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Escape from Responsibility:
Ideology and Storytelling in
Arendt's *The Origins of
Totalitarianism* and
Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Only in the frankly invented tale about events did man consent to assume responsibility for them, and to consider past events as his past. (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*)

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At first sight there appear to be some striking homologies between Arendt's account of the political role of meaning and the textual politics of contemporary cultural and literary theory, even if these similarities are valued differently in each case. Where the "linguistic turn" in literary and cultural studies has displaced "history" as the key social determinant and accorded discourse an extraordinarily expansive political agency through its role in constituting subjectivity, so

George Kateb has identified what he sees as a similar animus in Arendt's conception of meaning in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, although rather than being celebrated it is judged a source of weakness. On this reading, Arendt accords far too much weight to the determining power of ideology in the rise of totalitarian movements, overemphasizing the role of ideas and the search for meaning and ignoring more prosaic and wordly factors (Kateb 2002, 324–26). Equally, where contemporary literary theory has distanced itself from the referential capacity of language and has emphasized the free play and undecidability of textuality, Kateb complains that Arendt is similarly unconcerned with “truth,” and “mak[es] no attempt . . . to distinguish between historical accounts and fictional accounts” (2002, 335; see Lyotard 1984, 73–79). And just as the contrast between the homogeneity of “grand narratives” and the inventiveness of “little narratives” or “*petit récit*” has been offered as a means of political orientation in contemporary literary and cultural theory, so Kateb sees in Arendt a similar framework, which opposes the productivity and plurality of “storytelling” to the all-consuming narrative of “ideology” (Lyotard 1984, 60, 65; Kateb 2002, 331, 351–52).

However, the occurrence of such an apparently close homology between Arendt's writing and contemporary concerns in literary and cultural studies should give pause for thought. That we find an image of present concerns in the past we interpret within the parameters of the present is, of course, not so surprising; and while not necessarily worthless, the immediacy of such apparent homologies risks erasing the nonidentity of the past and its potential for illuminating the present. Although enthusiasm for the textualism of postmodernism has waned in the Anglophone academy in recent years, the opposition of master and micro narratives has entered into the basic conceptual vocabulary of contemporary cultural and literary theory, becoming woven into the nexus of intellectual assumptions which, in making contemporary critical discourse possible, tend to go unexamined. However, according to the editors of a recent collection of theoretical essays on postcolonial studies, the automatic rejection of grand narratives and the assumption of the inherent political productivity of micro narratives may not be so straightforward. Indeed, they argue that in order to address the global inequalities of power and resources, we may “need to keep alive particular metanarratives” and the collective subjectivities they sustain (Loomba et al. 2005, 34). It is therefore worth exploring the extent to which Arendt's conception of storytelling may diverge from contemporary assumptions about the political character of narrative.

This essay suggests that Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* provides a significant site for exploring the parameters of the identity and nonidentity between Arendt and contemporary critical assumptions. As

Gillian Rose observes, the political questions raised by *The Remains of the Day* clearly connect with Arendt's concerns, perhaps most immediately with the figuring of subjectivity and retrospection in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1996, 51–56). Yet at the same time, the novel has frequently been identified as a postmodernist text, an interpretation which would appear to be endorsed by Ishiguro's insistence that the fictional world it conjures needs to be read not in realist or representational terms but as “a pastiche”—one of the central terms in postmodern theories of fictionality (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 138; Jameson 1991, 1–54). However, Ishiguro's position is more complex than is often acknowledged, and while he rejects the parameters of realism he also distances himself from many of the defining features of “historiographic metafiction” through which postmodernist accounts of the opposition of master and micro narratives were developed (see Hutcheon 1988). Instead, Ishiguro talks about “find[ing] some territory” that lies “somewhere between straight realism and . . . out-and-out fabulism,” suggesting that his novel needs to be read within a different framework (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 141).

This essay argues that Arendt's conception of the political role of meaning is misunderstood if read in terms of contemporary conceptions of textuality and the opposition between master and micro narrative, a framework that depends on the loss of “the real” and of referentiality, and therefore functions primarily in terms of epistemology (Lyotard 1984, 74). This essay argues instead that Arendt's conception of narrative is not organized around the claim to know historical events absolutely, but around the variable capacity of human collectives and individuals *to take responsibility* for them. For Arendt, the act of narration has the power to enable individuals and collectives to *experience*—and not just intellectualize—this responsibility by assuming the role of narrator of events, even though human groups or individuals can never be the sole authors of the history within which they find themselves. While this taking of responsibility is not a question of truth/falsity per se, the very act of assuming the role of narrator is therefore necessarily a fiction, which is why Arendt insists that “[o]nly in the frankly invented tale about events did man consent to assume responsibility for them, and consider past events as *his* events” (1973, 208). Arendt observes on a number of occasions that the empirically verifiable nature of narrated events is by no means unimportant, but the force of her argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is that the “truth” of any narration is only possible when the teller fictionalizes herself as their narrator, an act of invention or artifice necessary if responsibility is to be taken.

In Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, this relationship between storytelling and responsibility is inverted: here narration becomes a way of escap-

ing responsibility. However, this essay argues that this inversion does not contravene Arendt's conception of narrative and responsibility, but rather helps to understand her complex and dynamic distinction between "storytelling" and "ideology." Because Kateb views narrative through the lens of epistemology, he argues that Arendt fails to make a viable distinction between stories and ideologies, since both inhabit the same relationship to verifiable historical truth: both are fictions, albeit on different scales and with different consequences (2002, 352-53). But the continuum between storytelling and ideology becomes much more distinct and differentiated when viewed through the optic of responsibility, since ideology functions primarily not as a truth-telling discourse but as a way of escaping responsibility. In *The Remains of the Day*, this dimension of ideology is explored in a pointedly prosaic way, a mode of presentation that not only demonstrates that Arendt's conception of ideology is not equivalent to the contemporary conception of the grand narrative, but also questions the very opposition between grand narrative and little stories itself.

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The terms of the apparent homology between Arendt's conception of ideology and contemporary literary and cultural studies are supplied by Jean-François Lyotard's hugely influential argument in *The Postmodern Condition* that "the grand narrative has lost its credibility" (1984, 37). Instead, Lyotard argues, legitimacy now resides in the endless invention or "paralogy" of the "*petit récit*," the micro narrative or little story that refuses to make universal claims to truth or knowledge (60). Lyotard's conception of grand narrative is closely associated with Enlightenment accounts of political progress that are anchored in the epistemological claim to know 'reality' (36-37). In contrast, little stories, understood as the proliferation of "language games," no longer depend on the denotative claim to adequate representation or knowledge, but instead on the capacity to "generate ideas [or] new statements" (36, 65). And because "there is no possibility that language games can be unified or totalized in any metadiscourse," for Lyotard they offer a means of political orientation that he conceives on the basis of Kantian sublime (36, 71-82). What is politically repressive is what synthesizes narrative elements and suppresses their plurality under the monological claim to know "reality"; what is politically liberatory is whatever escapes and disrupts such a monological closure by engendering the plurality of narrative accounts and the undecidability of knowledge.

