

The Reading of the Butler: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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“It must be an awful job to be a butler anyway” (Powell 144). These, only partly hypocritical, sentiments are expressed by Erridge, the Communist aristocrat in Anthony Powell's *At Lady Molly's*. Erridge's remark is meant as a comment on his butler's spectacular, self-destructive alcoholism: Smith, in what looks almost like metaphysical despair, has returned to the etymological root of his occupation and taken to the bottle. In Powell, alcoholism usually indicates a general collapse of the self, a failure of the individual to identify with his role (as in the more prominent case of Charles Stringham). Erridge's comment indicates that in Smith's case alcoholism is somehow only to be expected, since there is an inherent difficulty in the identification demanded by butlerhood, a painful truncation, something that affects the self damagingly. Following the logic of Erridge's comment, one might conclude that the difference between a butler's real self and the identity he has to assume as a butler acts as a disruptive force in the economy of the self, finding some outlet in the excessive habit of alcoholism which can be considered as an attempt to step out of the confines of an externally imposed identity.

Even if Smith's case has a wider metaphorical relevance within Powell's novel sequence, the marginal figure of the butler does not seem to be very promising as a potential allegory of human subjectivity. Yet, in the context of certain contemporary theories of identity, it is through its very liminality that the butler might assume something of a theoretical dignity and centrality: it is exactly the obvious difference between his public identity and his assumed real self that might make the butler a possible Everyman, and it is clearly in these terms that we are invited to read Stevens, the butler protagonist of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

Master and Servant

The possible allegorical relevance of the butler is apparently made questionable by the obvious fact that in contemporary society, the butler is somewhere between a joke and an exotic anomaly: the institution of the butler is a fossil or relic anachronistically surviving from a pre-capitalist age where the feudal relationship between master and servant, lord and bondsman was not yet disguised by or displaced onto the fetishistic relationship between objects characteristic of capitalist economy. This incongruity, however, might easily be seen in opposite terms: the relationship of undisguised domination and subordination between the master and the butler might be considered as a symptomatic place where the fundamentally repressive relations of production, elsewhere disguised and displaced, are able to appear in an immediately transparent form (Žižek 26).

The difference between the two (democratic capitalist and feudal) worlds is reimagined in Ishiguro's novel in terms of the difference between two kinds of linguistic or communicative protocol, and the subversion of their dichotomy is a good indication of the ambivalent function of Stevens's "feudalism."

Stevens's major linguistic or communicative shortcoming is his inability to "banter." "Bantering" seems to be offered in the novel as an alternative language use, one that is not exhausted in the non-communication between two social roles or masks but conceives of language as a genuinely intersubjective activity, as intercourse between two free and equal individuals. Stevens cannot banter; he cracks two jokes in the course of the novel, in both cases because he thinks that "bantering" is expected of him (16-17, 130-31). Neither goes down too well with the interlocutor, not because the jokes are particularly unfunny but because Stevens seems to be unable to switch into the mode of discourse that is necessary for the sharing of jokes. It is interesting that both of his "witticisms"—both are the products of conversational obligation, called forth by another joke—are concerned with communication problems, with kinds of "noise" that is difficult to put up with: the calls of the gypsies outside Darlington Hall in the first joke and, in the second, the various nocturnal noises supposedly made by the landlord and his wife in the inn where he is put up for one night during his journey. In this sense, his telling of the jokes (resulting in "noise" as opposed to efficient communication) is in both cases the repetition or reenactment of their object—and of the other episode of joke-telling. The second witticism (like the first, based on a bird metaphor) is an elaboration of Mr Farraday's original joke that compares the gypsies to crows. In the first episode, Stevens's witty reply ("More like swallows than crows, I would have said, sir. From the migratory aspect"—16) leaves his employer bemused because it ignores the difference between their backgrounds: a newcomer to Darlington Hall, Mr Farraday cannot be familiar with the regular visits of the gypsies. The second joke fails for a communicative reason, too, but a more serious one. In the inn, Stevens repeats Mr Farraday's metaphor without taking note of its offensive, aggressive content (he wittily refers to the conjugal shouts of the landlord's wife as "a local variation of the cock crow"—30). The aggressive content of the original joke is an assault on the gypsies, and its aggressive undertone is markedly based on a speech situation that involves a master and his servant. The master tells an aggressive joke to the servant who, in the entirely different intersubjective context of the pub, offers a modified version of the same joke. Stevens realises that his witticism was probably not a success because it was found insulting (131), but he fails to trace the failure to the original violence involved in the situation of bantering. The second instance of unsuccessful bantering thus exposes, exactly through its failure, the hidden aggressiveness of the first.

Bantering is nevertheless retained as a positive communicative model until the end of the narrative—or nearly so. In the last scene of the novel, when Stevens sees that a group of strangers, after exchanging a few bantering remarks, are now "laughing together merrily" (243), he comes up with the conjecture that "in bantering lies the key to human warmth" (243). If the dichotomy between two kinds of language use and intersubjectivity works as a valid supposition, Stevens is simply "unlucky" because he cannot speak the language that would be his own and would allow him to engage in genuine conversation. Bantering as a linguistic utopia, a democracy of language use, the opposite of his textuality of restraint, seems to hold

for Stevens a genuine possibility at the conclusion of the novel. This interpretation of the conclusion, however, is not entirely approved of by the text.

Bantering, as I have already suggested in the example of Mr Farraday's joke, is not a genuine alternative: at least as it appears in the novel, it is based on a power relationship between the participants, a relationship that is in its way no less rigid than the one between Stevens and Lord Darlington (see the rude joke Mr Farraday makes about the wife of a guest—5); Susie O'Brien has convincingly shown that the opposition between bantering and restraint (together with the accompanying contrast between English and American) breaks down as soon as we want to transform it into the binary opposition of true and false, feudal hierarchy and democracy (cf. O'Brien 793-94).¹

In the last paragraph, Stevens reveals his plan to finally approach the problem of bantering with the proper commitment. One could read this as a proposed entry into the free (linguistic) realm of bantering, as a first step towards a new identity for the reformed butler. The tone of the passage (as well as that of an earlier one on p. 131), however, suggests something else: "bantering" will be duly added to Stevens's professional skills, that is, to the identity which he himself has for a moment recognized as inauthentic, hollow, non-existent. The future orientation of the final passage is all the more ironical because of the key word in the last sentence. Stevens trusts that Mr Farraday, upon his return, will indeed find a renewed butler, immersed and already tolerably skilled in the art of bantering: "I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him" (245). To surprise, as I shall try to show, is the one thing Stevens cannot do; it is possible, though, that Mr Farraday will discover a butler who is carrying about and mugging a rhetorical primer in order to develop his skills of deception and defence.

