

Sentiment and History in *The Remains of the Day*

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Kazuo Ishiguro's 1988 novel *The Remains of the Day* participates in a now well-documented subgenre of postmodern British fiction beginning with John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and proliferating in the 1980s and 1990s in novels by Peter Ackroyd, A. S. Byatt, Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, and Graham Swift (Wells 2003: 1/2). Linda Hutcheon provides the felicitous phrase that the subgenre has come to be known by, "historiographic metafiction," marking at once its fundamental allegiance to postmodern pastiche and its self-reflexive (typically suspicious) emphasis on the processes of narrating and writing history, that is, on *historiography* as opposed to the putatively more objective entity we call *history*. She defines historiographic metafiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* as "novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge" (1988; 285/286). With its primary historical setting in 1956, indeed in the historically portentous month of July when the Suez Crisis was beginning, and its more distant historical setting (through the recollections of its narrator Mr. Stevens) in the equally significant appeasement era of the 1920s and 1930s, Ishiguro quite obviously takes on history. Add to this the dependably disruptive technique of an unreliable narrator and an unmistakable if mild tone of irony and *The Remains of the Day* looks a textbook case of 1980s historiographic metafiction.

The Remains of the Day — both thematically and formally — reveals the temporal distance and difference that makes of historical narration, whether on the personal or collective level, a dubious process. Yet, while so much of this novel works with distancing techniques — and we can see these both stylistically, as David James has demonstrated, and within the protagonist's social and psychological defenses against

intimacy, sentiment, and emotions — something draws in the reader in a less than skeptical way. James notes that “alternate phases of distance and immersion characterize the reader’s experience of memory on this novel” (2009: 54).

The preliminary page of my copy of the book with its “praise” for the novel is replete with words and phrases by reviewers such as “beguiling,” “profound,” “heart-rending,” “ineffably sad,” “deeply moving,” and “tragedy” that betray an altogether different reception than is typical for a work of postmodern metafiction. These words belong to a very different lexicon, a lexicon of pathos or sentiment. Granted, the preliminary’s role is to entice consumers to buy the novel, so it understandably tries to cast a far wider net than the postmodern reputation of the author alone might. The preliminary is not the novel itself (which may or may not be as pathetic as indicated by these selective descriptors), nor is it a reliable compendium of readers’ responses. Nevertheless, I think it indicates — reliably — a strong component of this historical fiction that is at odds with the general trend of historiographic metafiction. Furthermore, much scholarly criticism of the novel has been devoted to sorting out two strains of narratorial technique, the ironical metafictional and the nostalgic, the second of which may be considered what demarcates this novel from the others as well as what makes it seem so sad and tragic. The question becomes whether history is invoked in this novel in sufficiently distanced and skeptical ways or whether it succumbs to the nostalgia of its narrator. Does Ishiguro control the nostalgia for a politically reproachable time, or does the nostalgia control him?

At the level of readers’ responses, I think there can be little question that this novel closes distance through the enticements of a universal sentimental function. In fact, it may be that most historical novels, even so-called ironic and metafictional historical novels, which invoke history and memory at skeptical arm’s length, operate under a form of nostalgia. *The Remains of the Day*, no less than other Ishiguro novels, explicitly foregrounds nostalgia. Ishiguro has spoken numerous times in interviews about his views on nostalgia, and he carefully discriminates between the political nostalgia that attempts to reinstate hegemonic ideologies and what he sees as a potentially salutary type of personal nostalgia akin to idealism (Shaffer 2008: 74-75; 166). Stevens’ overall mindset and attitude toward his occupation, his own past, Lord Darlington, and Great Britain itself

are nostalgic. In making this novel a historical novel, set in 1956 with flashbacks to the interwar era, Ishiguro also invites a readerly nostalgia, which he has nevertheless disclaimed. Ishiguro's explanation for choosing a historical era in which to set a story about personal memory, nostalgia, and suppressed regrets, is that he is trying — ironically and critically — to call forth a perpetual mythicization of England as background to a story of 'universal' significance because it is supposedly symbolical and ahistorical (Shaffer 2008: 75). Thus the novel enacts a dialectical movement between critical distance and bedazzling involvement and immediacy with respect to the past — even if the past in its historiographic representations is always something of a myth, a false case.

