

**Literatures of Resistance under U.S. 'Cultural Siege': Kazuo Ishiguro's Narratives of Occupation**

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*Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I.*

The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau

The textual reconstruction of the plasticity of personal memory and the malleability of national and world history are of central importance to the work of Japanese-British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. Each of Ishiguro's novels is meticulously structured around the first-person recollection of a series of past events, recounted as a record, a confession, after a period of dramatic personal and geo-political change that has provoked a reassessment of the ageing protagonist's life. These precessions of reminiscence orbit around densely symbolic gravitational points that *The Remains of the Days*' Stevens refers to as 'turning point[s]', and the subsequent extended attempts to identify or account for the significance of this turning point in the self-narrative of the protagonist, and, typically, a contemporaneous historically significant event. Micro and macro memory become conflated in these texts to the extent that, as Justine Baillie and Sean Matthews remark, 'any distinction between public and private trauma is collapsed' (45).<sup>1</sup> Lilian R. Furst shares this view, suggesting that 'By mounting individual memories onto world events, these narratives merge private and public history' (550). Historiography, the recording, writing, narration, and interpretation of 'history', of 'events', and the ethical imperative to accurately record, comes under intense scrutiny in Ishiguro's écriture of ambiguity.

Through close readings of two of Ishiguro's historiographic metafictional works that share remarkably similar themes, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), supported by reference to his other works, I seek to show that each of Ishiguro's status-obsessed but marginalised narrators, operating on the periphery of global political and social upheaval, is motivated by two distinct but inseparable degrees of resistance. By exaggerating their proximity to or complicity in morally ambiguous historical events, Ishiguro's narrators choose infamy over anonymity, in order 'to rise above the mediocre', to be seen as having once occupied a position at the 'fulcrum of great affairs' (*Artist* 204, *Remains* 138).<sup>ii</sup> This desire evidences a personal resistance associated with an exaggerated sense of personal and professional status, a kind of narcissism, that has been widely discussed in scholarship. Developing this, perhaps more accurately re-reading it in a more politically aware fashion, I also want to make the more contentious and somewhat (intentionally) more difficult to evidence point that both novels betray a distinct, but understated anti-Americanism, one that in fact informs and gives rise to the sense of self-importance that is foregrounded in critical reception of Ishiguro's characters.

Anti-Americanism describes a feeling of animosity towards the growing dominance of the United States after WWII. It encompasses political conservatism, "the defense of traditional ways of life [...]" and a "straightforward opposition [...] to the cultural and political values of the United States" (Paul Hollander and Stephen Haseler in Gienow-Hecht 1171-1172). Indeed, not only are these observations accurate of the novels, but a distinct trend of anti-American feeling runs through Ishiguro's many interviews. In *The Paris Review* he reminisces with Susannah Hunnewell about first coming across "a little advertisement for a creative-writing M.A." remarking that "in those days it was a laughable idea, alarmingly American". His concerns are cultural, and more specifically literary: asked about the centrality of the American novel and the American market, he argues that, although

preferably outward-facing, “Every country should have a strong literary tradition of its own at the center”, as opposed to aspiring to replicate the American novel and its appeal to the US culture consumer (Spiegel). In an interview with *The Financial Times* he is more explicit in his worries over the rising dominance of the American fiction market, expressing a “a lot of sympathy for the view that there is a danger in our culture becoming homogenised,” because writers in every country cater for an American audience (*FT*). What is significant, here, is Ishiguro's consistent preoccupation with the ‘alarming’ Americanisation of world culture, the fear of a homogenisation that not only erodes distinctions between global literary production, but which sees all artistic labour as tending towards a US market that came to dominate Europe and Asia in the aftermath of WWII. US cultural imperialism, or cultural colonialism is both economic and political, intended ‘to capture markets for its cultural commodities and to establish hegemony by shaping popular consciousness [...] In the political sphere, cultural imperialism plays a major role in dissociating people from their cultural roots’ (Petras 2007).

To explore the political implications of this cultural dissociation on Ishiguro's writing, I want to borrow a term from Barbara Harlow's introduction to *Resistance Literature* (1987), in which she offers a reading of Ghassan Kanafani's *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Harlow begins by elucidating Kanafani's distinction between literature written ‘under occupation’, and under ‘exile’ (2). The latter, she argues, ‘presupposes an “occupying power” which has either exiled or subjugated [...] a given population and has in addition significantly intervened in [its] literary and cultural development’ (2). Under occupation, Harlow uses Kanafani's term ‘cultural siege’ to describe the atmosphere under which, and against which, literatures of resistance are written. Literature, as Kanafani and Harlow both powerfully assert, is ‘an arena of *struggle*’, against this siege, a struggle that plays a vital role in the determination of the past, present, and future of the occupied nation (2). Frantz Fanon, in his now seminal study *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) forcefully

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argues that colonialism 'distorts, disfigures and destroys' the history, traditions, and cultures of the subjugated state (210). Ishiguro's narrators, under siege, under the threat of personal and historical erasure, act to protect a personal and national status that is bound to their respective personal and national pasts. Both are guided by Stevens' observation that 'naturally, like many of us, I have a reluctance to change too much of the old ways' (7). If Masuji Ono, living in a Japan under the occupation of the US army, and Mr Stevens, living in post-war US-occupied Darlington Hall, offer narratives of resistance to Americanisation, we might also detect in Ishiguro's novels a sense that he perceives the global literary tradition as being under cultural siege precisely "because American culture is so dominant around the world" (Richards). If we concede this point, we might think of the novels as being works of resistance to global cultural siege of the post-war United States and the threat it poses to the past, present, and future of other nations.