While *The Postmodern Condition* has now fallen out of critical fashion, its opposition of grand narratives and little stories remains a central and widespread feature of contemporary cultural, literary, and postcolonial studies. For

example, Homi Bhabha's influential account of the "nation as narration" offers one of the most prominent attempts to mobilize the opposition of master and micro narratives as a means for political orientation. For Bhabha, the nation itself (rather than simply nationalism) joins liberalism and socialism as one of "the grand narratives" that must be contested (1994, 249). And although it has not been widely commented on, Bhabha's position draws on Arendt to authorize its central move, the absolute reduction of the space of politics to textuality.

Bhabha's approach interprets the modern nation-state as itself "a narrative strategy" which claims to construct a stable subject position (the narrator/people) through the narration of known events (the history of the people) (1994, 204). In exhibiting a "centered causal logic" and a "homogeneous, visual time," the grand narrative of the nation is understood as suppressing the "hybrid articulation of cultural differences and identifications" (200-02). However, Bhabha argues that the very act of narration introduces an element of provisionality within the narrative of the nation that "makes untenable any supremacist, or nationalist claims to cultural mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular or monologic" (265, 215). This claim revolves around the way Bhabha construes the position of the narrator of the grand narrative of the nation, which is understood as both requiring and engendering the "fixity" and "totalization" of the modern subject in all its self-sufficiency, isolation, and self-presence (265). In narrating its history, the narrator (the people/nation) manifests its own unity and self-identity, the "originary" national identity that grounds its authority. However, the act of narration, of telling the national story, is at the same time supposed to unify the people and generate a stable, exclusive, and finalized national identity—that is, to produce the very unity, fixity, and self-identity that is its own "cause" or ground. The coherent and cohering position of the narrator ("the position of narrative control") is therefore undermined by the "time-lag" inherent in narration—the gap between the identity that is said to emerge through the process of narration, and the claim that this identity is already grounded in the pre-existing fixity and stability of the narrator, the people/nation (63, 213-15).

Bhabha invokes Arendt in claiming a political significance for this account, focusing on her discussion of the difficulty of assigning an "author" to historical events in chapter five of *The Human Condition*. Here Arendt writes:

The great unknown in history, that has baffled the philosophy of history in the modern age, arises not only when one considers history as a whole and finds its subject, mankind, is an abstraction that can never become an active agent. . . . The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a

story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the “hero” of the story, we can never point unequivocally to him as the author of the eventual outcome. (Arendt 1989, 184–85)

Bhabha quotes the second sentence, which he interprets in terms of the disruptive “time lag” inherent in the master narrative of the nation. On this reading, Arendt is saying that because historical events cannot be authored by a subject, collective or individual, any attempt to narrate historical events as the history of the people/nation can only produce an “anxious fantasm or simulacrum . . . in the place of the author” (1994, 273, 271). And because the “*who* of agency bears no mimetic immediacy or adequacy of representation,” its unstable and inherently provisional relationship with the “*what*” it claims to narrate “must be accepted as a form of indeterminism or doubling” (271; emphasis in original). Any subject that narrates such a unified history is necessarily made incoherent, and any narrative that claims such a unity must necessarily be destabilized and disintegrate.¹ But this failure is for Bhabha productive: “The unreliability of signs introduces a perplexity into the social text,” a perplexity that orientates political judgment and even supplies political ‘agency’ within a framework that rejects all forms of coherent subjectivity or subjective agency (1994, 271, 274). For the very claim to unity of the nation is revealed as a claim to semantic mastery, while the indeterminacy that unsettles such mastery is viewed as being inherently politically valuable. On this basis, Bhabha is able to invoke Arendt’s authority in proclaiming that “the realm of representation and the process of signification . . . constitut[e] the space of the political,” and the political is transformed into a purely textual opposition between two regimes of narration—the temporally homogenizing master narrative of the nation and the provisionality of micro narratives or little stories which disturb and unsettle it (1994, 273).

III

Oddly enough, given their very different theoretical orientations, Kateb’s critical assessment of Arendt’s concept of ideology comes quite close to Bhabha’s transformation of politics into textuality. Interpreting Arendt’s account of ideology in terms of reconciliation, Kateb argues that the reconciliation it offers is “not with life so much as a meaningful simulacrum of life . . . life replaced by a representation of life” (2002, 338). Kateb does not of course endorse this view, nor does he share Bhabha’s theoretical project—indeed, quite the reverse. He therefore judges this aspect of Arendt’s work as a weakness, and argues instead that other elements of her work, concerned with more socially and politically grounded realities, provide important insights into totalitarianism that counterbalance what he sees as her overem-

phasis on ideology. To say that there are certain homologies in the way that Kateb and Bhabha read Arendt, then, is not to say that their readings are the same or are without important differences. My intention in tracing particular parallels is not to render unlike positions alike, but to reflect on the unspoken assumptions governing Arendt's interpretation in the present (see Benjamin 1996, 297-98).

According to Kateb, the central weakness in Arendt's account of meaning making is her apparent lack of concern for verifiable or empirical truth. On this reading, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* orders its political analysis around a conception of narrative meaningfulness—what Arendt calls “storytelling”—that is disconnected from “experiential and scientific knowledge” and “sever[s] truth and meaning altogether” (Kateb 2002, 327, 329). For Kateb, the demand for meaningfulness plays an existential role in Arendt's thinking that transcends the prosaic realms of the social and political—he talks of her “fanaticism” for meaning, since it “overrides every other consideration” (337). Storytelling does indeed play a crucial role in Arendt's conception of politics, as encapsulated in the quotation from Isak Dinesen that famously opens the chapter on “Action” in *The Human Condition*—“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (Arendt 1989, 175). Drawing on Arendt's essay “Truth in Politics,” Kateb interprets Arendt's concern for meaning making in terms of an uncritical “reconciliation with reality” through which Hegel's philosophy of history has been widely (if inaccurately) interpreted.² “[T]he net result of stories . . . and hence of a conviction of meaningfulness,” Kateb writes, “is that one achieves reconciliation with life beyond yourself; one feels at home in the world” (2002, 337). On this view, thinking “should not be expected to stand up to the claims of any kind of truth,” since its “purpose . . . is to generate meaning, or meanings, or meaningfulness” (331). The problem for Kateb is that such a view of thinking as storytelling will be unable to differentiate between the meaningfulness provided by life-sustaining stories or metaphysical systems, and that provided by totalitarian ideologies: in each the adherent “see[s] necessity, if only aesthetic necessity, in sequences of apparently random occurrences, and comes to feel that things had to be this way” (337).