Hayden White argues that meaning is created in historical narratives not from the contents chronicled by them — though chronology is the basic structural code — but by other implicit codes which all narratives in a given culture share (1995: 119). According to White, "narrative discourse performs differently from a chronicle" even when "it contains the same set of facts as its informational content" (1995: 119). There is emphasis on the word "perform," not so much because the narrative is meant to do what it says, as in speech-act theory, but because as opposed to being merely communicative of some pre-existing content, the narrative through its form triggers in the reader a recognizable pattern of meaning. *The Remains of the Day* works to produce a surfeit of feeling or affect on the part of the reader, and it does so at the same time that it thematizes emotional distance, repression of desire, and stultifying anti-sentimentalism. While I believe that this novel's historicism has been almost exhaustively treated in the critical literature, I do not believe that the novel's heightened affectivity has been valued correctly nor has it been considered how the affective quality of the novel is co-implicated with its historical narrative. I want to stress that the dialectical movement created by the historical narrative is complicated enough: it distances readers from the present by displacing them into a past time (foreign to many of the readers in that they weren't alive yet during the time the novel is set, but foreign in a sense to all readers because the setting is "mythical"); it also closes that distance through the highly affective means of nostalgia. Yet to complicate this movement even more so, *The Remains of the Day* calls forth subtextually and intertextually the sentimental novel.

In an article entitled “Misrecognizing History: Complicitous Genres in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*,” Bo Ekelund explicitly addresses just such competing modes of narration, including the sentimental romance among four others (travelogue, political memoirs, farce, essay on values). Ekelund claims that the “novel presents a complex of genres, each of them carrying particular burdens of meaning and subversion, each of them aiding and abetting the others in various ways.” Making a larger point about the service to which this complex of complicitous genres is put in the novel, Ekelund subordinates the novel’s overall ironic distance and manipulation to what is brought into the novel through pastiche: “these meanings are not easily controlled or automatically subverted by a strategy of generalized irony.” If I may be forgiven the pun, something of what is carried into the novel remains despite the irony. Similarly, reading *The Remains of the Day* as a belated British estate novel in which “the country house represents a prominent object of nostalgia” (554), John Su notes the extent to which the novel’s nostalgia has been actively denied by literary scholars. As a corrective to what he sees as a misguided emphasis on irony rather than nostalgia in *The Remains of the Day*, Su argues that “nostalgia is essential to the effort in [the novel] [...] to reenvision what constitutes ‘genuine’ Englishness” (555).

Despite these admirable attempts to recuperate the nostalgic function in *The Remains of the Day*, even to claim some extratextual function for it, the sense that this novel invokes feeling — more generally than the well-noted nostalgia — persists. The irony of Stevens’ self-exoneration in recounting his complicity in firing the Jewish maids at Lord Darlington’s command is an example of the ways this novel’s ironic tone parallels a poststructuralist suspicion of historical certainty. The competing function of nostalgia — both Stevens’ and the readers’ — can be read two ways. That is, it can be recuperable in a fully pathetic way, for example by “heritage” filmmakers like Merchant and Ivory, but it can also be subsumed by irony, creating what Hutcheon calls “critical nostalgia.” The presence of the nostalgic may be just what lends so much “feeling” to this work. But how exactly such a transference operates is far from simple and is one of the questions motivating this essay. We may note, to begin with, that *The Remains of the Day* is a narrative of pathetic polarities, evoking ironic distance from its characters and their personal and public histories as well as inciting readerly sympathy with a form of

sentimentalism. This term is justified by the emotional responses quoted above, but also, I think, by components of the novel that function as remnants of the sentimental novel.