While evidencing a discrete and discreet intra and extra-diegetic anti-Americanism in Ishiguro's writing, this essay is also an attempt to counter what the author perceives as a profound misreading of what are, in essence, works of personal and political propaganda masquerading as the often ethically distasteful memoirs of a superannuated generation. Cynthia Wong influentially proposes that Ishiguro's characters implement a 'purposeful deflection of injurious details' in their memoirs, to defend themselves against accusations that their pasts were morally questionable (17). It is Wong's contention that Ishiguro's narrators are secretive, they attempt to 'cover up' their more opprobrious pasts, but that they occasionally unwittingly betray themselves. However, given the political nature of these slips, these moments in which his characters aggressively pronounce their past loyalties to troubling ideologies, whether that be Nazi appeasement or the Japanese Imperial ideal, it seems more likely that they forcefully introduce into their narratives pointed critiques of the ascending US precisely by recounting and simultaneously eschewing their pasts: not only do

Ono and Stevens not minimise their roles, they exaggerate and revel in their complicity in questionable world events to perform acts of personal and political resistance to the aggressive imposition of radical cultural change precisely at the crucial moment in US cultural colonialism. Perhaps, then, they are heroes.

## I

### *An Artist of the Floating World*

It is in his debut novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), that Ishiguro first broaches the anti-Americanism so central to the later work. One character in that novel remarks that

“The Americans, they never understood the way things were in Japan [...] Their ways may be fine for Americans, but in Japan things are different, very different.” Ogata-San sighed again. “Discipline, loyalty, such things held Japan together once. That may sound fanciful, but it’s true. People were bound by a sense of duty. Towards one’s family, towards superiors, towards the country. But now instead there’s all this talk of democracy. You hear it whenever people want to be selfish, whenever they want to forget obligations” (65).

Evident here is a profound difference in national character, and a clear resistance to the forced Americanisation of post-war Japan. Alongside this, America is mistakenly viewed by some characters as a place of refuge; the character Sachiko, widowed by the war, dreams of taking her child to the States with her American boyfriend because there are ‘far more opportunities there’, her daughter can “become a business girl, a film actress even. America’s like that [...] so many things are possible’ (46). It is this sense that America, a country responsible for the devastation of Japan both culturally and materially, is a place of hope that invests the novel with a tragic poignancy. In conflict here, and throughout, are an individualism – characterised by democracy and ‘the American dream’ – and a more socially minded political philosophy. Of course, the reader knows both that Sachiko will never travel to the States, and that if she does she will be confronted not with opportunity but with an anti-Japanese sentiment that lingered long after the perceived betrayal of Pearl Harbor. As Kevin Allen Leonard notes, ‘It is easy to overestimate the extent of the "opening up" of American

society following the war. Many barriers to Japanese American social mobility remained' (481).

This trend of Anti-American sentiment continues into *An Artist* (1986), Ishiguro's second novel, also set in post-war Japan. In a conversation with the Japanese Nobel Prize winning novelist Kenzaburo Oe during a visit to Japan in 1991, Ishiguro (who at the point of writing his 'Japanese novels' had not revisited his country of birth since his parents had moved him to England at the age of five), mentions that he wished to 'recreate' a Japan that 'existed only in [his] imagination', to 'put together all these memories, and all these imaginary ideas I had about this landscape which I called Japan' (110). Immediately we find ourselves in a 'floating world', a symbolically overdetermined textual space whose primary generative principle is the imaginary. Japan, then, is in fact 'Japan'. This is typical of Ishiguro, who has said of the setting for *The Buried Giant* that "I call it 'England,' but it's just an imaginary setting" (Spiegel). *Artist* is an example of what Noriko Mizuta Lippit calls the 'Japanese I-novel', in which 'The author's inward-turning eye observes his inner self in minute detail, leading to a profound insight' (13).<sup>iii</sup> This form of writing is ideal for the purposes of resistance because it 'involves a confrontation between the individual and society' (Lippit 13). However, a warning comes with this: 'The self-exposure that characterizes the confessional I-novel is thus at once exhibitionistic and self-destructive' (13).

*An Artist* concerns political events in Japan in the years prior to WWII, recounted between 1948 and 1950 in the four chapters of the novel. As Motoyuki Shibata and Motoko Sugano point out, Ishiguro's Japanese novels 'raise sensitive issues about the country's militarism and nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, its imperial history, and the country's responsibility for war crimes during the 1939-1945 war' (24). The novel is the account of Masuji Ono, a former propaganda artist who produced paintings in support of the imperialist and militaristic ambitions of pre-war Japan, during which time 'Japanese foreign policy

underwent [...] militarization' and 'authority at all levels become more coercive' (Bix 2). There is of course a clue here: Ono is indeed a propagandist during the war, but also during the subsequent occupation in which he writes his narrative. Due to what he perceives as his 'position of large influence' in Imperial Japan, Ono has, in the aftermath of the lost war, fallen out of favour as the nation experiences a US-imposed transition, described as "the single most exhaustively planned operation of massive and externally directed change in world history" (Finn xix), from an isolated imperialist military nation to a pacifist, democratic, capitalist one (139). Ishiguro offers a guarded criticism of this US's focus on the Japanese economy, not on post-war punitive measures, rhetorically asking, "Who is to say that it would've been better if Japanese society had fragmented, with purges, and chasing down war criminals at every level" (Chen). It is hard to avoid the conclusion here that, although the fragmentation of Japan is not desirable, chasing down war criminals is indeed the morally just thing to do.