In the logic of the novel, Stevens's inability to banter is not an unlucky accident of personal disposition but a "necessary" flaw in his constitution; it is inevitable that he *cannot* enter into the protocol of bantering, because it is only in this way that this protocol can be revealed as fundamentally indistinguishable from what is posited as its opposite. Even though the new American owner (capitalist as opposed to feudal aristocrat, "proprietor" as opposed to "master") tries to talk to Stevens in terms of a "democratic" communicative situation that involves the verbal exchange of free subjects, the butler's inability to respond and participate in such a communicative situation functions as something like a memento of the repressed, feudal root of their real relationship of domination and servitude. In this sense, the butler is by definition an uncanny figure in the psychopathology of capitalism, bringing home a repressed truth about the dominant relations of power and production. Stevens, wearing the clothes and speaking the social idiom of his dead master (his master's voice), is thus a return of the repressed, a ghost of the master and of the servant alike.

The subjectivity of the butler might be described in terms of Hegel's well-known account of the birth of "unhappy consciousness" in the intersubjective encounter that inevitably develops into the unequal and unreciprocal relationship of master and servant, lord and bondsman. Hegel's story has been taken up by a number of contemporary theorists of subjectivity and domination, and some of the reformulations of his narrative are relevant for a discussion of Stevens as an allegorical character. By putting on his dead master's clothes, Stevens is the bondsman who, in

Judith Butler's words, becomes "the lord's body" (35). The lord, in his need for a total denial of the world that is experienced as a threat to his absolute sovereignty, disavows his own activity in life, delegating all involvement to the servant. "What the slave does is in fact the doing of the lord" (Hegel 105).² In Hegel's account, the lord apparently triumphs over life as a threatening externality by placing the consciousness of the slave between himself and the world (105); in this way, all the lord experiences of the world is its amenable masterability, its lack of independence (that is, nothing threatens his sovereignty and pleasure); the irreducible independence and unmasterability of the outside world is left to the slave who deals with it through work.

In Judith Butler's retelling of Hegel's narrative, the lord produces or projects the bondsman by means of the following ruse: "you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are is my body" (35). Thus, what seems to be the bondsman's autonomy (to transform, through *work*, the negative relationship with the object into form—Hegel 106) is simply the dissimulated effect of the lord's autonomy, itself a dissimulation (since a total denial of the world, as Hegel explains, is never a proper encounter with the world; the truth of independent consciousness is always necessarily the consciousness of the slave—Hegel 105). The lord effects the autonomy of disembodied reflection and delegates the autonomy of embodiment to the bondsman. The bondsman, in turn, effects autonomy through a miming of the lord's body, but a miming which remains hidden from the lord (as in the case of Stevens who connives at being mistaken for his dead master, even if he is finally relieved to be caught out and to address Doctor Carlisle as "Sir"—207).

In Hegel's story, the bondsman seems to find some recompensation in recognizing his own signature upon the objects he makes but realises at the same time that these objects are appropriated by the lord, experiencing this appropriation as a threat to his autonomy. Nevertheless, the bondsman works on, "taking up a posture of smugness or stubbornness, clinging to what appears to be firm about himself" (Butler 41). The terror of the loss of the self is allayed through stubbornness. It is in this process, claims Judith Butler, that the "unhappy consciousness" develops as the basic structure of subjectivity: "The bondsman takes the place of the lord by recognizing his own formative capacity, but once the lord is displaced, the bondsman becomes lord over himself, more specifically, lord over his own body; this form of reflexivity signals the passage from bondage to unhappy consciousness" (42). The realisation that the lord's assumed sovereignty depends upon the autonomy of the slave which is in turn borrowed from the lord's non-existent sovereignty does not do away with the lord. The unhappy consciousness involves a splitting of the self and the concomitant institution of a regime of self-subjection, an internalisation of the lord-bondsman relationship within the psyche (Hegel 113-14).³

At this point, one may feel inclined to install the butler as the embodiment of Hegel's slave consciousness or, conversely, speculate on the butler's differences from this model. One thing that clearly distinguishes him from the "ordinary" bondsman is that the butler does not produce anything: he cannot see his signature upon the objects he works with (because this signature is immediately erased by the lord). The butler's work (both the process and the product) is himself as butler: Stevens was bought by Farraday as part of the package that included the house and the furniture, as "a genuine old-fashioned English butler" (124). More exactly, the

job of the butler, his self-creation, is a veritable art of self-effacement, an ongoing erasure of himself (allegorised in Ishiguro's novel by Stevens's obsessive polishing of the silver). The butler's signature is not materially visible anywhere except in the symbolic strategy of the running of the household, in the document Stevens refers to as his staff plan. This implies an interesting ambiguity in the allegorical role of the butler: on the one hand, he is a bondsman through and through, a relic from feudal times, revealing the repressed relationship of domination and subjection that forms the unacknowledged secret basis of democratic capitalism; on the other hand, he is a bondsman whose delegated autonomy of embodiment consists solely in an activity of self-erasure.

Stevens is the servant whose verbal behaviour is defined entirely in terms of subordination: he is called, summoned (interpellated) and dismissed but never actually addressed. This is painfully evident in the scene when Stevens's political ignorance is ridiculed by one of Lord Darlington's guests or in the two abortive exchanges with Reggie Cardinal. On the other hand, Stevens's idiom (his pronunciation, his scrupulous grammar, his habit of understatement and his involved style) is that of his master—partly because his function as butler is that of symbolically “representing” (that is, reproducing, portraying) the master among the staff. That is why the butler functions as the master's uncanny double, and Stevens is mistaken for his master; in his master's absence (after his death, that is) he is all that is left of him. In this sense, the figure of Stevens may be read as an allegorical representative of the theoretical assumption that all language is the language of the master. His assiduous practice of self-training (reading, listening to the radio) does not involve learning things about the world but only the acquisition of the idiom: with language working “emptily,” without a referential component, it is obvious that the perfection of his project of acquiring a complete mastery of language is in fact the completion of the mastery of language over him, of his collapsing into the system of language that speaks him.