In certain respects, then, Arendt appears to Kateb to anticipate postmodern textuality, just as she does for Bhabha. Kateb argues that she “is most devotedly committed [to] judging not only stories (in the fictional sense) and poems, but all intellectual modes that can be construed as searching for meaning” in terms of their ability to “mee[t] the needs of the imagination,” rather than any kind of kind of “truth”—that is, to value them “for essentially aesthetic reasons” (2002, 331). And, he objects, “Arendt seems to endorse Bergson's view that meaning is ‘ineffable’ and . . . ‘slippery’” (327). In

a striking echo of Lyotard's terminology, Kateb claims that for Arendt, the "quest for meaning is a self-enclosed language game, just as the quest for knowledge is" (329).

This conception of the role of meaning making is understood to have political consequences. In overemphasizing the search for meaningfulness in the rise of totalitarianism, Arendt's approach extends the concern for meaningfulness to the broader population, rather than confining it to party intellectuals and ideologues. The extension of this aesthetic concern for meaningfulness is judged by Kateb to be simply implausible:

I really do not see how the concept of meaning can bear so much weight in Arendt's work if ineffability and indefinability are crucial. This quest for meaning would be meaningless if it never came to some conclusions, if only provisional or incomplete. The Socratic thinker may be content to be perpetually dissatisfied with any attempted articulation, but most people and most thinkers are not. If people want meaning as much as Arendt suggests they do and should, they will not rest until they have persuaded themselves that they have it or some part or glimpse of it. (Kateb 2002, 327-28)

Kateb's reasoning here sets the stage for his own conception of totalitarian ideology: ideology is a discourse of certainty, the full possession of meaning that stills Socratic doubt and settles the perpetual restlessness of thinking. As he subsequently explains, ideologies are "world organizing fictions" or "abstract patterns" that "dominat[e] the mentality" of their adherents (2002, 347, 346). They work to synthesize disparate contexts and allot them a secure place within a stable, overarching framework.

To a certain extent, then, this formulation can be seen as paralleling the conceptual coordinates of the master narrative—although unlike postmodern accounts of the master narrative, Kateb does not accept the epistemological claims of ideology. Ideologies, like master narratives, are all-encompassing semantic structures that suppress the inherent "ineffability and indefinability" of meaning and freeze it within an invariable framework (2002, 327). Thus, both master narrative and ideology are opposed to the "ineffability and indefinability" of little stories or of storytelling, although this opposition is understood differently in each case. As we have already seen, because Bhabha's conception of the space of politics admits no externality, this formal opposition between narrative regimes is taken to map political possibility absolutely and without remainder. In these terms, "ineffability" can be ascribed a powerful political "agency," becoming "the indeterminacy that makes subversion and revision possible" (1994, 257). For Kateb, on the other hand, Arendt's decision to wager so much in the context of totalitarianism and genocide on what appears to be an aesthetic distinction between narra-

tive genres is both baffling and worryingly reckless. “My main contention,” he writes,

is that there is no difference, in nature, between ideology and other meaning-conferring modes. There are of course differences in content: we may like some modes better than others, and some particular specimen within a mode better than another specimen, and also think that some specimens or even modes have a better influence on people than others. But then our judgment relies on considerations independent of the power of a specimen or of a whole mode to confer meaning on reality. We must appeal to truth or morality or both much more regularly than Arendt does. . . . [S]he typically does not want the claims of truth, in particular, to get in the way of meaning. (Kateb 2002, 348)

What is so worrying about this wager for Kateb is that it is premised on a distinction that he sees as simply unsustainable. “It turns out,” he observes, “that as [Arendt] accumulates characterizations of totalitarian ideologies, . . . they are often described in the same terms, or nearly the same terms, as she uses for stories in every sense [including] myths and legends” (2002, 347). If “ideology is fiction, a system of fiction,” just like a story or a legend or a metaphysical system, Kateb objects that there is simply no way to distinguish between them unless we admit the criterion of verifiable “truth.” “Mustn’t we use empirical truth to discredit meaning-conferring modes when we think that any of them can turn or has turned into an instrument of evil?” he asks rhetorically, adding “What other contrast to fiction could there be . . . besides truth?” (2002, 330, 346).

I will argue below that Kateb is mistaken in his characterization of Arendt’s conception of ideology and storytelling in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and in his contention that the distinction between them is purely aesthetic and so excludes historical experience. I argue instead that Arendt’s distinction between ideology and storytelling is not equivalent to the postmodern binary of grand narratives and little stories, and that her insights are lost if read in these terms. However, Kateb’s assessment of the instability of such purely aesthetic distinctions should not be dismissed out of hand, since it would appear to be relevant to the opposition between master and micro narratives in postmodern theory. As Kateb points out, while such formal distinctions may appear as stable and unbreachable when disposed within the disinterested realm of the aesthetic, they look rather different when relocated to the realm of historical experience. If considered in terms of fanaticism, for example—one of the key experiential configurations of modern political violence—grand narratives and little stories have at times proven indistinguishable. “[A]ny meaning-conferring mode can be a cause of fanaticism,” observes Kateb, including “theological” and “metaphysical sys-

tems,” “religious faith,” “cultural myths,” “legends,” and “even fictional stories”; “all . . . have done so [before] and can be counted on to do so again” (Kateb 2002, 348). But if this is the case, then contemporary literary and cultural theory may have made a disastrous mistake in building its framework for political orientation around an abstract opposition between master and micro narratives.