That the sentimental resurfaces along with the historical, or as the historical, raises questions about how each of these re-emergent discourses, of the past and of the sentimental, inhibit or enable the other. On the one hand, we are led to ask about the role of nostalgia — that is a sentimental or affective alliance created between the reader and a simulated past. Perhaps the past is conceived in this novel not so much as a foreign country but as an affective country, a place for emotion, pathos, and sentiment. In this view, we read not so much to *escape* an infelicitous present as to *feel* in such a way that has since become disallowed and displaced by an ironized mode prevalent since High Modernism. That the novel creates and maintains historical distance, but also closes such distance through the enticements of a sentimental function, suggests that this historiographic fiction borrows formally from its sentimental content. On the other hand, this sentimentalizing of the past as a kind of redemptive sentimental journey, a very particular form of nostalgia, appears to be complicated by a failure of sentimentality thematically. That is, the ideological content of the classic sentimental novel upon which the novel draws is perhaps reassigned to what Hutcheon has called the mode of ironized nostalgia.

Part of historiographic metafiction's *modus operandi* is its marked parodic intertextuality, so it would seem reasonable that certain sentimental texts or generic conventions would appear in these fictions, especially if those were set during the heyday of the various versions of the sentimental novel (the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries). But in this case, we would expect these sentimental intertexts to be, in one of Hutcheon's favorite phrases for describing the methods of the postmodern, "used and abused." That is, one has been taught to be alert to the ironic distance these postmodern texts create between their formal surface and their intertextual content. The sentimental is allowed to re-emerge, but only as an avatar made impotent of its formerly affective power.

We need only glance at Hutcheon's theoretical maneuver with regard to a similarly affective concept, nostalgia, to imagine how in this view the postmodern may recuperate the sentimental only to subvert it. Responding at once to charges that irony has

been superseded by nostalgia and to Frederic Jameson's criticism of late-capitalist forms of nostalgia, Hutcheon attempts both to rescue it and put it in its place by subsuming it under irony. Apart from the admittedly uncritical appropriation of stereotyped simulacra of the past by film, television, and music, she claims that a form of affective sympathy for certain historical values, tropes, or events does operate yet in an appropriately distanced and critical fashion in much postmodern art. What separates this form of nostalgia from the uncritical kind is what she calls its "ironizing of nostalgia":

In the postmodern, nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, *and* ironized. This is a complicated (and postmodernly paradoxical) move that is both an ironizing of nostalgia itself, of the very urge to look backward for authenticity, and, at the same moment, a sometimes shameless invoking of the visceral power that attends the fulfillment of that urge. (Hutcheon 1998, n.p.)

Is it possible that the sentimental returns in the twentieth century under the banner of postmodernism only to be put in its place, its charge to manipulate the reader into affect undermined, ironically, by its own knowing capacity to do so? To what extent can we claim, on the contrary, a recurrence of the concerns of the sentimental novel — of an affective ethos and agency — that breaks free of these distancing techniques at some level? After all, the sentimental as a category privileges immediacy of understanding or sympathy. If it's being recalled, is it not perhaps superior to the ironic historicizing in which it appears?

The Remains of the Day certainly evokes and rehearses the tropes of the sentimental novel, and especially in the figure of Miss Kenton — a classic portrayal of the servant woman who redeems through sensibility and virtue — revives the sentimental novel's traditions in the late twentieth century. But in many ways, Ishiguro presents an alternative story to the typical sentimental romance, by telling the story from the anti-sentimentalist and male servant's perspective, for example. But the novel also departs from generic expectations in that it tells the tale of sentimental virtues failing to redeem. Even as it narrates this failure, however, it is important to note, it is provocative and evocative of strong feeling: the conventional expectations of a marriage and redemption at the end of the novel make readers long for the sentimental resolution being withheld.

The Remains of the Day presents itself as an ultimately failed sentimental journey, with the butler Mr. Stevens moving geographically closer to a rendezvous with the former Miss Kenton at the same time that he recounts a variety of sentimental “errors” in his past. It is under the very sign of “error” that Stevens sets off in the first place both on his trip to the West Country and in his revisiting of certain self-termed “turning points” in his personal past, significant and usually whitewashed failures to be intimate, express sentiment, or acknowledge desire. Stevens decides to use his new employer’s suggestion of taking a holiday as the unacknowledged pretense to correct these errors, an overall sentimental errancy or waywardness because, he says, “over the past few months, I have been responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of my duties” (5). The narrative is one of gradual acknowledgment of error and errancy, then, prompting a journey to sentimental redemption. It is explicitly figured this way, even allegorically so, with Stevens living in a state of errancy to which Miss Kenton, the woman whose love he was unable to reciprocate, is the solution: “it is clear that even after a break of so many years, Miss Kenton would prove the perfect solution to the problem at present besetting us at Darlington Hall. In fact, by terming it a ‘problem’, I perhaps overstate the matter. I am referring, after all, to a series of very minor errors on my part” (49).