A typical reading of *Artist* fosters a view of Ono as a living anachronism, an enduring reminder of the convalescent wounded nation's politically unsavoury past, a man who regrets his place in past events, and composes a confession that excuses, conceals, or attempts to account for activities that, re-contextualised by recent events, appear reprehensible. As Wong notes, 'after the publication of' this novel, 'Ishiguro said that he was exploring how first-person narrators use "the language of self-deception and self-protection to convey their life stories"' (15). However, this notion of self-protection that Ishiguro insists upon, and which has informed Wong's interpretation of the novels, is evidently at odds with the narrative: If Ono does regret his active participation in the now questionable "emperor-system fascism" (Bix 2), then we might imagine a man keen to embrace the post-war Westernisation of the defeated nation by way of atonement for wartime transgressions. Recalling meetings with his students before the war he remembers admonishing them to 'rise above the undesirable and

decadent influences that have swamped us and have done so much to weaken the fibre of our nation', to be 'unflinchingly loyal to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor' (73, 64). During the narrative, he informs us of the suicide of several previously prominent figures in Japanese industry and culture, characters who, 'clearly felt responsible for certain undertakings we were involved in during the war' (55). Ono, contrary to a developing trend, declares that 'those who fought and worked loyally for our country during the war cannot be called war criminals. I fear that's an expression used too freely these days' (56). In line with her reading that Ishiguro's narrators deflect 'injurious details', Wong has suggested that that Ono 'is anxious that some details from that past do not emerge' (38, 42). Ono seems in fact to pointedly introduce these details about the events and beliefs that many critics assume he attempts to conceal, into his contemporary narrative written under the 'decadent influences' of the occupation. The wilful inclusion of these 'facts' in a text that masquerades as 'self-protection' then constitutes a calculated and targeted critique of the occupation of Japan, an admonishment in the present to rise against the external influence that is 'weakening the fibres' of "Discipline, loyalty, such things [that] held Japan together once".

Ono even describes the Japanese as the 'victims of the occupying forces' ('nominally Allied,' but [...] more accurately US (Seiler 176)) (88). Occupation involved 'a radical modernisation of the Japanese feudal system (1946-1948)' (Seiler 184). But there are more invasive and insidious pressures that come with modernisation, itself little more than a euphemism for Americanisation: Ono complains that many hotels are 'decorated in a somewhat vulgar manner – intended, no doubt, to strike the American clientele' as being 'charmingly Japanese' (116). Finn remarks that,

The United States was less than two hundred years old, confident of its power and the strength of its open society and democratic institutions. Japan was more than fifteen hundred years old, a hierarchical society that had been isolated for centuries and that lacked much knowledge of the outside world even after two generations of rapid modernization. Defeat

had shaken the morale of its people and undermined their sense of national purpose (xix)

There is a surface triviality to Ono's concerns about the décor of a hotel. But, taken as a coded political message within the post-war context of a demoralised, directionless Japan under 'cultural siege', it has ideologically sophisticated implications about the diminution of Japan's ancient cultural and aesthetic traditions to a mode of interior decoration. It also recalls Ishiguro's own concerns that the novel as a form, and cultural production more broadly conceived, are designed to 'strike' an 'American clientele' in a manner that is harmful to 'traditional ways of life'. If Japan in Ishiguro's works is imaginary, then this might result from the fact that post-war Japan has always been a simulacrum, a symbolic rendering of a nation mediated by American perception, itself the product perhaps of Hollywood's fascination with the quaint traditions of the tamed but once-feared samurai state. Homogenisation, then, might have to do with the intended audience and its appropriation and rebranding of world culture.

Nowhere is this more clearly presented than in the person of Ono's grandson Ichiro (perhaps a reference to the Japanese American protagonist of Japanese American author John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957)), who 'represents the effects of the American occupation in Japan' (Wong 50). In one scene, Ichiro gallops around on a pretend horse 'making sounds with his tongue', mimicking the Lone Ranger's English (29). In a moment of exasperation that his grandchild is turning away from his Japanese heritage in opting not to emulate a "'samurai warrior'" or "'The Ninja of the Wind'", Ono tries to correct the young cowboy: 'Ichiro', I said, more firmly, 'wait a moment and listen. It's more interesting, more interesting by far, to pretend to be someone like Lord Yoshitsune. Shall I tell you why? Ichiro, listen, Oji will explain it to you. Ichiro, listen to your Oji-san. Ichiro!' (30). Ichiro, as with the children in Orwell's *1984*, acts as an ambassador, a transitional moment, for the newly instituted regime. In conversation with his son-in-law Taro, Ono asks "'don't you worry at times we

might be a little too hasty in following the Americans? [...] Indeed, sometimes Japan has come to look like a small child learning from a strange adult” (185). This seems also to be rather personal to Ishiguro, who recalls in an interview with Scott Simon of *NPR* that, “I was five years old when I arrived in Britain. Neither of my parents spoke good English [...] in those days, television was full of Westerns, American Western shows. And so it was very confusing for me as a Japanese kid.” With this in mind, Caroline Bennett’s argument that the post-war Japanese subject is ‘infantilized by American’s assumption of parental power’ might be read more widely to account for Ishiguro’s own sense that global literary production was itself being led astray by a ‘strange adult’ (Groes and Lewis 90). Challenging this view, Cheryl Hudson has argued that countries ‘project [their] own fears and weaknesses, and [...] cultural nostalgia, on to America’, thereby constructing ‘it as the root of the problem’ (O’Connor 255); the Japanese Samurai tradition was already in decline before the war, and is not a result of Americanisation, a fact evidenced by Sadao Yamanaka’s 1937 film *Humanity and Paper Balloons*, which explores the pre-war end of a tradition that Ono conceives of as a victim of the post-war occupying forces.