IV

Arendt’s account of meaning can only be seen as an anticipation of post-modernism if it is organized or orchestrated around the axis of referentiality/nonreferentiality. On this view, Arendt’s discussion of storytelling and ideology is concerned only with aesthetic questions (“meaningfulness”), thereby excluding “empirical reality,” or what Kateb calls “truth.” But the discussion of storytelling and ideology in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* does not function within an opposition between the aesthetic and the empirical, but operates instead in terms that resemble Walter Benjamin’s account in “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” which conceives of narrative as a historically variable mode of organizing spatio-temporal experience (2002). That is, for Arendt as for Benjamin, the patterning of human meaning provides a medium through which historical events can be woven into—and so can come to inform—contemporary possibilities for political action and judgment (see Caygill 1998, 1–33). The pursuit of meaningfulness in these terms is not autotelic, but involves the (re)configuring of the range of possibilities for future action with regard to past events. Arendt terms this mode of configuring experience “responsibility,” and offers a very compressed discussion of its historical importance for the constitution of political community at the beginning of the third section of chapter seven, “Race and Bureaucracy” (1973, 208–11). However, the main focus of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is on how the modern political project combined with the global expansion of European power through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to engender the disintegration of responsibility. Although Arendt describes “a common sharing of responsibility” as “an instinctive feeling” because it had historically been woven into the very structuring of experience, in fact she shows how remarkably evanescent it proved when faced with the reorganization of experience in global modernity (235). In this new context Arendt warns that “[t]ribalism and racism are the very realistic, if very destructive, ways of escaping this predicament of common responsibility” (236).

Arendt’s discussion of the political significance of responsibility in chapter seven of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* adopts the language of narrative and fictionality not because she wants to leave the realm of the empirical for the

more rarefied realm of the aesthetic, but because narrative offers one (although by no means the only) historically important *technik* or mode of organizing experience.³ Even though they never “relat[ed] facts reliably,” Arendt contends that “[l]egends were the spiritual foundations of every ancient city, empire, [or] people” because they “promis[ed] safe guidance through the limitless space of the future” (1973, 208). Arendt explains this futural role in terms that may seem puzzling, and which might at first sight appear to corroborate Kateb’s interpretation that narrative provides a “reconciliation with reality.” Arendt writes:

The truth of the ancient legends—what gives them their fascinating actuality many centuries after the cities and empires and peoples they served had crumbled to dust—was nothing but the form in which past events were made to fit the human condition in general and political aspirations in particular. (Arendt 1973, 208)

Within the terms of Kateb’s reading, such a “truth” must be understood as a dangerously irresponsible act of fictionalizing reality, an act that willfully rearranges the facts in order to meet some kind of fundamental human need for meaning and existential purpose. However, Arendt’s discussion does not in fact work in these terms. For Kateb, the direction of semantic agency operates from present to past: contemporary preoccupations rearrange past events as so many dead and inert units, which like the tesserae that compose a mosaic can be disposed in any pattern to please current taste and understanding. On this view, the past can be rewritten in any way that that appeals to current tastes, and the scope of action of the present is therefore limitless in that it is unconstrained by any responsibility to the prior arrangement and meaningfulness of the past. But in Arendt’s conception of legend, past and present are involved in an interplay that allows (at least residually) for the alterity of the past, and which therefore cedes to it some vestigial definition that is independent from the present.

Arendt articulates this element of alterity by triangulating the unauthored nature of historical events, the agency of human beings in their course, and their continuing ability to shape and direct the parameters of political possibility. Because human beings “ha[ve] not been granted the gift of undoing” or of authorially editing historical events, they are “always . . . unconsulted heir[s] of other men’s deeds.” That is, they must come to terms with a world that is in some measure the outcome of the actions of others. But since the actions that produced the predicament of the present are now absent, this predicament does not appear to its inheritors as the accumulation of human agency but as the inexplicable impingement of the past (as objectivity) on the potentiality of human action in the present. Or as Arendt puts it, humans are “always burdened with a responsibility that appears to be the

consequence of an unending chain of events rather than conscious acts” (1973, 208). It is the continuing operability of the past in the present, its capacity to constrain and direct the scope of action in its afterlife, that requires the past be consciously incorporated into the ongoing parameters of human action and judgment—or put another way, that requires the past be *made meaningful*. Because past events continue to place a burden of responsibility on subsequent generations, they “deman[d] an explanation and interpretation . . . in which the mysterious key to [human] future destiny seems to be concealed” (208).

Far from being a statement of the aesthetic tractability of the past to the present—the “reconciliation with reality” which Kateb sees here—Arendt’s discussion is in fact an attempt to register the alterity of the past within the interplay of past and present. As Arendt writes, “[l]egendary explanations of history always served as belated corrections of facts and real events. . . because history itself would hold man responsible for the deeds he had not done and for consequences he had never foreseen” (1973, 208). This is not a license to rewrite the past at will, but an acknowledgement that because the past remains active in shaping the present, the present will retroactively inscribe that belated agency back into its conception of the past. That is, the present will structure a picture of the past organized around its continuing effectivity in shaping the parameters of the present, an organizational principle that could not, of course, have been ‘present’ to that past. Yet if this reinscription “falsifies” or “distorts” the past, this “distortion” is itself a function of the continuing effectivity and alterity of the past.⁴ In this way, Arendt seeks to accord the past some definition that is independent from the present—we might say that in legend the past is allowed a kind of vestigial plastic memory—while at the same time refusing to render its role retrospectively as the outcome of a pure intention which was once fully present. That is, Arendt seeks to avoid treating the course of events as the history of a unified subject—or “author”—while refusing to relinquish altogether both the alterity of the past and the agency of human subjectivity.

Arendt does not, therefore, equate authorship and narration in the way that Homi Bhabha claims. Rather, her finely judged deployment of the aesthetic categories of “author” and “narrator” reflects her intricate triangulation of these large-scale conceptual commitments. The discussion of the inapplicability of the category of author to human history in *The Human Condition* enables Arendt to maintain a historical role for human agency while distancing herself from Hegel’s philosophy of history, which she sees as erasing the alterity of the object world (by rendering it reducible to subjective intention) and the plurality and nonidentity of subjectivity itself. There are “many actors and speakers” within the “storybook of mankind,” she

writes, “yet [it is] without any tangible authors” (1989, 184). In any historical instance “we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion,” but “we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome” (185). Arendt does not see the rejection of an author of history as permanently instituting the impossibility of coherent subjectivity or the evaporation of “the real” as Bhabha does, but rather as an opportunity to explore the historical patterning of subjectivity in its differential capacity for taking responsibility (182–83).