The butler is the servant whose work is language, who “works” language and (mis)recognises himself in it. He is the allegory of the Symbolic, a figure whose authority (mastery of language) is equal to his self-annihilation (the mastery of language).

The Story of Restraint (The Restraint of Story)

This structure of self-denial and self-subjection clearly invites a reading of the butler in terms of internal, psychic difference. As a hero of the “unhappy consciousness,” Stevens has to be read as a character who enacts an internal drama of consciousness, someone who does not know everything about himself. The question of reading the novel is the question of what “else” there is to know about Stevens.

In the process of reading, Stevens's internal doubling or self-difference appears (is doubled) in terms of the doubling of the text, its difference from itself: the difference between the text of the narrator and that of the implied author. The effect of Ishiguro's novel clearly depends on this displaced difference. This would seem to imply that the successful reading of the novel consists mainly in an exposure of Stevens's famous unreliability, in the effort to splice his discourse according to a division between the intended and the unintended, the manifest and the hidden, where it is always the second term of the opposition (the hidden, the unintentionally revealed) that acquires greater truth value, if only because this truth value is also a

labour value, identical with the energy invested in interpretation, in the work of unearthing or revealing the hidden. The premise (and promise) of our reading is the assumption that what is not immediately visible, what is covered or concealed by verbal camouflage as meticulous and scrupulous as Stevens's, must be truer than that which conceals it. I shall go along with this kind of reading up to a certain point, to see where it takes us.

One version of this reading strategy translates the dichotomy of manifest and latent into economic metaphors, transforming the text into a psychomachia between desire and repression. Ishiguro's text contains a number of indications that it should be read in terms of desire and defence/repression. Stevens's "epiphany" (Baxendale and Pawling 193) of the English landscape is such a sign. Stevens's reading of the epiphany is offered as an essentially aesthetic comment, an attempt to define the essence of (natural) beauty. Stevens finds the latter in "greatness" which he in turn identifies as a "lack of obvious drama or spectacle" (28), characterised by calmness, a "sense of restraint" (29), as opposed to the far inferior aesthetic quality of dramatic, spectacular landscapes in places like Africa and America with "their unseemly demonstrativeness" (29). Baxendale and Pawling identify restraint as the basis of Stevens's aesthetics as well as of his politics (193)—and one should add that it is the starting point of his ethics, too.

The meaning of "restraint" is at least double, and this doubleness, of which Ishiguro's novel is very much aware, generates a somewhat paradoxical wavering in Stevens's text between solipsism and self-effacement, obsequiousness and assertiveness, a constant misjudging of the magnitude of what he says. On the one hand, restraint works as the poetics of the butler's discourse: as the formalised verbal code of understatement, so familiar from generations of literary butlers including, among others, Wodehouse's Jeeves. It is clearly a major rhetorical strategy in Stevens's discourse as well, even though here it assumes pathological dimensions. On the other hand, if restraint is considered as a political metaphor working in the novel, it manifests itself as repression, control. Stevens's (textual) regime is ironically characterised by Miss Kenton, who defines him in terms of desire and containment: "It occurs to me you must be a well-contented man, Mr Stevens. Here you are, after all, at the top of your profession, every aspect of your domain well under control. I really cannot imagine what more you might wish for in life" (173). Stevens's regime is a motionless, static world that does not tolerate change and movement. It has to be presented (this, ironically, is what Miss Kenton does) as a desireless state that is without desire because it is the aftermath of fulfilled desire. This world is governed by a non-narrative temporality based on repetition, and its textual equivalent is Stevens's "staff plan." In textual terms, Stevens's ideal is the perfect staff plan which, as he claims, is effective exactly because, far from being too rigid, it allows "margins of error" (8).

One could see the entire text as an attempt to transform the politics of restraint into an aesthetics of restraint and then to use the latter as a legitimisation of the former. Formulated in somewhat different terms, with much less emphasis on Stevens's conscious intention to persuade, the drama of the text could be seen as the conflict between the static staff plan and the story of desire that strives to come to the surface, to find for itself narrative discharge. The expedition that provides the narrative frame of the story gains its energy and momentum from a combination of assaults on Stevens's staff plan, including a new owner, a dramatic cut in the

number of staff, and, most importantly, the intrusion of another text, a letter from Miss Kenton who is now Mrs Benn. Miss Kenton is instantly identified by Stevens as a supplement to his otherwise complete (textual) world: "the factor needed to enable me to complete a fully satisfactory staff plan for Darlington Hall" (9-10). Miss Kenton, the character who commented on the self-sufficient completeness of the staff plan, now appears (or reappears) in it as a disruptive lack that needs to be filled. It seems that the expedition has the makings of a peculiar but not infrequent love story: desire generates the text which then strives to hide it. Our reading discovers an energising but potentially disruptive flow of desire beneath the journey; Susie O'Brien's view is a typical expression of this reading strategy: "For Stevens's narrative is animated, ultimately, not by the achingly restrained prose in which he recounts what happened but by the current of desire that flows beneath it, building up against the words a pressure of meaning whose significance is all the more palpable for never achieving release" (795).

This reading is supported by the grand finale that one cannot help seeing as somewhat parodistic: the romantic climax at the bus shelter in the pouring rain, the valedictory scene of the renunciation of desire (cf. Baxendale and Pawling 204-05). Stevens and Miss Kenton (Mrs Benn), though attached to each other, are ready to relinquish their desire for the sake of "correctness," duty, restraint. This episode reestablishes the reign of restraint on the level of narrative, at the cost of a momentary breach of the code of restraint in the narrative discourse: "My heart was breaking," says Stevens, very uncharacteristically (239; cf. Baxendale and Pawling 205).