During a meeting of families before the wedding of his daughter, Ono confesses to an extraordinary degree of influence in the political history of pre-war Japan:

“There are some who would say that it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours [...] I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people” (123)

It quickly becomes evident that his listeners are all equally bemused by the inflated sense of importance that Ono attributes to his career as an artist, one that, in his own terms, makes him a ‘war criminal’. Dr Saito, Ono recounts, ‘leaned forward, a puzzled expression on his face’ and asks: “‘Forgive me, Mr Ono,’ he said. “You’re saying you are unhappy about the work you did? With your paintings?’” (123). This diminutive use of ‘your paintings’ is in discord

with Ono's own elevated, inflated sense of the significance and influence of his 'teachings' (123). A little later, Setsuko says to Ono that "'Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing that he has done some great wrong"; "'No one has ever considered Father's past something to view with recrimination"' (193). This view accords with one of Ono's pre-war colleagues, Matsuda, who states that "'our contribution was always marginal. No one cares now what the likes of you and me once did"' (201). Again, there is an ambiguity in this alternative perspective – it at once allows Ono to legitimately claim that he was not in fact responsible for 'the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours' while at the same time enabling him to safely use these as a means of re-asserting his allegiance to that very past (123). In other words, his previous propaganda, whatever its political significance, is now reformulated as a vocal propaganda in the present.

Of central importance, here, is that Ono's means of evidencing his previous 'position of large influence', his having risen above 'the mediocre' involves the correlative of an unethical professional past, and that in order to secure the former, Ono is determined to assert the latter, which also serves to challenge the post-war occupation by re-affirming an adherence to the Emperor. Ishiguro has said that he is 'interested in people who [...] work very hard and perhaps courageously in their lifetimes toward something, fully believing that they're contributing to something good, only to find that [...] The very things they thought they could be proud of have now become things they have to be ashamed of' (339). It appears that Ono is still proud, not simply of his part in the Imperial programme, but perhaps more for his continued resistance to the 'weakening' of fibres, and the dilution of the Japanese cultural tradition that constitute not simply reflections on the past, occasions for regret or shame, but guarded, camouflaged, yet powerful statements of personal and political dissent and resistance in a nation under military control from a hostile external force. Wong asserts

with confidence that 'Ono tries hard to cover up' these aspects of his past, but it is abundantly evident in the text that Ono repeatedly draws attention not with shame, but with pride, to his continuing loyalty to his, and his country's past (43).

The most recent mention of Japanese-US relations comes in *The Unconsoled* (1995), in which there is a seeming rapprochement. In this curiously ethereal novel set in what appears to be an unnamed post-war European city, the central character Mr Ryder comes across several groups of 'rich young Americans - many of whom were singing in unison some college anthem; while in yet another area a group of Japanese men had drawn several tables together and were also carrying on boisterously. Curiously, though these groups were clearly separate, there appeared to be much interaction between them'; a little later, he sees tourist attractions with 'Americans, Japanese, all taking photographs of it' (343, 388). It seems unlikely, here, that these references to Americans and Japanese in harmonious accord is coincidental, but rather that it is a comment on the Americanisation of the Japanese subject. However, a remnant of cultural fear remains; in one of the more touching scenes we see Boris, Ryder's son, trying, but failing to draw 'Superman'; he adds a little too much detail, using 'the crayon with some recklessness'. Ryder recalls 'the anguish mounting within me - I had watched him attempting to salvage his picture, applying more and more crayon. Finally his face had fallen and, dropping the crayon onto the paper, he had risen and left the room without a word' (95). As is typical of Ishiguro's fascination with the everyday, with childhood traumas so quotidian as to remain unrecognised, there is some lingering sense here that aspiration towards Americanness in the post-war generation is in some profound way damaging.

## II

### *The Remains of the Day*

*The Remains of the Day* works well as a companion piece to *Artist* – Ishiguro himself remarked upon the similarities between the two novels in a conversation with Susannah Hunnewell of *The Paris Review*, confessing (with *A Pale View of Hills* in mind) that ‘I’ve written the same book three times.’ As with the earlier novel, Ishiguro’s most famous work is structured around the protagonist’s recollection and conflation of the personal and political events that would eventually culminate in the Second World War. As with *Artist*, we might think of *Remains* as a work of historiography in what the historian Hayden White terms the ‘dissertative mode’:

after the historian had discovered the true story of ‘what happened’ and accurately represented it in a narrative, he might abandon the narrational manner of speaking and, addressing the reader directly, speaking in his own voice, and representing his considered opinion [...] dilate on what the story he told indicated about the nature of the period (28)

This is precisely the function that Stevens, our diarist, performs as he both narrates and meditates upon the critical events that precede WWII – only, in this case Stevens repeatedly revisits, and reinterprets the salient events, seemingly modifying them at will to suit his modulating self-view. As Etsuko, the narrator of *A Pale View of Hills* remarks, memory is ‘an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances within which one remembers’ (156). This may simply result from an involuntary cognitive process of ‘retrieval-induced distortion’ (Bridge and Paller 12144), or because ‘people make their recollections of themselves consistent with their current self-view’ (Albert 1977), but may, on the other hand, be indicative of a more sinister set of connotations about the ethical position of the speaker.

