

heart of the humanities—reading primary texts, explicating and debating those texts in communities of inquiry, writing essays in which neither the voice of the text nor your own voice drops out—are themselves dialectical practices teaching one how to move from vicious to productive circles, staging the dialectical unveiling of self and other.

The preparation model treats the practice as given and understood, equipping the novice with what it assumes are the needed skills and knowledge. But what if we want to teach our students precisely to eschew such knowingness? If we acknowledge that it is an open question what—and who—the work entails, that crucial features of the landscape will only emerge once the journey is underway, how can we help students prepare for the journey? While the humanities are not prime purveyors of technical tools, they do offer gear of a different sort, what Kenneth Burke calls “equipment for living.”¹³⁶ Literature, broadly construed, is a trove of techniques for sizing up the sort of situations that don’t come predefined, an archive of angles envisioned, a store of stances adopted. In humanities classes we are not loading in formulae; but we are equipping students with an expanded range of naming and noticing, offering students some practice in recognizing the contingency of current self-understandings, and some preparation for making sense of the unfamiliar landscapes likely to unfold in the dialectics of vocational experience.

THE LAST BUTLER

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels¹³⁷

Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.

What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?

—Milan Kundera¹³⁸

We have now identified three dangers in the contemporary reduction of vocational development to training and credentialing. First, we saw how short-circuiting the search for a calling courts the tragic failure to unfold one's potentialities in the fullness and freedom of fit. Then we considered how technicism, perpetually preempting the question of what matters by focusing on what works, invites axiological disorientation and degradation. And we have just seen how the reduction of vocational education to preparation sets our students up for stagnation. Vocational formation can and must mean more than readying oneself for a chosen line of work. For one thing, as we noted, no one has only one vocation. Specialization risks alienating us from our "dominant vocation," not to mention hollowing out the chosen calling itself (for only someone with "variegated vocational activities" will have the fullness of character to access the full dimensionality of the work; and the narrowness of the specialist breeds the myopia of the technician). Even when we bracket off the issue of specialization, the preparation model remains problematic, for it mislocates the key juncture of education and vocation. Preparatory training is trivial compared to the education afforded by vocations themselves.

What we discovered is that each vocation represents a mode of educative experience with a spiral structure. Allowing the work to open new veins of meaning in oneself reveals in turn new layers of the work. Thus what seems like a superficial job may actually represent a failure to perceive or unwillingness to travel this self-expanding, work-deepening path. The dead-end job turns out to be a cul-de-sac in yourself. On the other hand, is it always wise to double down in this way? Maybe we chose the wrong line in the first place, or perhaps the world has changed making it impossible to pursue this work in its integrity. What advertises itself as adventure, communication, and service may really be drudgery, manipulation, and servility. The work may contain rich layers of meaning and value . . . or we may be suffering from a kind of occupational Stockholm syndrome. Even if F. H. Bradley is right that we cannot specify our duties in advance of knowing our station, might we not come to feel bound by an opposing obligation, the duty to leave one's station?¹³⁹ Thus, I propose as the sixth necessary task of vocational development learning how to recognize and seize the moment to grow out of one's work, if and when that time comes. To perceive the puzzle and pathos of this final and perhaps most delicate dimension of vocational growth, I will offer a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*. First, though, we need a quick review of the laws of gravity.

A human being, Iris Murdoch observes, is “the kind of creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture.”¹⁴⁰ This is why Charles Taylor calls us “self-interpreting animals,” not for the trivial reason that we offer various interpretations of ourselves and our situation, but because we then, in significant ways, live out those interpretations.¹⁴¹ Michael Oakeshott condenses this idea into a Hegelian epigram: a human being “is *in* himself what he is *for* himself,” later offering this helpful gloss:

A human being is a “history” and he makes this “history” for himself out of his responses to the vicissitudes he encounters. The world he inhabits is composed not of “things,” but of occurrences, which he is aware of in terms of what he understands them to be.¹⁴²