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, on the other hand, Arendt stresses the retroactive incorporation of the belated agency of past actions—which is what she means by the act of taking responsibility—through the necessarily retrospective assumption of the role of narrator of historical events. For Arendt, “man” is not the author of history but engages with “deeds he ha[s] not done and [with] consequences he has never foreseen”; yet in order consciously to register and negotiate the continuing role of past deeds in shaping the scope of action in the present, humans must think of themselves *as though* they were the authors of these deeds, even though they are not (Arendt 1973, 208). That is, in registering past events as impinging on their own future possible courses of action, humans retrospectively “narrate” those events as “their” history, although they were never in fact the author of those events. Just as the narrator of a novel is the fictional persona used to tell another’s story, so for Arendt we take responsibility for the past deeds of others and integrate their continuing agency into our own scope of action by fictionalizing ourselves as their narrator:

Only in the frankly invented tale about events did man consent to assume responsibility for them, and to consider past events as his past. Legends made him master of what he had not done, and capable of dealing with what he could not undo. In this sense, legends are not only among the first memories of mankind, but actually the true beginnings of human history. (Arendt 1973, 208)

For Arendt, the narration enabled by legend involves the assumption of responsibility in the sense that past events are recognized (and thereby also misrecognized) as consequential within the present and future of the political community, not in terms of cause and effect but through the retrospective extension of a shared experiential consistency to what is in fact a different regime of experience. Although this taking of responsibility is not a question of truth/falsity per se, the very act of usurping the role of narrator is necessarily a fiction, since the community that now constitutes itself was not the author of the past events for which it now takes responsibility. Arendt stresses the fictionality of legend—“the frankly invented tale”—not because she is unconcerned with empirical data or because she is blind to its manip-

ulation by totalitarian movements, but because she wants to make it clear that she is not installing any particular political community as the subject of history in the Heglian sense, as history's "author." Her foregrounding of fictionality, then, is not the familiar postmodern gesture, which implies the reduction of spatio-temporal experience to textuality, but involves instead the recognition of the speculative identity/non-identity of subjectivity and spatio-temporal experience.

Arendt's conception of legend, and more broadly of storytelling and ideology, is not primarily organized around a formal distinction between different kinds of narrative, but around the way in which particular narrative instances implicate a political community within the course of events, and so realize and restrict the range of its possible futures. Her "legend" is neither a "master narrative" nor a "little story," but may take different narrative forms and function in a number of ways. After all, there are many ways in which a story can be told. Arendt illustrates this multiplicity by examining the endurance of legend for later societies, contrasting the enduring potential of many ancient legends with the decidedly limited afterlife of modern storytelling. While legends once provided a way of consciously incorporating the continuing operability of the immediate past into the ongoing parameters of action and judgment for the people of the city, they live on as empty husks or skeletons "many centuries after the cities and empires and people they served have crumbled to dust" (1973, 208) But the fact that they retain a "fascinating actuality" is highly instructive for Arendt. What it shows is that in taking responsibility for past events, the structuring of experience encoded in legend is one that has to be more or less porous: that is, it must be open to regimes of experience other than that within which it was engendered. Thus, even when the past that called forth that openness has long since faded from memory, the porosity that that past once evoked remains evident, and enables a suggestiveness or potential for continuing interpretation which Arendt describes as its "fascinating actuality." This enduring porosity contrasts starkly with another structuring of responsibility, namely the much more recent "legend of the British Empire," and it is here that Arendt's discussion of legend connects with the more contemporary framework of her analysis of modern politics (2007, 209).

What Arendt means by the "legend of the British Empire" is the particular configuration of experience through which certain sections of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British society came to *feel responsible* for the imperial project. That is, she is interested in the extent to which certain individuals came to regard the imperial project not as an external opportunity for self-advancement or economic enrichment, nor as a maneuver for propelling another cause or achieving another end, but as an

integral part of their own experiential framework of meaningfulness, action, and collective possibility. It is this structuring of the relationship between individual and collective experience that Arendt refers to as “the imperialist character,” and which she associates with the storytelling of Rudyard Kipling (1973, 209).

V

Arendt’s discussion of Kipling and the legend of the British Empire is framed within a very compressed consideration of the historicity of narrative and its fate within the emergent predicament of global modernity which draws on Benjamin’s “The Storyteller.” Briefly, for Benjamin the decay of tradition in modernity marks the disintegration of the collective experiential matrices in which storytelling was possible, and gives rise instead to the spatio-temporal disconnection manifested in the unrelated and abstract information of the newspaper, while at the same time feeding the (impossible) desire manifested in the novel for a representation of the coherence and meaningfulness of individualized experience (2002, 147–48, 155–56). Yet Benjamin also identifies instances in which the narrative structuring of the story—which had been generated not by the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of the isolated individual but by the experiential web of the collective (*Erfahrung*)—is reanimated or resurrected within the atomized experience of modernity (*Erlebnis*). Benjamin identifies such *inauthentic* instances of the “return” of the story not only in the writing of Nikolai Leskov, but also in stories about the lives “of British seamen and colonial soldiers” written by Rudyard Kipling (157).

Arendt’s understanding of the legend of the British Empire follows the broad parameters of Benjamin’s account. As she observes, the “flourishing of historical and political legends came to a rather abrupt end with the birth of Christianity,” the theological framework which even in its earliest manifestation anticipated the atomization and fragile inwardness later identified by Max Weber with the “Protestant ethic” and the “spirit of capitalism” (Weber 1976; see also Rose 1998, 86–89). By homogenizing historical experience into “one single road to redemption,” Christianity at once extended the range of the “common sharing of responsibility,” while at the same time dangerously weakening the embeddedness within spatio-temporal experience upon which the taking of responsibility ultimately depended (Arendt 1973, 208, 235). As a single and “all-inclusive legendary explanation of human destiny,” the legend of Christianity was much less closely bound to the particularity of space and time, and tended to become increasingly universal, abstract, and distanced from the specificity of historical location (208). It is through its distancing of the space and time into which political communi-

ty is thrown and for which it must take responsibility that Arendt sees Christianity as opening the way for the escape from responsibility that marks the emergence of “ideology” in modernity (235). Understood in these terms, while ideology claims to offer “total explanation,” it is less a way of synthesizing the multiplicity of historical events within an overarching narrative or coherent body of belief—what often seems to be meant by the “grand” or “master narrative” conceived on the model of Enlightenment philosophical systems—but a way of excluding spatio-temporal experience from the patterning of meaning altogether, of refusing to incorporate the continuing agency of past events within the parameters of judgment and action of the political present (470–71). As Arendt writes, “ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a truer ‘reality’ behind all perceptible things” (470–71). “Legends,” therefore, “are not ideologies” because they are “always concerned with concrete facts” (208).