As would be expected of such a conversion narrative, along the way we must hear the confession of these errors as a painful string of failures, which are nevertheless sublimated in almost perverse fashion into “triumphs” (110). The first of these is the stilted deathbed conversation with Stevens’ father, followed by his refusal to view his body immediately upon learning of his death. With determined urgency, the enervated and dying man says twice “I hope I’ve been a good father to you” (97). Both of these iterations Stevens deflects, refusing to acknowledge the sentiment inhering in them, whether to reciprocate it or to validate it. First he responds “I’m so glad you’re feeling better now” (97) and the second time he answers “I’m afraid we’re extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning” (97).

Another sentimental foreclosure occurs when Stevens initially denies reading a sentimental novel for enjoyment but claims to be in the habit of reading such romances primarily “as an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one’s command of the

English language” (167). This denial, which is later tentatively retracted, occurs in a scene that compounds his repudiation of intimacy with Miss Kenton. In the most physically graphic — indeed, erotic — scene in the novel, Miss Kenton insists on taking a look at the cover of the book Stevens is reading. Ishiguro writes:

Then she was standing before me, and suddenly the atmosphere underwent a peculiar change — almost as though the two of us had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether . . .

‘Please, Mr. Stevens, let me see your book.’

She reached forward and began gently to release the volume from my grasp. I judged it best to look away while she did so, but with her person positioned so closely, this could only be achieved by my twisting my head away at a somewhat unnatural angle. Miss Kenton continued very gently to prise the book away, practically one finger at a time. The process seemed to take a very long time — throughout which I managed to maintain my posture — until finally I heard her say:

‘Good gracious, Mr. Stevens. It isn’t anything so scandalous at all. Simply a sentimental love story.’ (165-166)

Stevens goes on to explain at inordinate length that he read “sentimental romance[s]” (167) to improve his English and rarely completed them because their plots were “invariably absurd — indeed sentimental” (168). Yet there, is of course, a grain of disingenuousness in this equating of the sentimental with the absurd, which is exposed in the remainder of this passage. Encapsulated in a variety of locutions, circumlocutions, and rhetorical questions — all designed to acknowledge that he read these novels for moral and sentimental instruction or at least vicarious sentimental pleasures while at the same time appearing to diminish the significance of the fact — Stevens says:

Having said that, however, I do not mind confessing today — and I see nothing to be ashamed of in this — that I did at times gain a sort of incidental enjoyment from these stories. I did not perhaps acknowledge this to myself at the time, but as I say, what shame is there in it? Why should one not enjoy in a lighthearted sort of way stories of ladies and gentlemen who fall in love and express their feelings for each other, often in the most elegant phrases? (168)

But Stevens is an inveterate suppressor of emotion and will not be tutored. Ironically, one of the most striking examples of a sentimental intertext — this use of a sentimental novel as an erotic and sentimental prop — signifies the most extreme, cowering, and solipsistic failure of sentimental values in *The Remains of the Day*.

A third example of Stevens' failure to feel, particularly to sympathize, is his standing outside Miss Kenton's door with a detached and paralytic awareness of her suffering, of his being so far unable to console her after her aunt's death that he actually taunts and niggles her cruelly. Exiting her room after learning of the death of her aunt, who was "like a mother to her" (176), Stevens realizes he has not offered her his condolences. He hesitates, concerned he might intrude up a scene of "private grief" and emotion (176): "Indeed, it was not impossible that Miss Kenton, at that very moment, and only a few feet from me, was actually crying. The thought provoked a strange feeling to rise within me, causing me to stand there hovering in the corridor for some moments" (176-77). Stevens encounters Miss Kenton later that day and engages in a discussion about two recently hired servants. As the communication dwindles for want of substance, he fabricates reasons to continue that take the form of accusations of sloppiness and lack of diligence in the servants' work, effectively criticizing and badgering Miss Kenton at a moment of extreme emotional fragility. As with the other two passages of failed feeling or intimacy, we notice that Stevens is not insensitive entirely. Feelings burst through in these passages, as in the "strange feeling" of sympathy Stevens experiences but cannot name while imagining Miss Kenton grieving. But the feelings undergo a swift and secondary suppression.