For Oakeshott, this insight into our condition leads to an optimistic conclusion: we possess a fundamental freedom that no one, not even the agent herself, can dispose of. Each person must seek out, select among, make sense of, and integrate various cultural resources into livable answers to the questions “Who am I?” “What is my situation?” and “What is worth wanting, doing, and becoming?” Our answers stake out a world of meaning and possibility, a world that both constrains and enables choices of various sorts. While this type of choice, this freedom of movement within worlds, is certainly important, what concerns Oakeshott here is, to put it baldly, the choice of our choices. The fact that we inhabit worlds shaped by a chosen relationship to formative resources means that, with effort and time, it is possible to rework the terms of our self-understanding and worldly engagement. This does not mean, of course, that believing you can fly makes it so. But we self-interpreting animals are subject to more than regular g-forces. In our lived worlds, we find a baroque assortment of gravitational anomalies:

- This one cannot get off the couch; that one cannot take a day off from running.
- This one must be the center of attention; that one must be the outsider.
- This one is always picking up strays; that one is always dropping balls.
- The hale fellow only feels comfortable with hand extended; the straight-A student with hand raised; the gardener with hands in the soil. And so on.

Now, when Oakeshott says that this is a kind of freedom of which “a human being cannot divest himself,” he doesn’t mean that we can’t try.¹⁴³ And try we do. We shop for off-the-shelf personae. We are drawn to

doctrines that seem to require no interpretive work. We try to get a hold of the teacher's edition, with the answer key in the back. But you can't blame us for being frightened by this radical, unshakable form of freedom. After all, part of what we want from a world-picture is a secure home. Sure, we hope it has some picture windows, but Philip Johnson's glass house won't cut it. Our need for shelter is at least as basic as our need for exposure. For testimony on this point, we can call on any of number of witnesses. Consider first, Simone Weil, who, in her rich, dialectical account of the needs of the soul, gives pride of place to our profound "need for roots."¹⁴⁴

Similarly, Hannah Arendt includes in her list of six basic conditions of our humanity both "natality" and "worldliness."¹⁴⁵ Natality is Arendt's name for the human capacity to begin anew. We behave in various ways and this behavior is both understandable through conventions and predictable by means of statistics. However, no matter how routinized and conventionalized our behavior becomes, each of us always remains capable of enacting ourselves in word and deed in ways that echo our original "an-archic" insertion into the grid of conventions, initiating the kind of self- and other-surprising, self- and world-renewing actions that, because they cannot be labeled and counted like behaviors, stimulate the natal reactions of others.¹⁴⁶ While Arendt considered natality to be not only central to individual flourishing but also socially salvific—I am thinking of the "glad tidings" passage in the *Human Condition* and especially how natality appears as the sliver of hope at the end of *Origins of Totalitarianism*—she also recognized its limits.¹⁴⁷ Children need a dependable world if they are to mature into natal actors. And then we need a stable world in which to stage our unpredictable, disruptive actions. Meanwhile, we are not only natal beings but mortal ones, with a deep need for the durable and lasting. Finally, Arendt points to the simple fact that none of us would last long trying to respond to all we encounter as if for the first time:

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventionalized, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted.¹⁴⁸

Even the thinker who famously linked it with evil, acknowledges the importance of banality. We are, then, both natal and worldly beings,

self-interpreting animals who do and to some extent must live in denial of the freedom this fact about us entails.