Ishiguro has said that the novel is ‘about a butler who wants to get close to a great man, close to the centre of history’ (346). If we replace the word butler with painter, then we have a pretty accurate description of Masuji Ono. As Barry Lewis has noted, there are ‘many similarities between the Japanese and the English’ in terms of their restraint and ‘obsess[ion]

with politeness and etiquette' (74). I want to apply the same reading to Stevens, to demonstrate that he, as Ono, not only does not attempt to mitigate or to minimise his or his employer's role through the 'purposeful deflection of injurious details', rather that he in fact exaggerates his importance in what have subsequently become dishonourable affairs (Wong 17). *Remains* might even be considered as a refinement of *Artist*, by introducing a further degree of removal from what Stevens refers to as the 'hub' of history; where Ono could magnify the repercussions of his propaganda, Stevens must overstate his employer Lord Darlington's role in culturing an international political consensus to soften some of the punitive conditions levelled on the German republic in the treaty of Versailles, and, subsequently, in condoning and facilitating the British government's appeasement of the Nazi regime prior to WWII. What is at stake, here, in this record is the preservation of an account of the 'English soul'; 'the consummate Imperial Englishman on the eve of extinction' (Terrence Rafferty and Joseph Coates in Lewis 78).

Mr Stevens is a meticulous, fastidious, precise recorder and observer – in a way, he is the apotheosis of a style of writing that has become synonymous with Ishiguro's novels. David James eloquently argues that 'self-conscious experimentalism takes second place to Ishiguro's fastidious maintenance of Stevens's narrative voice. The result is indeed artful, originally so, yet thoroughly self-effacing as well. It is best characterized as a mode of authorial *modesty*' (55). We meet Stevens at the end of an era in British history, undergoing the dissolution of the aristocracy:

The Labour Government's wealth transfer taxes have begun to break up the ancestral estates of people like Lord Darlington. Members of the aristocracy are now opening their houses to throngs of tourists or, worse still, conveying them to the National Trust or, worst of all, selling them to foreign, even American, millionaires (Atkinson 181).

Henry James had a fascination also with the English country house and its political significance. As Q.D. Leavis notes, he 'sees them as beautifully desirable but in degenerate or

unworthy hands. This is what makes it all right for them to be taken over by American money' (133). Following the post-war public disgrace of his former employer, Lord Darlington, Darlington Hall is indeed purchased by the wealthy American businessman Mr Farraday, (just as the wealthy banker purchases Gardencourt in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)), who is looking for a 'genuine grand old English house [and a] genuine old-fashioned English butler' (124). Again, it is striking that, as with *Artist's* US occupied post-war Japan, the UK is figured as a loser in the war, occupied by a foreign power that has risen to political, cultural, military, and economic dominance in the wake of two world wars. As with *Artist*, the only victor in WWII, at least as Ishiguro portrays it, is the United States. If occupation is too strong a word, then 'cultural siege' is certainly fitting; just as Ono resists the quaint picture of Japan that US occupation reduces his nation to, Stevens is equally resistant the economic and cultural occupation of Darlington Hall, a house and grounds that constitute, for Stevens, his world, his country. Indeed, as Farraday remarks, this vision of England is 'old-fashioned', Stevens the last of his kind. Stevens's account, then, is precisely 'the defence of traditional ways of life,' informed by a 'distaste to animus, to the cultural and political values of the United States,' typical of anti-Americanism.

It is during the motoring journey that forms the 'action' of the novel that Stevens demonstrates a troubling loyalty to his participation, or support for Lord Darlington's participation, in the appeasement of the Nazi regime, and his desire for personal esteem and status. Indeed, in somewhat parodic fashion, Stevens pantomimes as a great lord. Stevens borrows 'Mr Farraday's Ford', which, as McCombe observes, is a symbol of both 'social prestige', and 'America's global economic predominance' (88), a fine suit 'passed on [to Stevens] by Sir Edward Blair, and is repeatedly taken for a gentleman by several characters in the small town of Moscombe, who tell Stevens that, 'You can tell a true gentleman from a false one that's just dressed in finery. Take yourself, sir. It's not just the cut of your clothes,

nor is it even the fine way you've got of speaking. There's something else that marks you out as a gentleman' (185). It is in Moscombe that Stevens plays his part as a great lord. Sitting in his fine lounge suit, a remnant from a British political power now lost, in the borrowed American symbol of new power and wealth, surrounded by locals of a small village who are under the impression that he is a 'true gentleman', Stevens conveys the impression that he played a significant role in world politics:

“In fact, I tended to concern myself with international affairs more than domestic ones. Foreign policy, that is to say [...] It has been my good fortune, after all, to have consorted not just with Mr Churchill, but with many other great leaders and men of influence – from America and from Europe [...] It's a great privilege, after all, to have been given a part to play, however small, on the world's stage” (187).