The repressed element is invariably seen as the truth of the text. Its greater authenticity (measure of truth, etc.) can, as we have seen, be translated into psychological terms. The same truth value can be claimed for the hidden element by granting it the status of an archetypal narrative. Ishiguro's novel has been seen as a quest story (cf. Baxendale and Pawling 191) where the hero sets out on a rescue mission to save the beleaguered maiden from the ogre (though the suspicions concerning the violence of Mr Benn, looming large in Stevens's imagination, prove to be unfounded). To this assumption one could also add that Stevens's journey, if seen as a quest, contains encounters with a series of quasi-mythical figures, including at least three doubles, one of whom is also a figure of death, and a series of events that gradually dislocate, disrupt and generally threaten Stevens's selfhood. The quest structure is dangerous for Stevens (and thus perhaps an adequate metaphor of what is repressed) primarily because it is a narrative that is initiated by a lack, and lack is exactly what his staff plan and his subjectivity are not supposed or acknowledged to have.

The act of setting out (starting a narrative) is itself fearsome for Stevens because it involves the transgressive possibility of narrative: it is a departure from the world that can be textually covered by the staff plan: "I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries" (24). When he leaves behind the area that still looks familiar, Stevens panics, and expresses his alarm in almost allegorical terms that clearly link narrative movement with the threat of (moral, existential) chaos: "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" (24).

The essential difference between desire and repression (restraint, defence) is thus reformulated as the conflict between two textual principles: the narrative, which is associated with transgression, disruption and desire, and another code, exemplified

by restraint, that works to repress narrative energies and maintain the rule of the staff plan. In the novel, this non-narrative principle is rhetoric, which seems to function primarily as an agent of containment and repression.

Stevens's opening sentences encapsulate the struggle between the two principles that informs (or disrupts) the entire narrative.

It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr Farraday's Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the countryside of England to the West Country, and keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out, from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portraits in the library. In fact, as I recall, I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he presumably wished returned to the shelves. On seeing my person, he took the opportunity to inform me that he had just that moment finalized plans to return to the United States for a period of five weeks between August and September. (3)

The first sentence promises considerable and regulated narrative movement by carefully identifying (speaking from and creating) a moment in the flow of mental activity that involves past ("has been preoccupying"), present ("it seems"), and future ("I will undertake"). Translated into narrative terms, this structure offers a grammatical allegory of the entire text, suggesting the model whereby the successful reworking or working through of painful or problematic past psychic material by means of introspection (or confession) in the present will open up the possibility of a more valuable or habitable future. The narrative "now" is immediately placed in the context of retrospection and anticipation, gaining its content and (essentially narrative) meaning from the organic relationship between them. The dynamism is like Saint Augustine's "distention of the soul" that Ricoeur links to the dialectics of the threefold present, the constant interplay of expectation, memory, and attention that makes up the fullness of the present moment (cf. Augustine 240-41, Ricoeur 15-21).

This temporal structure is reassuringly extended and reinforced by the perfect symmetry in the rhetorical organisation of the next three sentences. First some of the particulars of the planned journey are revealed in two instalments, the second offering more exact details than the first, each introduced by an inserted formula: "I should say" and "as I foresee it"; these are perfectly symmetrical with the rhetorical structure of the two subsequent units that relate the genesis of the trip: "I should point out" mirrors "I should say" and expresses an eagerness to do justice to Mr Farraday's contribution to the expedition, whereas "as I recall" completes the symmetry by adding further details to the previous statement.

The first passage is thus full of healthy narrative promise, yet, the general "sickness" of the text is also obvious. Stevens's belaboured style is all mannerism—in the sense that his discourse is made up of prefabricated elements. He speaks

like a non-native speaker who has appropriated a large but limited set of phrases applicable in a large but limited set of situations: his language is indeed his world, he has no words for experiences and situations (places) outside his linguistic competence. This is borne out in the pretty passages describing his impressions of Salisbury. He describes this "city of many charms" (27) by referring to the "delightful rows of old timber-fronted houses" and other noteworthy sights, concluding with "the august building" of "the fine cathedral, much praised by Mrs Symons in her volume" (27). Reporting his encounter with a hitherto unknown place, he simply lists a number of Baedeker clichés, presumably recapitulating a few gems from Mrs Symons's *The Wonder of England*, a multi-volume work from the 1930s, highly valued by Stevens, who thinks that it is still up-to-date in 1956. Stevens is reluctant to leave Darlington Hall in the first place, claiming that, despite his isolation, he has seen "the best of England" within these walls (4). His account of Salisbury suggests that there is indeed no need for him to go out, simply because he is unable to notice anything that is not already in his guidebook: he sees only what the guidebook allows him to perceive, that is, what he has already "seen." No surprises await Stevens on his expedition, or there would be no surprises if it were up to him to organise his journey. This is indicated by the fact that whenever he receives instructions from someone he encounters on the way, he tends to lose his way and suffer all manner of accidents, finding himself in mazes of lanes as well as in situations for which he is not at all prepared (as in the episode of the identity change when he is taken for his master).

Using his limited set of phrases mechanically, as in the description of Salisbury, he is helpless in situations that "exceed" the communicative situations he is usually involved in. This is most pathetically the case in the scene with his dying father, where, bewildered by the unexpectedly personal overtures of his father, all he can do is compulsively repeat the same formulaic sentence over and over again; Stevens's only acknowledgement of the personal and dramatic nature of the situation is his lapse into second person, addressing his father as "you" (97). Another example of Stevens's inability to find words in unusual situations is his tragicomic failure to enlighten Reggie Cardinal about the facts of life (84).

Stevens's discourse, like his clothes, is borrowed. Its origin is outside him: when he speaks, something else speaks, too (Mrs Symons's worthy book is one of the more comic tropes for this externality). What is radically questioned through his "butler's style" is the continuity between the subject as the origin of his language and the language that comes to us as his own. What speaks through Stevens is exclusively his master's voice, language as Other.