That said, abiding alienation from our natality must be considered a form of despair. This might show up as overt emotional distress, or only in the subtle signs of someone sagging under the gradual realization that they have become nothing but a digestive tract with a credit card. Or perhaps it reveals itself in the habitus of the humorless pedant. Laurence Sterne offers this helpful definition: “Gravity, a mysterious carriage of the body to conceal the defects of the mind.”¹⁴⁹ It could be that the despair is never noticeable as such. At one point, Kierkegaard drops this bomb: “The greatest hazard of all, losing one’s self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all.”¹⁵⁰

If we sometimes sag under the weight of convention, the modern stress on voice and perspective has created new gravitational difficulties. To see things from multiple angles is one of life’s pleasures. To be liberated from those ideas that back us into corners or teach us to hate ourselves is one of life’s necessities. But for two centuries now, alert spirits have attested to the fact that the waning of grand narratives is far from an unalloyed good. As early as 1807, Wordsworth registered his buyer’s remorse over our life of “getting and spending,” crying out, “Great God! I’d rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn.”¹⁵¹ When our lived worlds start to strike us as flimsy, contingent “worldviews,” we may well find existence to be, as Milan Kundera famously put it, *unbearably light*, an anguish of the arbitrary. Indeed, for the young narrator of Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room,” gravity seems to fail altogether, as a simple trip to the dentist with her aunt turns into a harrowing unravelling of the fabric of the ordinary.¹⁵² She becomes aware of the contingency of her location: in a dentist’s waiting room, in Worcester, Massachusetts, on “the fifth / of February, 1918” (5). She looks sidelong at “shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boots” (1). Suddenly, the questions begin to crash upon her like “a big, black wave / another, and another” (4):

“How had I come to be here”? (3)

Why do I react like my “foolish, timid” aunt? (1)

What does it mean to be “an *Elizabeth*”? (2)

“Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone?” (3)

“Has anything “stranger / . . . ever happened?” (2)

As the contingency of her situation settles in, she experiences a profound vertigo, like “the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world. / Into cold, blue-black space” (2).

How do we navigate these twin forms of despair? How do we remain, like Virginia Woolf’s Jinny, flowing but rooted?¹⁵³ How do we achieve Deweyan “continuity,” ensuring that our experience neither grinds into mechanical repetition nor fragments into the haphazard and the arbitrary? Interestingly, Dewey’s other name for this middle ground was “vocation.” Vocations give us an axis of salience, orienting us in what would otherwise be a Jamesian “blooming, buzzing Confusion,” giving us habits of noticing that call forth an environment from our surroundings.¹⁵⁴ As purposive frames, informed by traditions and communities of practice, vocations help make the current situation legible in terms of prior experience without reducing the present to the past. Except of course, when they don’t. For Dewey, vocation is a regulative ideal, with continuity already built into its definition. In the life of practice, there is no such guarantee. We may well grind monotonously or flit about disjointedly. Our vocational pathways may open onto wider vistas or lead to existential dead-ends

Unlike sports stadiums, life offers no skybox from which we might survey and rank competing routes. We reflect on forks in the road, feel relief or misgivings, play with what-ifs; but we cannot know what would have been, what *we* would have been.¹⁵⁵ It is similarly unclear how one can tell, from the inside out, whether a vocational environment is educative or miseducative. As we noted earlier with MacIntyre, we join practices in part to learn new modes of perception and canons of value.¹⁵⁶ How then can we see limitations of a line of work with vision honed by that very practice? The puzzle is how to vouchsafe independence of judgment and freedom of self-determination without reverting to an impoverished, atomistic model of the self. After all, practices are the very medium in which we fashion our freedoms, hone our judgments, and cultivate our character. What if staying true to the ideals of one’s calling ensures not a determinate mode of open-minding, but precisely the sclerotic habitus famously predicted by Weber.¹⁵⁷ What if, as Jonathan Lear asks, our virtues turn out to be “neur-tues” (neuroses disguised as virtues)?¹⁵⁸ Professions can be a way of life. But so can disavowal.