Perhaps fanciful exaggeration is excusable in a man that has been in life-long servitude, and whose life has been subordinated to the advancement of others. Stevens here is unable to elaborate the precise details of the way he greased the wheels as it were, and in a broad way what he is saying has an element of truth. He talks merely of concern, and the narrative bears out his concern for world affairs. Of course, that concern represents a significantly smaller degree of influence than Stevens implies. Stevens here has a physically present audience, one that could prove hostile, and which can engage in a dialogue. As with Ono, Stevens prefers to expound, to meditate without an interlocutor, without even a listener. Readers, the spatially and temporally distant interlocutor, are necessarily less threatening than imposingly present listeners. This accounts for Stevens repeated denials that he knew and worked for Darlington. With the reader, then, Stevens can paint a fuller, perhaps more dramatized picture of his status and not be subjected to scrutiny. Now, his master dead, replaced by the new world order, Stevens resurrects Darlington in his parlour diplomacy. Only, the effect is a parody, one that necessarily comments upon the naiveté of Darlington, and of Stevens, who yearns for a status that has both vanished, and never been present. This charade is also a comment

upon the reduced political significance of Great Britain, on the rather provincial status that the nation acquired as a result of the post-war contraction of the empire. But, this desire for position has some worrying impact on Stevens' current position, and his views on the past.

The way Stevens accomplishes his resistance to political change, and to the 'cultural siege' of post-war England, is identical to that of Masuji Ono, with the distinction in Stevens' less direct case that his acts of ignominy are vicarious, are simply a complement of his service to the influential Lord Darlington. As Stevens loyally informs us of his own emperor, 'A great deal of nonsense has been spoken and written in recent years concerning his lordship and the prominent role he came to play in great affairs, and some utterly ignorant reports have had it that he was motivated by egotism or else arrogance' (61). As Ono remains 'unflinchingly loyal to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor', Stevens remains loyal to Lord Darlington. Much of the discussion of Lord Darlington centres on the 'conference of 1923', to which Lord Darlington would invite, 'the most influential of gentlemen' to 'discuss the means by which the harshest terms of the Versailles treaty could be revised' (70, 75). Lord Darlington expects a great deal to come from the 'unofficial conference', suggesting that it will have 'considerable repercussions on the whole course Europe is taking' (62). Stevens himself claims that

the great decisions of the world are not, in fact, arrived at simply in the public chambers, or else during a handful of days given over to an international conference under the full gaze of the public and the press. Rather, debates are conducted, and crucial decisions arrived at, in the privacy and calm of the great houses of this country' (115).

Stevens' belief in this is paramount to his understanding of his own place in the world.

But, there is a counterargument. Mr Lewis, the American senator that has been invited to participate, claims that the guests gathered at the conference 'are just a bunch of naive dreamers':

“Decent, honest, well-meaning. But his lordship here is an amateur [...] The days when you could act out of your noble instincts are over [...] So much hog-wash has been spoken here these past two days. Well-meaning, naïve hogwash. You here in Europe need professionals to run your affairs. If you don't realize that soon you're headed for disaster” (102).

McCombe observes that ‘Lewis’s prescient remarks are later borne out by the tarnished reputation’ that Darlington garners because of his interfering (80). McCombe also makes an interesting case for the presence of ‘midcentury Anglo-American tensions’ in the novel, suggesting that an ‘understanding of the political and cultural tensions that existed’ between the waning UK and waxing US – exacerbated by the Suez crisis of 1956, the year of Stevens’ narrative - can help to understand certain aspects of the narrative (79). Indeed, Lewis somewhat condescendingly informs the conference attendees that ‘if you didn’t insist on meddling in large affairs that affect the globe, you would actually be charming’ (102). This ‘charming’ has the same currency and connotations as *Artist’s* depiction of the ‘charming’ picture that the US painted of Japan. America, here, is precisely the ‘strange adult’ that Ono encounters and resists. The US, in its cultural, military, and economic hegemony figures itself as a kind of overseer, thereby diminishing the agency of the more established but declining nations: in both texts, the old world gives way to the new. Ironically, of course, Lewis proposes that the colonisers now need colonial overseeing, a point made more relevant again by the contraction of the empire. As Cheryl Hudson points out, ‘Sensitivity to Americanisation and a growth in cultural anti-Americanism so often represents the projection of home-grown anxieties onto an external entity’, including ‘British concerns about the loss of international status and influence’ (O’Connor 254). To emphasise the importance of the Anglo-American tensions, in the Merchant Ivory film of the novel, it is in fact this Congressman Jack Lewis who buys Darlington after the fall of Lord Darlington.

Stevens is expressly suspicious about Mr Lewis throughout the text, finding ‘something odd, something duplicitous perhaps, about this apparently charming American

gentleman' (87). Indeed, at various points in the text Stevens critiques the United States.

Having worked for English lords, Stevens is most troubled by the culture of informality and 'bantering' that Mr Farraday seems to expect as part of his service:

Indeed, to put things into a proper perspective, I should point out that just such bantering on my new employer's part has characterized much of our relationship over these months – though I must confess, I remain rather unsure as to how I should respond. In fact, during my first days under Mr Farraday, I was once or twice quite astounded by some of the things he would say to me (14-15).

Understated, yes, and a seemingly minor consideration, but a cultural shift that does perturb Stevens to the degree that, often after a comment made by his new employer, a 'residue of [...] bewilderment, not to say shock, remained detectable in [his] expression' (15). A little later, Stevens compares directly a topographical realisation of the differences between the British and the Americans which also operates as a metaphor for the differences in temperament:

We call this land of ours *Great Britain*, and there may be those who believe this a somewhat immodest practice. Yet I would venture that the landscape of our country alone would justify the use of this lofty adjective.