Rather than generating a binary opposition between master and micro narratives, Arendt’s conception of storytelling suggests a continuum of different possible narrative modes, ranging from ancient legend through the transitional legend of Christianity, to the totalitarian ideology of modernity, which are to be differentiated not principally in formal terms but in their historically specific capacity to enable the taking of responsibility. Kipling’s stories mark a point on that continuum: while they resemble the experiential configuration of legend in that they do in a sense take responsibility for a range of historical events that their implicit narrators could not have authored, they do so in a way that abnegates or closes down the porosity of experience that has heretofore constituted the “fascinating actuality” of ancient legend. Arendt writes that “[w]hat brings” Kipling’s stories “so close to ancient foundation legends is that [they] present [t]he British as the only politically mature people, caring for law and burdened with the welfare of the world, in the midst of barbarian tribes who neither care nor know what keeps the world together” (1973, 209). That is, Kipling’s stories do invite the assumption of responsibility “for deeds [the narrator] had not done and for consequences he had never foreseen”—although only *for a certain kind of reader* (208). As Arendt observes acutely, the experiential structuring of Kipling’s stories only extends the assumption of responsibility to a tightly restricted configuration of subjectivity—to the subjectivity that will accommodate and subordinate itself to the parameters of the “imperialist character” (207). Arendt’s assessment of Kipling’s narrative mode is careful to register its extraordinary achievement, but her judgment is quietly devastating. “Unfortunately,” Arendt writes, Kipling’s “presentation lacked the innate truth of ancient legends,” since contrary to his claim that imperialism was an altruistic task whose burdensomeness was not cared about, understood, or

seen by anyone else, “the world cared and knew and saw how they [the British imperialists] did it [built the Empire],” and “no such tale could ever have convinced the world that they [the British imperialists] did not ‘get anything out of that little job’” (209). In the framework of Arendt’s conception of legend, as we have seen, the assumption of responsibility requires a spatio-temporal configuration, or narrative framework, that is open to different regimes of experience—which is why legends remain narratable within other, quite different contexts of experience. But as Arendt observes, Kipling’s stories were unnarratable (at least without irony) by anyone—except, of course, by aspiring imperialists. For notwithstanding the foundational claim of Kipling’s tales, “the world” indeed “cared and knew and saw.”

While the postmodern paradigm of referentiality gives rise to a static binary opposition between master and micro narratives, Arendt’s conception of meaning in terms of political responsibility conceives of narrative as a historically determinate medium which is capable of generating multiple modes of taking—or escaping—responsibility. Taking responsibility necessarily involves subjectivity, but not in the zero sum game of epistemology—the formal adequation (or not) of subjective consciousness to reality—but in terms of the myriad possible configurations of subjectivity in its relation to past events and future actions. Thus, in the case of the legend of the British Empire, this legend takes responsibility for the course of events, but only in a way that dangerously isolates and hardens subjectivity in a bureaucratic attitude Arendt calls “aloofness.” “Aloofness,” she writes, “was a more dangerous form of governing than despotism and arbitrariness because it did not even tolerate the last link between the despot and his subjects, which is formed by bribery and gifts.” What had come in the eyes of the imperialist bureaucrat to appear as the very manifestation of responsibility, namely “[i]ntegrity and aloofness,” in fact generated “an absolute division of interests” between the rulers and the ruled “to the point where they were not even permitted to conflict” (1973, 212). Thus, this most single-minded assumption of responsibility was to become frighteningly irresponsible.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* written some two decades later, Arendt identifies in Eichmann another point on this continuum of responsibility and the escape from responsibility.⁵ Many readers have been dissatisfied with Arendt’s apparently cursory judgment that Eichmann “*never realized what he was doing*,” and so was guilty of “sheer thoughtlessness” (1977, 87; emphasis in original). But Arendt’s articulation here of her conception of the “banality of evil” is designed not to absolve Eichmann, but to point more unsettlingly to the commonness of Eichmann’s attitude: “The trouble with Eichmann,” she writes, “was precisely that so many were like him, and that . . . they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (276). What is both “terrifying”

and, within the atomized predicament of modern subjectivity, “normal” is Eichmann’s “remoteness from reality” and the “thoughtlessness”—or escape from responsibility—which it facilitated. Eichmann was indeed a talker and teller of tales, but the stories he narrates do not imagine his own authorship of the events he participated in or of the outcomes to which they contributed, but seek instead to smother responsibility in a welter of cliché and self-pity (see Eichmann 1984). “It was precisely this lack of imagination,” Arendt writes,

which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it was not his fault that he was not promoted. . . . He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (Arendt 1977, 287–88)

VI

It has frequently been observed that Ishiguro distances his own writing from straightforward realism and the claims for referentiality associated with it. “The kind of England that I create in *The Remains of the Day*,” he has observed,

is not an England that I believe ever existed. I’ve not attempted to reproduce, in an historically accurate way, some past period. What I’m trying to do there . . . is to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England. I think there is this very strong idea that exists in England at the moment, about an England where people lived in the not so distant past that conformed to various stereotypical images. That is to say, an England with sleepy, beautiful villages, with very polite people, and butlers, and people taking tea on the lawn. (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 139)

Yet it has been less often remarked that Ishiguro’s discussion of his own writing adopts a wary distance from critical fashion, and in particular from the then dominant paradigm of postmodern fictionality. Pointedly, Ishiguro insists that “I don’t believe that the nature of fiction is one of the burning issues of the late twentieth century,” nor is it “one of the things I want to turn to novels and art to find out about” (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 145). In fact, Ishiguro’s articulates his aim for the novel neither in terms of a flat realism nor as a celebration of postmodern textuality, but in terms of the wider experiential applicability of the “parable.” Offering a parallel between his own mythic construction of England and the myth of the Western, Ishiguro explains that “I’d have to say that my overall aim wasn’t confined to

British lessons for British people because it's a mythical landscape which is supposed to work at a metaphorical level." What consumed him in writing the novel was "this whole question about how to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphors so that people don't think it is just about Japan or Britain, but also give it that sort of ability to take off as metaphor and parable" (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991, 140). Unlike the postmodernist claim for the "loss of the real," Ishiguro sees his fiction as engaging with experience, not in terms of referentiality but in the more porous and temporally variable framework of parable.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro creates a kind of fictional analogue for the construction of national myths. The novel is told entirely in the first-person by its narrator, Stevens, over a few days in July 1956. The butler at what was formerly a grand stately home, Stevens takes a trip by motorcar to visit the former housekeeper, a Mrs. Benn whom Stevens consistently refers to by her maiden name, Miss Kenton. Stevens's narration is almost entirely concerned with the past, and especially with the years before World War II when he was the butler for Lord Darlington, an aristocratic Nazi-sympathizer. Stevens appears at first to be quite naturally recalling his earlier life prompted by his forthcoming motor trip, but quickly the novel reveals that his need to tell and retell the past is obsessive and all-consuming.