Precisely this set of questions lies at the heart of Kazuo Ishiguro’s rightly celebrated novel. *Remains of the Day* is no heart-warming tale. As it turns

out, very little remains of the day. Salman Rushdie, for one, chose two adjectives to describe Ishiguro's novel: beautiful and cruel.¹⁵⁹ What makes it cruel is the precision with which Ishiguro shows us the limits of a person, the confines of a lived world. Where Kundera's Prague 68ers experienced an anxious lightness, Mr. Stevens suffers, if anything, from an excess of gravitas. Far from falling off the "round, turning world" like Bishop's narrator, Ishiguro's narrator is pinned to the map, a fixture of Darlington Hall, where he has served as butler for decades. Stevens is planted in this place and in this role. His identity is rooted in a vocation, his vocational identity is rooted in a tradition of practice, and that tradition is itself rooted in the dense network of social mores that constitutes the English class system with its ideal of the gentleman. In short, Stevens is not a man prone to vertiginous epiphanies of contingency.

However, by the time we meet Stevens, the year is 1956, some four decades into the rapid social and economic changes that have transformed Britain since World War I. It is not only Stevens's career that is near its end, but an entire era of domestic service. Looking at the statistics for female domestic servants, we find that, in 1901, fully one in three British women in paid employment worked as domestic servants; by 1951, that number had declined to 1 in 10.¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the bulldozing of the great country houses had reached a peak in 1955, with one house being demolished every five days.¹⁶¹ Darlington Hall may still be standing, and Stevens is still employed, but everything has changed. Lord Darlington is dead and Stevens now works for an American businessman, Mr. Farraday. Where Darlington Hall once boasted a staff of twenty-eight, Stevens now manages a "skeleton team" of three (6). Where Lord Darlington rarely conversed with Stevens (occasionally staging a chance meeting at the one bookcase near the stairs when a topic could not be avoided), Farraday wants to banter with Stevens. Where Darlington had depended on Stevens to manage frequent, elaborate gatherings attended by leading figures in British society, Farraday thinks Stevens ought to take a vacation and "see this beautiful country of yours" (4).

While Stevens is aware that times are changing—for example that fewer people are going into domestic service (7), that even the nobility now often travel without servants (19)—he insulates himself from the realization that his very way of life is on the critically endangered species list.¹⁶² He chalks up some of the changes to quirks of his new employer (4), others to the

advent of “electricity and modern heating systems” (7), and still others to a “sharp decline in professional standards” (7). Among the figures we considered earlier, it is Wordsworth who seems to offer the best description of Stevens, as someone “suckled in a creed outworn.” And yet, while Stevens is certainly not located where Wordsworth’s narrator begins, neither is he quite in the place that narrator wishes to be transported to, namely a time before traditional creeds have worn thin, when one could inhabit wholeheartedly a still-enchanted world. Ishiguro locates us neither in a state of modern alienation nor in a prelapsarian fullness of meaning. It is the special province of *Remains of the Day* to explore what it is like to deeply inhabit a creed *just as it is wearing out*. Ishiguro places us within Stevens’s interpreted world precisely at a time when internal contradictions and external forces have begun to put pressure on its coherence and adequacy. We do not sit outside, assuredly measuring its circumference, but we can see places where Stevens’s life narrative is wearing thin, patches where his explanations barely paper over evidence of alternative understandings. Ishiguro artfully casts the light so that these existential possibilities, these other worlds, bleed through like the underlayers of a palimpsest. Indeed, we could say that *Remains of the Day* is fundamentally an account of existential openings and closures, moments when Stevens feels the limitations of, returning to Murdoch, the “picture” he has come to “resemble,” only to double down and add a fresh coat of paint.

Ishiguro establishes this pattern right from the start, foregrounding moments when Stevens’s worldview wobbles until he can reinforce the structure. Here are three examples from the first seven pages:

1. “*You fellows, you’re always locked up in these big houses helping out*” (4).

When urging Stevens to travel, Farraday redescribes the life of a butler as a form of captivity. “I mean it, Stevens,” Farraday declares, “It’s wrong that a man can’t get to see around his own country.” Stevens counters that it has been his “privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls” (4). And Stevens has indeed met—or at least served—the leading figures of his day. Eden, Halifax, and Churchill have all come through Darlington Hall, as did George Bernard Shaw, whom Stevens once caught admiring his beautifully polished silver (135). But there is truth to Farraday’s observation that Stevens’s experience has been narrow and secondhand. Stevens fends off this truth.