And yet what precisely is this 'greatness'? Just where, or in what, does it lie? I am quite aware it would take a far wiser head than mine to answer such a question, but if I were forced to hazard a guess, I would say that it is the very lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. It is as though the land knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to shout it. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness. (28-29)

This occupation with crassness, unseemly demonstrations of power is precisely the cultural siege that Stevens is attempting to resist, in what is, essentially, a description of himself and Mr Farraday; the calmness of the English gentlemen and the unseemliness of the American millionaire. In his subtle, often merely implicit critiques of Farraday, and of the U.S., Stevens is offering a guarded but nonetheless powerful resistance to the growing dominance of the

brash, young, confident United States, a nation that while young had benefitted financially and culturally in the wake of two world wars, and which had exploited its political advantage not only to export its culture, but to refashion and export the cultures of the defeated nations.

However, in this instance there is some grounding for Mr Lewis concerns. There is, a more insidiously sinister and invasive dimension to Darlington's amateur diplomacy and participation in global politics, and, relatedly, Stevens' adherence to Darlington's oscillating political beliefs. At various points throughout his text, Stevens records worrying instances of racism, fascism, and support for Hitler and appeasement at Darlington, an architectural and cultural space that represents Great Britain in microcosm. Because of his ongoing communication with Ribbentrop, Lord Darlington comes to the conclusion that 'We cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington Hall' (146). Stevens then has to dismiss from his staff the two Jewish housemaids who, as Miss Kenton informs Stevens, have 'been members of [her] staff for over six years' (148). Stevens, despite Kenton making it clear that she 'will not work in a house in which such things can occur', depicts the 'extraordinary shallowness', and 'authentic inability to think' that Hannah Arendt uses as definitional attributes of the 'banality of evil', in his reply that 'professional duty is not to [their] own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of' Lord Darlington (*Remains* 149, Arendt 417). A little later, Darlington claims that democracy is 'outmoded', 'something for a bygone era. The world's far too complicated a place now for universal suffrage' (198). This resistance to democracy recalls the same in *A Pale View*; it is a political system that becomes associated with the rise of the U.S. and resistance to it, and adherence to European fascism, comments precisely on the Anglo-American tensions and Japanese-American tensions discussed in each of these novels. Darlington enjoins Stevens to 'Look at Germany and Italy [...] See what strong leadership can do if it's allowed to act' (198). During this period Darlington enjoys a close relationship with, as Stevens writes, the 'blackshirts', through Sir Oswald Mosely who visits

the house, and Mrs Carolyn Barnet, a member of the British Union of Fascists (151). Lord Darlington's godson, Mr Cardinal, asks Stevens if he has observed that 'his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler has had in this country' (224). At question here is, as Arendt proposes, a distinction between thoughtful and thoughtless adherence to undeniably fascistic politics.

These admissions are shocking, in many ways. Despite this, Wong claims that Stevens is careful to 'conceal important details too shameful to bring into the open' (55). It is hard to understand this reading, given the above admissions of blind adherence to anti-Semitism. Indeed, Stevens later proudly claims a direct hand in enabling appeasement, and in UK-Nazi relationships, by facilitating a smooth encounter between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop. He accomplishes this by the shine of his silver. A Halifax unconducive to diplomacy arrives at Darlington Hall, only to be impressed by the silver, as Stevens recalls Lord Darlington remarking:

"By the way, Stevens, Lord Halifax was jolly impressed with the silver the other night. Put him into a different frame of mind altogether." These were – I recollect it clearly – his lordship's actual words and so it is not simply my fantasy that the state of the silver had made a small, but significant contribution towards the easing of relations between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that evening (135).

Wong argues that Stevens 'positions himself as having directly influenced world history; but, when he discovers that the influence was profoundly negative, he casts himself in an extradiegetic mode, where he can extricate himself from responsibility' (55). But in Stevens's own confession, here, of 'Small but significant' contribution there is a clear sense of pride, not one that is located in the pre-war past, but one that informs his self-perception in the present. We might think again, here, of Arendt and the banality of evil – is Stevens merely the subject of 'perverse professionalism' as Atkinson suggests, or is this phrase one that might equally apply to Adolf Eichmann's participation in the Holocaust.<sup>iv</sup> This question of an

'authentic inability to think' became problematic for Arendt, when it was interpreted as a kind of apologetic for Eichmann, and for individual action and agency during the holocaust. These are questions that Ishiguro's text poses, in the way of Stevens; critics have tended to see Stevens as something of a bumbling, if loyal, butler. Furst, seemingly concurring with Wong, claims that Stevens is indeed innocent, or at least innocent by way of omission, because 'of his ignorance of world events and his unquestioning loyalty to Lord Darlington' (551). However, there are instances of profound personal, political, and historical insight in Stevens' narrative, ones that challenge the image of a naïve, thoughtless servant.

Even with a retrospective awareness of the harm caused by Lord Darlington's amateur politicising, Stevens wants to be held accountable for the relationship between the British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax and the Nazi Party Foreign Secretary Herr Ribbentrop. Atkinson defines Stevens' actions and loyalty to Lord Darlington, and to his vicarious support for the political machinations as 'perverted professionalism', again, in a way that mitigates not only Stevens' failure to act as an independent moral agent, but perhaps more worryingly the degree to which Stevens arrogates these deeds to his own life story. Ishiguro has said that

"The butler is a good metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, small people to power [...] It struck me that the figure of the butler, the man who serves, someone who is so close and yet so very far from the hub of power would be a useful person to write through' (Swift 23).