Finally, the sentimental redemption narrative itself — the orientation of this repertoire of sentimental mistakes, errors, and failures towards a new, hopeful, and different end — ultimately remains unfulfilled. Mr. Stevens finds Mrs. Benn (the former Miss Kenton) returned to her husband and not free to engage with him in a second chance. As a narrative of sentimental education, then, *The Remains of the Day* appears to be a cautionary tale. We might assume this to be a denunciation; the sentimental ultimately fails, so the novel is anti-sentimental. I cannot argue, therefore, that the sentimental re-emerges in these novels in a completely unqualified way — that we see, nostalgically, a return to a prelapsarian ideology of sentiment. Yet the novel is suggestive

of a sentimental politics and in a way that works directly against the reader's native historical sympathies.

Part of what makes this novel postmodern is its intertextual manipulation, indeed its complicity of genres, most prominently the sentimental story and the political memoir. Far from operating the way ironic historiography does, distancing the reader from the affects of the story in precisely opposite fashion as the machinations of the classical sentimental novel, this enforced complicity involves a degree of sympathy. We are asked to sympathize with parts of the narrative that history — precisely that quotient that is systematically invoked for its distancing effects in this subgenre — has asked us to prejudge. The complicity this novel calls for on the generic level, its hybridity or ambivalence, may be interpreted as a sentimental alliance, which carries an affective charge. This is somewhat closer to the gist of James Lang's argument about the novel, that in critiquing the historiographic tendency to backshadow, to create the illusion of retrospective fatality, the novel draws on a certain form of sympathy and on a different awareness of the openness and contingency of the historical moment (152-154). By neutrally valuing the idealism of thirties appeasement politics installed in the country-house diplomacy narrative of the novel, or at least not monolithically impugning it, Ishiguro opens up space for a set of sentimental values to be installed—a crucial set of sentimental ideals based on feeling, which might be labeled Germanophilia. We are asked through this sympathetic response temporarily to suspend judgment of a certain kind of political sentimentalism, that which Lord Darlington characterizes in the novel as being honorable, regardless of the teleological condemnation of history. This kind of sentimental-historical response is both critical and sympathetic, and forces the reader into a history lesson in the least didactic way.

Stevens's conversion narrative also has its own ambivalent moment of sentimental validation, a breakthrough admission of feeling in classically sentimental terms. When Stevens hears Mrs. Benn's confession of former love for him, he concedes, "Indeed — why should I not admit it? — at that moment, my heart was breaking" (239). Intriguingly, just as the historical materializes in this novel sentimentally, the sentimental finally emerges from suppression — whether conceived of as historical or psychological suppression — under the sign of historical impossibility. The two would-be lovers

recognize three times that the moment for a sentimental alliance is past, that they “cannot turn back the clock,” and that they may never meet again. Do we see here a version, whether parodic or not, of a sentimental education, perhaps as cautionary tale? Or are we meant to see, with some sadness but more sobriety, the eclipse of the sentimental in the twentieth century? Is Stevens a twentieth-century everyman, revealing to us the historical and dehumanizing eclipse of sentimental values by professionalism? The alliance of the sentimental and the historical in this novel leaves the reader involved emotionally, longing for a sentimental resolution in the face of an affective loss. But the *telos* of this sentimental education, this redemption, is in the past — embedded in a series of irrevocable turning points that move us to a present devoid of feeling. The sentimental is recuperated in this novel as finally unsustainable, and the historicizing of this narrative “aids and abets” that movement. The surfeit of affect that we feel at the end of this story, of a sense of sadness and loss, is unusual in late twentieth-century historical fiction (*Atonement* comes to mind as another example), but it ultimately validates this novel paradoxically as a radically discontinuous and alternative evocation of the sentimental novel genre.

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