2. “*A series of small errors*” (5).

When we meet him, Stevens is wrestling with a new development in his career: he is making mistakes. While he assures us that each of these errors is trivial in itself, the pattern is clearly troubling, as Stevens had begun to “entertain all sorts of alarmist theories as to their cause” (5). It could mean that he is over the hill. Maybe his mind is going. Whatever alarming explanations Stevens entertained consciously, there is a deeper truth announcing itself through his “mischievements,” to adopt Walter Kaufmann’s brilliant translation of *Felleistungen* (that is, Freud’s term for statements spoken as slips, grudges grafted onto forgettings, actions appearing as inactions, concerns masquerading as mistakes). For a description of this truth, we won’t do better than the searing prose of Marx and Engels, who observe how capitalism has

- “pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’”
- “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than . . . callous ‘cash payment,’”
- “drowned . . . chivalrous enthusiasm . . . in the icy water of egotistical calculation,”
- “stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured,”
- “converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers.”¹⁶³

My point is that, at some level, Stevens must be feeling profoundly bereft (since it is after all his life being swept away along with these “ancient and venerable prejudices”) and deeply disoriented (as all that was solid in the foundations of his vocational identity evaporates beneath him).¹⁶⁴ However, rather than look beyond the surface cracks, his trivial mistakes, into the tectonic shifts below, Stevens crams his crisis into a technicality, remarking, “I had become blind to the obvious, . . . that these small errors of recent months have derived from nothing more sinister than a faulty staff plan” (5).

3. “*An unmistakable nostalgia*” (9).

Stevens tells us that what finally cleared his vision was a letter he received from Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn, having married twenty years earlier and moved to Cornwall). In what he himself describes as “long, unrevealing

passages,” Stevens nonetheless detects “distinct hints of her desire to return” to Darlington Hall. If Stevens is right to see desire here, his hermeneutic is a funhouse mirror, a perfect illustration of Freud’s mapping of the strange routes by which our desires enter the world.¹⁶⁵ As the novel slowly reveals, Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton felt much more than mutual professional respect, but only Miss Kenton was able to perceive this fact. Stevens can feel, but not own, his longing and regret. First, he executes the maneuver Freud describes as “turning back on the self” so that “I want her” becomes “she wants me.” The drive is then further transformed by the process Freud called “sublimation”—the elevation of an embodied desire into a more rarified, culturally approved aim—so that “she wants me” becomes “she wants to work for me.” How can Stevens not see that it is neither Mr. Farraday’s Ford nor staff planning, but love, that drives him from Oxfordshire all of the way to Cornwall? It is because his sense of professionalism precludes it. His love for Miss Kenton clashes with a key element in his vocational self-understanding, that a great butler utterly submerges his private self into his professional role (a point Ishiguro underlines by concealing Stevens’s given name throughout the novel). When the world does not fit our worldview, it can be bent to do so. Detecting his loneliness and need for intimacy, his worldview wobbles, but he redresses his desire and once again sets the structure aright.

These three early episodes teach us the basic footwork in Stevens’s dance of disavowal, one that only becomes more desperate and clumsy over the course of the novel. My aim has been to capture this dynamic accurately but sympathetically, avoiding condescension. After all, while Stevens’s world may be narrow, so is that of each of us. We all inhabit, as Oakeshott puts it, “a corner of the earth, lapped round with locality.”¹⁶⁶ Likewise, we all find ways to distance from desires that clash with our sense of who we are or should be. And you don’t need me to tell you just how powerful are the forces, within us and around us, deferring the “sober” reckoning described by Marx and Engels, when we will finally face the “real conditions of life and our relations with our kind.”¹⁶⁷ We all settle for realism, capitalist realism, in which “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”¹⁶⁸