The novel's interest lies in its extraordinary ability to involve us in the drama of Stevens's ceaseless remembering. His narration roams obsessively over his field of memory, attempting to avoid what is difficult or painful, and displacing unacknowledged anxieties into elaborate descriptions of trivial details or over-engineered interpretations of incidental events and bogus points of principle. Thus Stevens never once mentions his mother, a lack that suggests a desperately damaged and restricted emotional life, while his refusal to face up to Mrs. Benn's marriage—and hence to his profound regret about his inability to acknowledge his feelings for her—is continually registered in his referring to her as "Miss Kenton." The past is massaged and adjusted to return a picture that will justify—or failing that, at least make bearable—the experience of the present; however, as the legacy of the past continually intrudes into contemporary experience, often in ways that are disconcerting or incompatible with the glass of memory, the past has to be relentlessly remade over and over again. In constantly shifting ground, Stevens's narration of the past betrays a postwar awareness of Darlington's public identification as a Nazi sympathizer, which leads him to repeatedly deny his connection to his former master in a bathetically ironic echo of Peter's denial of Jesus of Nazareth.

The traffic between past and present is thus more complex than is acknowledged in postmodernist accounts of fictionality, which see the past

as blank and inert, and so infinitely rewritable within the unconstrained scope of the present (see for example Hutcheon 1988, 89–101). But while Stevens constantly reconstructs the past in light of the anxieties of the present, this process of rewriting is itself prompted and provoked by the continuing operability or agency of the past. The reconstruction of memory does not so much attest to the liquidation of referentiality announced by post-modernism’s “loss of the real,” but to the residual alterity of the past and its refusal to be assimilated to the present. Indeed, if we read his narration symptomatically, rather than literally, it is possible to gain a sense of the alterity of the past that exceeds the projected and displaced image that Stevens moulds from the plasticity of memory. That is, if we focus on the warps and inconsistencies in the texture of Stevens’s unreliable narration, and on the disparities between his narration and the fictional world of England in 1956 through which he moves, the memorial topoi and patterns of revision that his narration iterates themselves become interpretable—as *symptoms* of anxieties and obsessions which Stevens’s consciousness cannot fully acknowledge or confront. Such a symptomatic reading inverts the usual calibration of significance in realist narration: in *The Remains of the Day*, what the narrator considers significant or revealing is usually not so, while what goes unmentioned or is quickly dismissed as of no consequence often provides the most penetrating insights into Stevens’s disconsolate condition.

In its obsessive reinscription of the past in the present of 1956, Stevens’s narration traces a topography of anxiety that is imbued with post-imperial melancholy. As the Suez Crisis looms—the book begins in July 1956, coinciding with President Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal—an American, Mr. Farraday, now owns Darlington Hall, and the great house becomes a figure for the nation. Now an empty shell thrown up by an earlier stage of economic globalization in the process of being superseded, the house’s ostentatious show of tradition and power can now be comfortably inhabited by the new hegemon, the United States, although only in so far as it meets a certain self-affirming image that for a period flatters its new occupier. But Stevens’s unhappy consciousness is not simply a function of decline, but is freighted with a legacy of damage and distortion inherited from the highpoint of the British Empire. Especially significant here are the three stories that Stevens tells about his father on the evening of day one, and his recollection of his father’s death on the morning of day two. In recalling what is ostensibly a workaday anecdote to confirm his father’s embodiment of the dignity appropriate to a “great” butler, Stevens reveals almost incidentally the devastating loss of his brother, Leonard, in the Second Anglo-Boer War. Even though his father had to act as valet to the General whose blundering had directly led to the young soldier’s death, “so well did [he] hide his feelings,

and so professionally did he carry out his duties” that he comes to define for Stevens the notion of “dignity” according to which he lives his own life. What is so striking in his narration of the incident is the way that it mirrors his father’s emotional suppression, which is then elevated to become the principle of “dignity” that according to Stevens “has to do crucially with a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits” (Ishiguro 1993, 42).

Just as in Arendt’s diagnosis of the imperial character, Stevens comes to mistake an attitude of “integrity” and “aloofness” for responsibility, a misrecognition comically exposed in the first of the stories he tells, which recounts an unknown butler’s unflappable dispatch of a marauding tiger in the days of the Raj. This “legend” is understood by Stevens “with hindsight” to embody an ideal which his father “must have striven throughout his years somehow to *become*” (1993, 36, 37; emphasis in original). But the telling of the tale does not work to enable Stevens to take responsibility for his own relationship with his father or his own professional life as a butler, but functions instead as a way of claiming “a large sense of triumph” at the very moment that he fails to comfort his father on his deathbed (110).

However, if the past over which Stevens’s memory obsessively rakes suggests Arendt’s imperialist character and the aberrated legend of Kipling, the temporal structure of Steven’s postwar narration inserts this legacy within the retrospective and self-centered storytelling of Eichmann. Deprived of the emotional infrastructure that comes from the hurt and triumphs of interpersonal engagement, Stevens must cling all the more tightly to a precast structuring of subjectivity, a kind of psychological exoskeleton which takes its impression from what appears within its social world to be the most complete, self-composed, and invulnerable masculine self—the aristocrat, Lord Darlington, who echoes a string of British aristocrats who sympathized with Hitler and saw an alliance with Germany as the best way of saving the Empire and preserving peace in Europe.⁶ Stevens laboriously constructs a sense of himself from the wreckage by tying his own life to the larger movements of history through his identification with Darlington, whose amateurish interventions in foreign affairs are interpreted as historical work of epochal importance. Darlington becomes one of those “gentleman who were, so to speak, furthering the progress of humanity” and contributing “to the future well-being of the empire”; “dignity” thus becomes a function of “years of service” in which a butler “has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman—and through the latter, to serving humanity” (Ishiguro 1993, 117).

In a sense, then, Stevens resembles the imperial bureaucrat that Arendt identifies as a key form of the imperialist character in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. “At the basis of bureaucracy,” Arendt writes, “lies th[e] super-

stitution of a possible and magic identification of man with the forces of history,” an identification that rejects the permanence of community and the “inherent stability” of moral or juridical law in favor of “handling each situation separately” by arbitrary and ever-changing “decree” (1973, 216). But Stevens lacks the Olympian hauteur of the Imperial civil servant, and in that respect resembles more the failure of thought that Arendt saw in Adolf Eichmann. If Stevens builds his exoskeleton through an identification with the “forces of history,” a structuring of subjectivity that might seem to recall the grand narratives of postmodern theory, he does so *at one remove*—by “serv[ing] the great gentleman of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted” (Ishiguro 1993: 116). And it is this disconnection from even the residual responsibility of Kipling’s aberrated legend and the imperialist character it sustains that generates the dangerous instability of Stevens’s recollection, his rule of memory by arbitrary decree, wherein memory is always rewritable and renegotiable, always flexible and open to the shifting demands of the present.