Otherness, however, also penetrates into his discourse in other ways. What is immediately striking in the opening passage, as well as elsewhere in the narrative, is the presence and prevalence of inserted elements, such as "I should say," that give the impression of a written, polished text rather than a stream of thoughts. The referential, narrative components of the text are, as it were, superimposed, effaced, back-staged, by the component that we should call rhetorical. Stevens's painful accuracy, generating much of the second half of the passage quoted above, and a general air of redundancy throughout the narrative, are themselves motivated rhetorically rather than referentially. Rhetoric means, among other things, the vector of language that is concerned with persuasion, eloquence as a way of impressing and influencing the other. Stevens's text is thoroughly rhetorical in the sense that it is simply unable to

forget for a moment its structure of address. There is perhaps no sentence which does not include a little phrase like “in fact,” “it has to be pointed out,” let alone the innumerable instances of direct addresses to the reader/listener; the most frequent locutions of the latter type include “you can/will perhaps understand,” “you will (no doubt) appreciate,” and their various derivatives, each appearing dozens of times in the course of the narrative. A single example will illustrate the general effect of such locutions:

But I feel I should return just a moment to the matter of my father, for it strikes me I may have given the impression earlier that I treated him rather bluntly over his declining abilities. The fact is, there was little choice but to approach the matter as I did—as I am sure you will agree once I have explained the full context of those days. (69-70)

The narrative (or narratives, since there are two narratives to tell: that of the journey in the narrative present and that of Stevens’s past, revealed in fragments) is invaded and smothered by an all-pervasive rhetoricity, in other words, by the ubiquity of the other in Stevens’s text. On closer scrutiny, large chunks of the text turn out to be generated by an essentially non-narrative logic. The text works like an apology or an extended self-justification, and the narrative sections are often revealed to be grammatically and logically subordinated to an argument. This is illustrated by the placing of the two anecdotes about Stevens’s father, brought in as examples, parables, illustrating a point in his argument about the greatness of butlers. Extended narratives of reminiscing also turn out to be similarly subordinated to other, rhetorical, argumentative concerns of the text (e.g. the interpretation of a detail in Miss Kenton’s letter generates and frames seventeen pages of narration—50-67).

Excessive rhetorical control over the narrative is in itself not necessarily indicative of the erosion of the self that produces the language; usually it suggests that the present of the narrative situation gains ascendancy over the narrated past, and that the “meaning” of the narrative shifts away from the referential content, sliding over into the act of telling. In Ishiguro’s novel, this manipulative use of rhetoric is obviously present: Stevens wants to convince, to justify. More significantly, however, the over-rhetoricised nature of the narrative discourse indicates a radical lack, in two senses. First, the rhetorical overdetermination covers the lack of narratable material: if Stevens does not allow anything to happen to him, there is no story that he could tell, and it is the very poverty and meagreness of the narrative material, rather than its unruly excess, that is disguised by rhetoric. Second, the omnipresence of rhetoric indicates an emptiness, an absence at the source of the text. The other, invoked in practically every sentence, inhabits this language not as a co-tenant with its proprietor but as its owner, having full authority over it. The reader or listener implied by the text is some kind of High Court for butlers, an agent or agency that has to be humoured and, by all means, convinced. There is no statement that does not try rhetorically to create the reader’s tacit agreement or approval, as if without this approval or endorsement no further textual or narrative move could be taken.

Stevens undertakes a journey in search of his future and a narrative in search of his past. The journey deprives him of a future while the narrative deprives him of a past—or, more exactly, his rhetoric deprives him of a narrative. The subject of the

narrative is deprived of a past and of a future whose interplay would sustain the narrating subject as well as the narrative itself; the narrating and narrated subject becomes a repeated emptiness, and the narrative becomes a staff plan: a series of identically hollow moments without the possibility of redemption, of a departure from this temporality.

Stevens as Reader—The Reader as Stevens

The conflict between the repressive regime of the staff plan and the subversive, disruptive love narrative is thus revealed as a general conflict between manifest surface and hidden truth. This, at least, is how the text invites itself to be read and how it usually is read. And this is what the term “unreliable narrator” would seem to suggest with its implication of levels of reliability, authenticity, and, ultimately, truth.

This reading strategy establishes the reading activity on the analogy of a simplified view of psychoanalytic interpretation. We are invited to read with suspicion the language of a (sick, unhealthy, abnormal) self, assuming that the self speaks a language of self-delusion which, however, if the correct methods of reading are applied and the layers of deceit unravelled, is also the language of self-revelation. We read Stevens’s discourse symptomatically in terms of desire and repression, concealment and distortion, searching for the hidden centre and origin of his discourse, victims of what Slavoj Žižek calls our “fascination with the secret content” (11).

Naturally, this reading is not wrong or fallacious. Ishiguro’s text allows and invites to be read as a drama of manifest text (repression, defence) and secret content (desire). The novel, however, does not entirely approve of the model of reading that is overtly called forth by it: Stevens’s discourse is born in a complicated network of revelation and concealment that cannot be reduced to the binary model of truth vs. untruth, the former identified with the latent or hidden and the latter relegated to the position of inauthenticity.⁴

One interesting sign or symptom of this ambiguity is the treatment of “politics” in terms of the desire/repression reading of the novel. The dominant reading seems to generate a certain tension between politics as subject matter and politics as a metaphor of the novel’s textual and psychic regime.

Stevens’s story clearly offers itself as the underside of a more important story that is mainly political. The subjection of his life (narrative) to the larger narrative of international politics is the most important strand of self-legitimation woven into the text. One question that faces the reader is that of the relationship between the love story and the political story. The reading of Stevens’s domestic and psychic regime in political terms, as a twofold political allegory, is clearly a possibility that is offered by the text, even though such a reading takes it for granted—following Stevens himself—that the political is the novel’s final signified or referent, and relegates the love interest to the status of allegorical parable which means something *else*. Interestingly, an overtly political reading of the text repeats Stevens’s strategy of self-legitimation on a higher level: the “love interest” is effaced under the political theme, even if the latter appears on a primarily formal level as a strategy of repression.