But it is not just a matter of checking our condescension toward Stevens. We also need to resist the urge to prejudge the practice of butlering. This problem that we are tracking in the phenomenology of vocation requires

that we take seriously the way in which practices reveal aspects of the good. We must reject the idea that we can queue up directly at the Bureau of Ethical Guidance and then, checklist in hand, judge practices from the outside. Admittedly, this is harder with some practices than it is with others. I suppose the success of shows like *Downton Abbey* proves that we are not only repelled but fascinated by the chance to see class, the murky waters in which we daily swim, at arm's length and crystallized into caste. However, once we have finished the popcorn, the charming Mr. Carson and his staff resolve back into the oppressed, whom we view either as knowing if silent critics of the class system or as victims of false consciousness. Here I want us to be open to the possibility that even a practice as morally dubious as butlering contains real existential resources for its practitioners. To be clear, attempting such sympathetic entry into Stevens's world is not to deny its limitations. The novel is, as I have said, about these limitations, about the lies that one must tell oneself in order to smooth over contradictions and avoid inconvenient facts. But we need to resist the fantasy that, unlike Stevens, we can step outside traditions and practices to form our moral code. Like it or not, we find ourselves at sea with Stevens, aboard Neurath's boat. It may be possible to replace a great many planks without drowning, but such work must be done gradually and carefully. Thus, we want neither to celebrate nor to condemn Stevens's way of life, but to follow him in confronting its limitations, from the inside out, in his search for a new beginning.

Luckily the path we want to follow is well marked, for in the concept of dignity we find all of the following: (1) the key to a sympathetic reading of the richness of Stevens's practical world; (2) the site of some of its core contradictions; (3) a possible way to rebuild his vessel amid these epochal sea changes. That dignity is the central node in the network of beliefs and values that orients and sustains Stevens, what Taylor calls a "hypergood," requires no subtlety of interpretation.¹⁶⁹ *Remains of the Day* is a kind of travelogue of Stevens's motor trip from Oxfordshire to the West Country in the novel's present, 1956. Each night, Stevens makes a record of the day's journey, straying into reflections on his calling and detailed reminiscences of life in Darlington Hall between the wars. Dignity is the compass bearing by which Stevens navigates both present and past. The topic arises in his present-day conversations (with Harry Smith and Dr. Carlisle in Moscombe, and then again in his closing confessional with the stranger

on the bench in Weymouth).¹⁷⁰ And it is the central organizing theme of his reminiscences.

On Stevens's recounting, to be an English butler, at least in the heyday of the 1920s and 1930s, is to be part of a community of practice, an ongoing conversation about the ideals that animate the pursuit. The servants' hall was the scene of running debates about who the best butlers were and in what their greatness consisted (28–44). The basic answer was well agreed upon: a great butler is “possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position” (33). But what is this special form of dignity? Stevens explains that it amounts to a highly austere professionalism demanding unwavering loyalty, perfect emotional restraint, and (as we already noted) a complete submersion of the private self. The book's central episode, Stevens's recounting of the night his father suffered a stroke, vividly illustrates all three aspects (70–110). While his father was dying upstairs, Stevens managed to pull off without a hitch the culminating dinner party of one of the most important events in Darlington Hall's history, a multiday conference on post-Versailles tensions attended by eighteen dignitaries (along with their entourages) from Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. Even grief this profound can and should be controlled in the name of loyalty to one's employer, fidelity to one's craft, and the honor of serving in a “great house.” Stevens sums up this ideal with a vivid metaphor:

The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost. They will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming, or vexing. They wear their professionalism the way a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off of him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of “dignity.” (42–43)

As examples and images like these attest, there is nothing abstract about the ideal of the gentleman. It is an embodied habitus, a unique blend of stoic negations. The great butler is uncomplaining, understated, unflappable. People look for ethos in mission statements when it is right there in the muscles of the jaw.