One incident in particular suggests a parallel with Eichmann’s breathtaking yet banal refusal of responsibility. Stevens recalls a conversation before the war with Miss Kenton concerning an order given by Darlington a year earlier to dismiss two Jewish maids. Miss Kenton had at the time identified the order as anti-Semitic and morally repugnant and had threatened to resign, but much to her own shame had ultimately kept her silence and position, standing by while the Jewish girls were dismissed. In his recounting of the dismissal Stevens claims that “my every instinct opposed the idea,” but in retelling their conversation about the incident a year later he cannot elide Miss Kenton’s stunned amazement when he then makes this claim (Ishiguro 1993, 148). “As I recall,” Miss Kenton objects, “you thought it was only proper that Ruth and Sara be sent packing,” adding that Stevens was “positively cheerful about it” (153). In his postwar account, Stevens supplies an elaborate justification for his original compliance with the order, citing the need for them both to subordinate their judgment to the superior understanding of their master—a justification that may or may not accurately reflect his state of mind at the time. But the smooth justification he provides of his initial decision cannot be extended to the later conversation with Miss Kenton, where Miss Kenton articulates an alternative principle of intersubjective solidarity that might have strengthened their own capacity for judgment and action in opposition to reliance on authority: “Do you realize, Mr. Stevens, how much it would have meant to me if you had thought to share your feelings last year?” (153). Despite the impossibility of now knowing Stevens’s state of mind at either moment—we, of course, only have his account to go on—what the text does reveal is his inability to share deliberation with Miss

Kenton. Despite our incapacity to know the “truth” of Stevens’s state of mind at the moment of the maids’ dismissal, this past moment remains operative in the present, and so inassimilable to Stevens’s retrospective reconstruction. At the personal level, it marks the change in their relationship that ends the possibility of their emotional intimacy, a loss with which Stevens still struggles to come to terms. But at another level, it marks the collapse of any potential Stevens has for building a sense of himself in community with others—a subjectivity in community that could take responsibility for its pasts and its futures independently of the master to which it has subordinated itself. And so this past moment remains operative in the continuing failure of Stevens’s narration to take responsibility.

Arendt’s insistence in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain’” may seem to import a wildly inappropriate standard for the judgment of a Nazi war criminal (1977, 287). But her recourse to such literary characters as a framework for understanding becomes readable within the terms of her account of narrative and responsibility. For Arendt, these characters self-consciously directed their ruthless calculation to the pursuit of power, and fully cognizant of the human destruction necessary for its achievement, they are remarkable, and even in a sense courageous, in taking responsibility—albeit in distorted and aberrated ways—for transgressing all divine and human morality and law. In contrast, Arendt sees in Eichmann no such awareness and no such assumption of responsibility, but only what she called controversially “the banality of evil” (287). For Arendt, Eichmann’s “extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement” combined with a chilling “lack of imagination”—the inability to envisage in the minutest degree the human and moral significance of his actions—to “predispos[e] him to become one of the greatest criminals of [the Nazi] period” (287-88). Stevens, of course, is not Eichmann—or not quite. But his identification at one remove with the forces of history excuses him even from the residual responsibility assumed by Darlington, who fights (only to lose) a libel action when he is publicly denounced as a Nazi after the war. But even though Stevens acknowledges Darlington’s disgrace, he continues to affirm at the novel’s end that “there is little choice other than to leave our fate ultimately in the hands of those great gentleman” (Ishiguro 1993, 244). His distancing of his own experience of identification thus leads him to abnegate his responsibility even to envisage the consequences of that identification.

VII

The identification of Arendt's conception of meaning making with contemporary theories of textuality is misleading, and mistakenly identifies her historically specific concern for responsibility with the exclusion of spatio-temporal experience in claims for the "loss of the real." As our reading of *The Remains of the Day* indicates, it is not just the "Socratic thinker" who might "be perpetually dissatisfied with any attempted articulation" of meaning, and who may continually defer the certainty that "they have [the truth] or some part or glimpse of it" (Kateb 2002, 327-28). That Stevens remains perennially bound up in the "ineffability and indefinability" of meaning suggests a much less existential conception of meaning than Kateb envisages, and points instead to one more closely embedded in the historical predicament of collective and individual experience (327). Against Kateb's claim that "the quest for meaning would be meaningless if it never came to some conclusions," Stevens's ceaseless retelling of the past indicates that such a quest indeed remains meaningful, although not in terms of referentiality (the representation of an external object) but in its evasion of responsibility (328). And as Eichmann's example attests, this structuring of experience is not restricted just to ideologues and intellectuals, but may be a much more common fate in modernity than Kateb believes. As Ishiguro puts it, "We're [all] like butlers" (Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda 1991: 140).

On this reading, *The Remains of the Day* is not a demonstration of language's inability to represent an external referent or past, nor of the inevitable undoing of the master narratives of history, truth, and the nation. Rather, the novel explores how the little stories in which postmodernism has placed so much faith may come to provide an alibi for the escape from responsibility which had once been narrated through the "total explanation" of ideology (Arendt 1973, 470).

Notes

¹ This sits oddly with Arendt's focus on stories with "a unique meaning" and her account of storytelling as revelatory, aspects of Arendt's account which Bhabha either rhetorically inverts or simply rejects out of hand (1989, 184-86; Bhabha 1994, 272-3).

² See the first three essays in Jon Stewart's collection *The Hegel Myths and Legends* for a discussion of the relationship between "actuality" and "reality" in Hegel's thought (1996, 19-49).

³ For a discussion of *technik* in these terms see MacPhee (2003)

⁴ This is primarily what I take Benjamin to mean when he writes that "origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming" (1977, 45).

⁵ I would argue that Arendt's admission in her letter to Mary McCarthy of 20 September 1963, that "Eichmann was much less influenced by ideology than I assumed in the book on totalitarianism," does not necessarily refute her account of

the political role of meaning making as Kateb contends (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 147; Kateb 2002, 350). Rather, it may suggest her acknowledgement that a much wider range of elements was operative within the continuum of responsibility/irresponsibility that underpinned popular adherence to the Nazi regime.

⁶A list of such figures would include: Lord Rothermere, the owner of the influential British newspaper *The Daily Mail*; Lord Lothian, onetime Under-Secretary for India; Sir Oswald Moseley, leader of the British Union of Fascists; the Duke of Windsor, formerly King Edward VIII; and perhaps most closely Lord Londonderry, Churchill's cousin and Air Minister in the early 1930s (Kershaw 2004, 31-64).

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