In Stevens’s life, politics seems to be the agent of the repression of the love story and of a private, emotional life in general. There are two “nights of triumph” that condense intense personal as well as political crisis: the night of the death of Stevens’s father and the great conference in 1922, and the night when Miss Kenton

decides to leave and Reggie tries to enlighten Stevens about the political career of Lord Darlington, with Ribbentrop and the British Prime Minister in the house. These two episodes, narrated in some detail, are offered as parables about the subordination of private life to that other thing which is called "history" or "politics." The more important narrative forecloses the possibility of personal narratives, repeatedly interrupting and suppressing them even before they could come into existence. Stevens thus sacrifices interiority for the sake of furthering the progress of mankind, suppressing the private for the sake of the public—a noble enough sacrifice. This simple dichotomy, however, is disrupted by several factors. First of all, in the higher realm that represses unruly private life, politics chiasmically appears in the context of concealment. The model of political processes in the novel is one where secret operations determine the manifest, public, visible decisions and activities. Stevens's strange metaphor of the world's structure is an expression of this belief: movement, activity (the circumference of the *wheel* of the world) is the emanation of the "mighty decisions" (115) taken in the great houses, the motionless hub of the revolving world. This conceit defines Stevens's non-narrative life as a replica of the motionlessness of the hub: his self-congratulatory military metaphors of himself (the butler's pantry is the hub of the house, the butler is like the general who is conducting his armies from the motionless centre—138-39) strangely invert the logic of his "internal politics," attributing greater significance to the secret operations that determine the visible surface in unpredictable ways.⁵

Another disturbing inversion is involved in the introduction of "politics" itself into the "political" or politicised field of textuality. Stevens's hollowing out of himself, his relinquishing of a self is a result of his "professionalism": he refuses to be anything ("lover" or "amateur") in order to fully inhabit a profession, to be a profession(al). He does all this for the sake of a sphere ("politics") where the dichotomy between "professional" and "amateur" appears in an inverted way: the American guest, Mr Lewis, dismisses the likes of Lord Darlington as a bunch of amateurs when politics should be the business of professionals (102). The politics of repression in Stevens thus works in total subservience to professionalism in order to serve politics itself where, however, the hierarchy of amateur and professional which informs Stevens's decision is chiasmically reserved: what he serves (effaces his real self for) turns out to work in a way that is exactly the opposite of what he has been doing.

The dominant reading is not cancelled or disqualified by such incongruities or unresolved instances of tension as much as constantly harrassed by the text and dramatised within it. If there exists "another" reading of *The Remains of the Day*, it is certainly not a better or more truthful interpretation but the reading of the dominant reading by the novel.

The difference between the dominant reading of the novel and the "other" reading is that the former is based upon a conception of subjectivity that is questioned by the latter. The dominant reading, starting out from the opposition between latent surface and manifest truth, entails that the reader return (or create) Stevens's desire by duplicating it: if we read Stevens's text as a textual surface or screen that serves to conceal the "real Stevens," the reading becomes a hunt for the real Stevens, who in turn becomes the meaning of the tale. What is interesting is that, although this reading finds its truth in Stevens's self-delusion, it must depend for its logic on Stevens's consciously held views on identity, most fully expounded when he ex-

plains his negative behaviour during the battle of the book, Miss Kenton's most desperate intrusion into his world. The passage, which almost disappears under the proliferation of rhetoric, is one of Stevens's very few positive statements.

But when I say this, I do not mean to imply the stance I took over the matter of the book that evening somehow unwarranted. For you must understand, there was an important principle at issue. The fact was, I had been "off duty" at that moment Miss Kenton had come marching into my pantry. And of course, any butler who regards his vocation with pride, any butler who aspires at all to a "dignity in keeping with his position," as the Hayes Society once put it, should never allow himself to be "off duty" in the presence of others. It really was immaterial whether it was Miss Kenton or a complete stranger who had walked in at that moment. A butler of any quality must be seen to *inhabit* his role, utterly and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume. There is one situation and one situation only in which a butler who cares about his dignity may feel free to unburden himself of his role; that is to say, when he is entirely alone. (169)

This uncharacteristically assertive statement seems to prescribe a reading process that would amount to a search for the traces of the real Stevens in the text: if to be "on duty" means to be with someone else, to be visible for someone else, then we, by the end of the reading, must find the Stevens who is off duty, the Stevens whose desire and unruliness, whose language, are concealed by layers of conscious disguise and unconscious self-delusion. This reading seems to restore control over the narrative: not Stevens's control (it is essential that he should *not* be in control, that he should not be fully present to himself) but the control of the growing insight and knowledge generated in the course of reading, instituting the reader as analyst. The dominant reading thus has two stages.

In the first stage, the real, private, off-duty (duty-free) Stevens must be isolated; he is here defined as the one who is allowed his privacy. We must find and hear the voice of the Stevens who is "entirely alone." This strategy takes its cue from the notion of the modern subject, "instituted as an effect of the historical production of that great distinction in modernity between the public and the private spheres. Constituted over against the public world, the private subject is thus established in isolation from others and from the collective realm of the very society whose lived form it nonetheless is" (Barker vi). According to Francis Barker it is this founding division between the private and the public that runs through other separations, including for instance the one between desire and responsibility (vi), the dichotomy that supplies the basic structure and vocabulary for the prevalent reading strategy of the text.

It is exactly such a "private" Stevens that the narrative situation promises. The problem with this reading is precisely that the moment of utter solitude, the moment of Stevens's self-presence coincides entirely with the moment of the narration: the "now" of the storytelling is clearly identified several times throughout the text as a series of moments of tranquil solitude (in the guesthouse outside Salisbury, by the scenic pond, in the Rose Garden Hotel, and on the pier): the recurrent expression

“Now, in these quiet moments...” (47) could serve as a general index to the kinds of time that produce sections of the text (see also 120, 132, 205, 211, 231). These are moments when the outside world does not intrude, when the self is on its own and can reflect upon itself. This situation would define the status of the text as internal monologue, the kind of discourse that takes place within the self and is usually considered as a discourse of sincerity and truth. The over-rhetoricised nature of the narrative shows, however, that this Stevens who is entirely alone is still very much “on duty”: he needs the presence of the other, as is very ironically indicated by the sentence immediately following his declaration concerning absolute privacy: “You will appreciate then that in the event of Miss Kenton bursting in at a time when I had presumed, not unreasonably, that I was to be alone, it came to be a crucial matter of principle, a matter indeed of dignity, that I did not appear in anything less than my full and proper role” (169). In a moment of total privacy, in an argument for total privacy, he needs the authority of the other to formulate his view. Stevens is “entirely alone,” “off duty,” when he is talking and yet, as I have tried to show, there is nothing in his discourse that belongs to him: his language belongs elsewhere and simply goes through him as through a transparent medium that does not really “do” anything to the words; his discourse is dominated by rhetoric as the pervasive presence and authority of the other over all he says. If we choose to read the narrative in terms of the logic of revelation and concealment and try to trace the hidden Stevens, the hidden narrative beneath the proliferating rhetoric, the desire that is repressed, we might find that there is in fact nothing there. The most disturbing aspect of the story is in this case not that it is a painful chronicle of repressed desire, but the possibility that there is nothing to hide: the “real Stevens” dissolves into the circulation of language between its origin and destination. The elaborate strategies of legitimation, defence and dissembling are working in a void, creating a two-tier structure of the subject that it is their task to reveal.