Of course, I don't expect you, upon hearing this reconstruction of the goods internal to the practice of butlering, to want to sign up. I only want us to notice what Stevens stands to lose. “Orientation to the good,” Taylor

writes, “is not some optional extra . . . but a condition of our being selves with an identity.”¹⁷¹ By virtue of his calling, Stevens occupies a coherent moral geography with dignity as its capital, central precincts of honor and loyalty, professionalism and emotional restraint, and important if further-flung provinces such as propriety and a sense of discretion, meticulous foresight and keen attention to detail. Undeniably, this cluster of ideals is problematic in various ways. But we should acknowledge that (1) this is true of all livable ideals (alas, it is impossible to carry the perfect ones out of the seminar room), and (2) this particular ethos is more than capacious enough to orient a lived life, to frame an inhabitable world, to satisfy one’s need for roots.

Why, then, is Stevens troubled as he enters this evening of his career? How has his ethos come to feel pinched or incoherent? I have already suggested one of the novel’s two main answers to this question, that it cannot accommodate the stubborn reality of Stevens’s love for Miss Kenton, which has survived even a twenty-year separation. While Stevens does make an emotional breakthrough when he meets with her in Cornwall, it is the novel’s second major arc I want to pursue here: Stevens’s relation to class and his identification with Lord Darlington. Butlers occupy a unique, ambiguous class position. Seamstresses and solicitors may not, on any given day, have cause to compare their differential social status. Those in “the service” enact that differential in all they do. And yet, as head of the downstairs shadow family, the butler has pride of place among the underclass of domestic servants. As servant, he is a member of the working class. As head servant, closely identified with the head of the upstairs household, he has a borrowed nobility.

As long as Stevens stays in Darlington Hall, this ambiguity need not be resolved. (It is for this reason, not literal geographic range—as if today frequent flyer miles were a sign of depth of experience or breadth of vision!—that *Farraday* is right about Stevens’ insularity.) It is only when Stevens embarks on his “expedition” to the West Country that he is forced to confront his class contradictions. Case in point is the scene when Stevens runs out of gas in Devon. Arriving as he does in *Farraday*’s fancy vintage Ford and dressed in smart new clothes (Stevens almost decided to wear one of the fine suits handed down to him by Lord Darlington before deeming this impractical for a motor trip, deciding instead to spend a chunk of his savings on a “new costume” worthy of Darlington Hall [11]), it is no surprise

when Stevens becomes an object of curiosity for the group of locals putting him up for the night. This borrowed finery extends to Stevens's habitus, which differs markedly from that of these working folks, as Stevens possesses much of the polish, speech, and cultural literacy of the upper class set whom it is his job to understand and serve. To the locals, Stevens is, as Dr. Carlisle will explain to Stevens the next day, a "pretty impressive specimen" (208). Where things get tricky for Stevens is when the conversation turns to the very topic of how to tell "a true gentleman from a false one that's just dressed in finery" (184). "It's not just the cut of your clothes," Mr. Tayler says to Stevens, "nor is it even the fine way you've got of speaking. There's something else that marks you out as a gentleman" (185). And as we've noted, Stevens does subscribe to gentlemanly ideals. We cannot fault him for wanting to accept the groups' verdict that he possesses something beyond the trappings of class, or to suggest that that something is dignity. But once the topic shifts to great men and international affairs, it is clear that Stevens is all but encouraging the group's mistaken impression that he is a member of the upper class. He lets drop, without explanation, that while Churchill had "come to the house on several occasions," Mr. Eden and Lord Halifax were actually the more important and thus "more frequent visitors." Though he will later dismiss this "regrettable . . . business" as an "unfortunate misunderstanding," Stevens has plenty of chances to set the record straight (193, 187–188).