Hub is a crucial word here, Stevens proposes that to butlers 'the world was a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub', making the rather broad, grandiose claim that 'each of us harboured the desire to make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world, and saw that, as professionals, the surest means of doing so would be to serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted' (115). We might even suggest that a failure to resist is, perhaps perversely, a resistance to resistance. Stevens's failure to

resist is predicated on his professional ethics, on the one hand, but, is perhaps also a demonstration of his continued belief, faith, in the path taken by Lord Darlington. As such, in the same way Ono's confession is in fact a disguised critique of the current order, Stevens presents a resistance to the US occupation of Darlington Hall, at the same time foregrounding his own exaggeratedly central position in world affairs. One might even argue, then, that far from 'feeding a bloated sense of self-importance', Ono and Stevens are in fact heroes of resistance in their own quiet, understated yet traditional, or stereotypical British and Japanese ways (Lewis 102). They are, perhaps, writing under cultural siege, the last bastion of resistance to the rapidly expanding cultural, political, military, and economic power of the brash, confident, yet overly 'demonstrative' United States. Of course, as Hudson notes, 'The United States is a necessary scapegoat because it can be positioned as ignorant and arrogant; as both uncultured and dangerously powerful' (O'Connor 254).

A subtle but telling anti-Americanism is at the heart of Ishiguro's later English country house novel, his most moving work, *Never Let Me Go*, a profound comment on the perceived shallowness of American popular culture. The title comes from the fictional American popular song 'Never Let Me Go', a saccharine love song that the central character and narrator Kathy H. a clone destined for organ harvesting, hears and is affected by. She remembers that 'it's slow and late night and American, and there's a bit that keeps coming round when Judy sings: "never let me go...Oh baby" [...]. I was eleven, and hadn't listened to much music, but this one song, it really got me' (69). Here, Kathy is the child being led astray by some 'strange adult', given to believe in the possibility of a world that is the product of US commercial culture. Just as Sachiko tragically dreams of moving to the United States to escape post-war Japan, there is an element of escapism: the clones, allegories of the working classes and council estate tenants, dream of moving to America and becoming movie stars. They are even told by one minder that 'None of you will go to America, none of

you will be film stars [...] You're not like the actors you watch on your videos' (80). It is no accident that a favourite film scene at Hailsham, a strictly monitored home for clones prior to organ harvesting, is from *The Great Escape*, 'the moment the American jumps over the barbed wire on his bike' (97). Ishiguro does not use the name 'the American' accidentally; it is a pointed critique of a globally dominant culture that creates profoundly misleading expectations.

### III

#### **'Each of us, it seems, has his own special conceits'**

Ishiguro told Susan Chira in a telephone conversation that,

"What I'm interested in is not the actual fact that my characters have done things they later regret [...] I'm interested in how they come to terms with it. On the one hand there is a need for honesty, on the other hand a need to deceive themselves - to preserve a sense of dignity, some sort of self-respect"

It seems rather that this self-respect does come from deceit, but it is one grounded not in regret for participation in shameful events, but rather for the slightness of their part. Perhaps Ishiguro misreads, perhaps he misdirects, but his narrators revel in complicity; it is precisely their pride in their minimal but exaggerated accountability for global tragedies and even war crimes that makes them reprehensible in a way that is not explicable simply by recourse to trauma. This re-reading is not a trivial matter, neither is it simply a possible alternative reading – it is in fact the suggestion that Ishiguro's works have been repeatedly misread, as a result of the attribution of notions of trauma, of simple ignorance, and as a result of the author's own claims. Almost all criticism of these works takes an apologetic stance, offering a range of excuses for the characters. However, in so doing, characters are bereft of agency: all political significance is removed from their acts of resistance in the failure to acknowledge that their confessions of misdeeds are indeed intentional, and highly sophisticated. It might even be argued that current readings are too focused on the intradiegetic, and that they do not

recognise the propagandistic nature of these narratives precisely in their refusal to acknowledge the implied reader, whether that be the remnants of Japanese Imperialists or the waning Butler class. However, taking account of one's life, one's actions, and of the multiplicity of being through time requires a faculty for self-portraiture that exceeds the abilities of even the most rigorous, honest, and gifted of draftsmen. As Ono remarks, 'I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty; however accurately one may fill in the surface details of one's mirror reflection, the personality represented rarely comes near the truth as others would see it' (67).

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Ishiguro's fascination with memory, and the reciprocity between with story and history has been a determining factor in the direction taken by scholarship, a fact evidenced by the publication of Yugin Teo's informative recent study *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory* (2015), itself forming one strand of a more extensive critical history of essays on this theme, beginning very soon after Ishiguro began publishing. Cf Cynthia Wong's excellent *Kazuo Ishiguro*, (1988), and Lilian R. Furst's 'Memory's Fragile Power in Kazuo Ishiguro's "Remains of the Day" and W. G. Sebald's "Max Ferber"', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2007, pp. 530-553; and Natalie Reitano's 'The Good Wound: Memory and Community in The Unconsoled', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* Vol. 49, No. 4, 2007, pp. 361-386.

<sup>ii</sup> See Leza Lowitz 'Towards a Literature of the Periphery', *Manoa*, Vol. 7, No. 1, *Fiction from Japan*, 1995, pp. 50-53 for an intriguing discussion of Japanese writing on the periphery.

<sup>iii</sup> It is telling that Ono's daughter is also named Noriko – perhaps coincidence, but perhaps an acknowledgement.

<sup>iv</sup> These are questions that the text not only encourages, but in fact insists upon.

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