The second stage of the dominant reading is the attempt to interpret the isolated “private” Stevens, to read the internal psychic struggle that is assumed to produce the text, an overcoming of this lack in Stevens’s subjectivity. This reading does not institute Stevens as the allegory of the self-present and coherent individual, but as an essentially traumatised subjectivity that is not fully aware of himself. Nevertheless, over and against the emptiness of his language and his total dissolution in the Symbolic, this reading must restore the hidden secret of Stevens’s subjectivity as the target of the successful reading, with the important difference that this secret now appears as a fundamental lack. This entails that Stevens’s privacy contains a lack (of self-knowledge, self-presence), that the essence of Stevens’s subjectivity has to be something of which he is not fully aware. If we continue to consider the figure of Stevens as an allegory of the subject, we may say that the dominant reading is not at all “naïve”: it is not interested in the maintenance of the self-present, self-identical subject but in the notion of the subject as a hermeneutically complex structure of conflicting forces, as a structure that is by definition not fully knowable for itself.

Stevens ultimately implies that he rejects Miss Kenton because he chooses solitude, he wants moments of perfect privacy. That is, he wants moments for his secret self. The paradox is that this secret self which remains after the exclusion of Miss Kenton is exactly what has been excluded or foreclosed to retain this secret core. That is, if we continue to believe that Stevens’s repressed desire for Miss Kenton is

the secret core of his self (and of the narrative), we must conclude that he rejects Miss Kenton (desire) for the sake of his intimate, interior secret (which is also identified by our reading as desire). We are thus clearly invited to read his professed statement about his need for privacy as a kind of evasion or defence, that is, an *error* that was necessary to protect him from his real desire for the other. It is the erroneousness of this theory that we grasp and hold on to as proof of our desire for Stevens's desire for Miss Kenton, for the structure of self-delusions and self-deceptions that seems to be the only way in which subjectivity as *depth* can be conceived in the novel.

The "other" reading, the reading of the dominant reading by the novel, is simply the wedge between the two stages of the dominant reading, a constant pestering or harrassing of it, a reading that continuously takes account of the possibility that Stevens's autonomy (desire, secret interiority) is the effect of the reader's desire rather than the origin of the narrative (or the origin of the narrative only in its capacity as the effect of the reader's desire). The text does not decide between the two readings (conceptions of the subject): the "real Stevens" is inevitably re-produced by the reading as a necessary fiction, and the unwritten and foreclosed love story might also be read as the repetition of our reading.

In order to reckon with the consequences of the "other reading," we need to ask two questions: first, what are the clues in the text that the dominant reading, working with the contrast of desire and repression, is based on? Apart from the pathologically severe repressive regime of the text, what are the traces of Stevens's desire? And second, how is reading imagined in the text? A quick look at the privileged points of the novel reveals that the two questions turn out to refer to the same thing: (Stevens's) desire appears in reading and reading is imagined as an activity of (Stevens's) desire.

The central textual conflict of the novel is half-mockingly allegorised in the fight over the book that is the central scene of confrontation in the unnarrated (because unborn) love story of Stevens and Miss Kenton. One evening Stevens, reading in his pantry, is ambushed by Miss Kenton; since she cannot speak about what really matters, she displaces the emotional charge of the situation onto the book and insists on being told what he is reading. Stevens resists and a fight ensues in the course of which Miss Kenton, playfully suggesting that the butler indulges in the reading of "racy" things, finally succeeds in prising Stevens's fingers off the book and exposing his secret. The item turns out to be an inoffensive, though incongruous sentimental love romance, and, since the emotionality of the episode is not discharged in a "love scene," the battle of the book remains one in a series of episodes that fail to trigger off any narrative development. The love story that he is reading fails to be transferred to the level of Stevens's narrative. It seems that, for Stevens, desire is retained for the activity of reading. Although he claims to read sentimental romances in order to improve his command of good English (167-68), he admits to finding in them some "incidental enjoyment" (178). Since the secret the reader hopes to tease out of the entire narrative and the secret of Stevens are certainly not unrelated, it is interesting to note the lesson of the episode. Stevens's secret is that he reads; his secret is *reading*: what is more, his secret is reading exactly the kind of stories he excludes himself from experiencing in his real life.

The single most important clue for the dominant reading of the novel is also related to reading. In Stevens's reading of Miss Kenton's letter, his displaced desire

seems to work most powerfully and in a more or less unchecked way; this is indicated by the fact that the letter is compulsively reread and reinterpreted in the course of his expedition. It seems that Stevens the reader, unlike Stevens the butler (or Stevens in general, for that matter) is governed by his desire: he manages to detect in the "rather unrevealing" (9) passages of the letter an "unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall, and—I am quite sure of this—distinct hints of her desire to return here" (9). Stevens reads desire in(to) the letter. It is his reading that makes him accept Mr Farraday's offer and set out on a motoring trip. Stevens penetrates the understated, unrevealing textual surface of Miss Kenton's missive and reaches the truth of the letter, locating it in her desire that speaks through it though only in a hidden, repressed way. That is, in a way that is perfectly sufficient for astute—desiring—readers like Stevens.⁶

Stevens, of course, is not a terribly astute reader, and the logic of his misreading is important if we are to maintain the analogy between his reading and our reading; this logic is evident, for instance, in his laborious misinterpretation of why Miss Kenton happens to remember a particular episode: she confesses that she remains haunted by the image of Stevens's old father "walking back and forth in front of the summerhouse, looking down at the ground as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there" (50). This haunting and powerful image is seen by Miss Kenton as the tragicomic effort of a broken man to justify his lapse (he has fallen there with a full tray and claims that he fell because the steps were crooked), to ignore that his life is over, whereas Stevens sees it as a professional attempt to rectify some small mistake. Their differing interpretations of the scene reveal major differences in their interpretive attitudes. For Miss Kenton, the *fort-da* image of the broken man clearly allegorises the uselessly repetitive nature of life at Darlington Hall; Old Mr Stevens is also young Mr Stevens as well as herself, imprisoned in an endless repetition as a compulsive return to the place of loss. Stevens is unable to "read" the image in a symbolic way, that is, to read anything *behind* it; however, he does much better with Miss Kenton's interpretation of the scene, interpreting Miss Kenton's motive in referring to the memory as her "painful" guilt over having misjudged old Mr Stevens (66-67). His blindness (refusal to read the original scene as referring to himself) returns as a displaced desire to read something (desire, that is) into or behind Miss Kenton's reading of the scene; his misreading of the letter is the proof of the symptomatic nature of his blindness in the first instance: the desire that is repressed from the reading of the scene returns in the reading of the interpretation. Stevens's inability to read himself appears as the ability to misread the other, to read the other as (the figure of) that which he can never read in himself.