Indeed, once the organic intellectual, Harry Smith, arrives and gets up on his soapbox, Stevens is forced to choose a side. "Dignity's not just something for gentlemen," Smith declares, but stems from being "born free" into a country where you can vote and "express your opinion freely" (186). Here Smith, in his exuberant, unpolished way, offers Stevens a potential life raft, an egalitarian view of dignity that might give Stevens a way to remain true to his hypergood without having to deny the reality of his position in the social hierarchy. But Stevens demurs, noting that while he and Smith were at "cross purposes," it was "far too complicated a task" to explain his view "clearly to these people" (186). Stevens chooses the identification with Darlington over solidarity with the "broad and agricultural" frames and "muddy Wellington boots" in the room (182). His greatness as a butler depends on the greatness of Darlington Hall, which depends in turn on the idea that Lord Darlington himself is a great man, a true patriot working behind the scenes to steer the ship of state to safety. However, as we come

to find out, first through what Stevens reveals accidentally, and later as Stevens himself begins to admit the fact to himself and us, Darlington is at best a dupe of the Nazis—giving Ribbentrop a platform from which to spread his deception that Germany posed no threat to Britain—and possibly an outright sympathizer. In distancing himself from the likes of Smith and—as we then learn in a reminiscence—from the idea of democracy itself, Stevens borrows not Darlington’s nobility but only his proto-fascism.¹⁷²

Though Stevens motors out of Devon convinced that Smith is something of a comic figure (209), self-doubt is festering beneath the surface. By the time Stevens has been to Cornwall and is on his way back to Darlington Hall, something seems to be breaking open inside of him. In the novel’s closing scene, Stevens is sitting on a bench on a pier in seaside Weymouth. Though “there is still plenty of daylight left,” they have just switched on the colorful lights for which they are known, eliciting a hearty cheer from the boardwalk crowd. The sun is, not to put too fine a point on it, finally setting on the British Empire and, with it, on Stevens’s way of life. But if his day as one of the great butlers in one of great houses is over, the question remains of what the evening entails. There is a second set of lights coming on. Striking up a conversation, a man sitting next to Stevens tells him that, in fact, “the evening’s the best part of the day” (244). Stevens is not so sure. But something is shifting in him, and he is starting to separate the man from the idealized Lord Darlington. Even going this far leads him to a very dark conclusion about himself. If he felt his heart breaking in his conversation with Mrs. Benn, the paragon of emotional restraint now actually chokes up (he cannot admit this fact directly, of course, but narrates how his benchmate offers him a hankie) as he reflects that

Lord Darlington wasn’t a bad man. He wasn’t a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted his lordship’s wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that? (243)

Stevens reels under the twin realization that he has never given any thought to two questions that should have been unavoidable: how well does titular

nobility map onto the real article and is nobility even something that can be borrowed? When we leave Stevens, we don't know whether these questions and his newfound access to long-suppressed feelings will be enough to lead him to evolve his ideals without abandoning them, and to see whether they might not be better realized in new callings.

As the sun sets, Stevens resolves to learn to banter. We can read this as hopeful, as a sign that he will now learn to develop a voice and interests of his own. But even in the book's final pages, we find Stevens backsliding again, construing this banter as but a duty to please his new employer. He resolves to practice while Farraday is still away thinking that "perhaps . . . I will be in a position to pleasantly surprise him" (245). But who knows? Maybe Stevens will surprise himself and make contact with his natality, establishing new roots and branches. Whatever Stevens's fate, the moral for vocational formation is clear. One must not only find and learn to grow through one's vocation, one must learn when and how to leave it. I will end with the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which serve as the perfect coda to Ishiguro's thick exploration of dark alleys and dead-ends in the life of vocation:

You trust in the present order of society without thinking that this order is subject to inevitable revolutions, and it is impossible for you to foresee or prevent the one which may affect your children. The noble become commoners, the rich become poor, the monarch becomes subject. Are the blows of fate so rare that you can count on being exempted from them? . . . Happy is the man who knows how to leave the station which leaves him and to remain a man in spite of fate!¹⁷³

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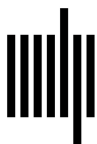
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