The structure of reading (Stevens's and our reading) leads us to say that Stevens, by reading desire in(to) the letter, reads his own desire in(to) it, that he reads the letter of the Other in search of his own desire. His reading makes sense narratively only if he is wrong; his truth is his error, in the sense that only by misreading Miss Kenton's letter can he (or we) hope to get to the truth of his own desire. We can witness here how Stevens's desire for Miss Kenton is indispensable for the dominant reading strategy to work: without this desire, we simply lose the content of his utter solitude; one could argue that the sole content of this solitude is the reflection of our desire, that is, reading—the very activity disturbed by Miss Kenton's appearance. If we extend the analogy between Stevens's reading and our

reading, we could perhaps say that the appearance of Stevens is as disruptive to our process of reading as is Miss Kenton to Stevens's solitary occupation.

To read the text according to the structure of self-subjection and self-delusion is to assume that there is something to be read, to be known about Stevens, to read his narrative in the way he reads Miss Kenton's letter. We must read the text in a way that is revealed in the novel as erroneous but necessary. Accepting his internal act of reading as a model for reading the novel has an important and perhaps somewhat unwelcome corollary: if what he reads in Miss Kenton's letter is his own desire, what we read in his text is also our own desire. We read Stevens to learn something about ourselves, something that can only be learnt through the desire-inspired misreading of his narrative, that is, through error. We read Stevens's text, assuming that it hides something, that there is an authentic self, revealed only in the process of reading (revealed in him as a reader and as the object of our reading); we read for a self, for signs of the self that we presume is already there, producing the signs for our misreading. The hidden self repressed by Stevens (his inability to read himself) is thus a figure of our desire: we are bound to find this self and desire if all the symptomatic moments of the narrative are interpreted as symptomatic of the repression of this desire. Stevens becomes the object of our desire in the sense that he hides that which we desire to hide but can never be sure of hiding within ourselves.

It is our desire to see Stevens like this. In the process of reading, Stevens indeed becomes an allegorical figure: the figure of a certain kind of subjectivity as well as a figure of (our) desire.

Notes

¹ The second reason lies in the general logic of the novel. Interpreting "bantering" as an authentic realm of intersubjective and verbal relations would require the imposition of a reading strategy that transforms the novel into a narrative of growing insight and self-knowledge as a result of various unsettling and humiliating experiences. In the final scene on the pier Stevens is confronted with the last of the doubles that line his journey: an ex-butler to whom Stevens is able to confess the total emptiness and failure of his life. His narrative thus seems to end on a note of increased self-knowledge, a kind of "creative" or productive breakdown that may lead to a fuller life. The remaining few lines, however, serve to undercut this reading.

² Wodehouse's memorable duo of Wooster and Jeeves might be read as a comic variation on this Hegelian insight. In the light of the Hegelian narrative, some of Bertie Wooster's innocuous and famously nonchalant declarations might begin to look somewhat sinister. "Now, touching on this business of old Jeeves—my man, you know—how do we stand? Lots of people think I am much too dependent on him. My Aunt Agatha, in fact, has even gone so far as to call him my keeper... I gave up trying to run my own affairs within a week of his coming to me" (Wodehouse 9).

³ For a persuasive combination of the Hegelian story with Freudian theory, see Jessica Benjamin (esp. 69-73), who explores the distorted psychological dynamisms and structures (masochism and sadism) in terms of this intersubjective narrative of domination.

⁴ The model of dream interpretation offers a more adequate metaphor of the reading process, one that does not follow the binary, spatial logic of visible and inauthentic surface vs. concealed and true centre: what demands to be read is the “dream-work,” the work of distortion that is not exclusively the discourse of repression, just as one cannot readily identify and isolate the component which is repressed but wants to come to the surface, assuming various disguises on the way (cf. Skura 61, where she talks about the inability to decide what is wish and what is repression; cf. also Žižek 11-14). Stevens’s text is a symptomatic text indeed, but it is perhaps better to say that the text is itself a symptom, which implies that it cannot be separated into authentic and inauthentic bits, healthy and unhealthy parts, surface and depth; expressing neither that which wants to enter consciousness nor that which performs the work of repression, the symptom is a composite formation that essentially “stands for” the work of distortion which generates it.

⁵ The relationship between Stevens’s pathologically repressive psychic regime and Fascism is obliquely indicated in the novel (in the conversation with Harry Smith, 186-87) and extensively explored by Baxendale and Pawling; Stevens, they say, is not a fascist, but the extreme other-directedness of his life, the disturbing and unthinking inability to question the acts of his master (what Reggie deplors as his alarming lack of curiosity) is related to the kind of socio-psychological disorder that could erupt in violence (206). The two anecdotes about his father (anecdotes whose function is to establish him as an allegorical personification of “dignity”) seem to confirm this link. The first is dominated by a strange image of suppressed but very real physical violence, his father appearing as “an imposing physical force”—39), and the other by an unthinking and humiliating, almost masochistic self-negation in the face of professional duty (41-42). Such a reading of Stevens’s text, not pursued here, could take its cue from considering him as an allegorical representative of “unhappy consciousness.”

⁶ It has to be noted that in the course of numerous rereadings, Stevens’s increasingly sober interpretation of Miss Kenton’s letter gradually loses its colouring of desire (e.g.: “Of course, one has to remember that there is nothing stated specifically in Miss Kenton’s letter... to indicate unambiguously her desire to return to her former position”—140).

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