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Generic Differences: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff*

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Burkhard Niederhoff's very knowledgeable and scholarly essay discusses the motif of the unlived life in two outstanding English works of the 1980s and 1990s. Niederhoff analyzes first the different representations of this motif in the two texts and then tries to answer the question of how it is possible to find meaning in the unlived life. It appears convincing that Niederhoff generally states that "implicit representations of the unlived life are much more frequent and characteristic than explicit ones" (169), and when he comes to distinguish between "six typical techniques or methods" (169) of implicit representation, the argument strikes the reader as highly intelligent and sophisticated. It is underscored by references to many different texts from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* via Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and "Will o' the Mill" as well as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle,* "Diary of a Man of Fifty" and "The Jolly Corner," and also Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape,* not to mention Alice Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy," where this motif appears.

If a reader wants to find fault with statements made in the essay, an argument in a long endnote (5) perhaps offers itself, where Niederhoff

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff02023.htm>.

looks at Austen's *Mansfield Park* and comments: "The road not taken (Fanny Price marries Henry Crawford) is just as or almost as likely as the road taken (Fanny Price marries Edmund Bertram)" (185). This is not very convincing and is suitably corrected in the very first essay of the same number, where Angelika Zirker much more justly states: "The possibility of Fanny marrying Henry Crawford is, *at least for some time, not entirely excluded from the novel* […]" (131; my italics). Apparently Niederhoff himself is aware of the temptation of also subsuming less fitting examples under a category that is being discussed.

The scope of an essay in a periodical is, of course, limited. Otherwise it might have been interesting and rewarding also to take into account the generic differences of the two texts Niederhoff analyzes. Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, after all, is a novel, and Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* is a play, and critics have rightly stated, "Stoppard has 'never written anything for discussion' (*TLS*). His plays are written for, and shaped by, the theatre" (Jenkins 2).[1]

The two genres certainly have much in common, and each of them can, to some extent, adopt techniques and features originally belonging to the other. For example, there can be a narrator, who primarily is an element of fiction, in a play as well; and a novel may consist largely or even completely (as the example of Ivy Compton-Burnett demonstrates) of dialogue, which is basically a technique of drama. Nevertheless, one can say in general that the novel, mainly owing to its larger extent, but also to the specific nature of the reading process, has greater possibilities to work with different shades of meaning and to introduce a narrator whose reliability becomes questionable. On the other hand, drama has the advantage of immediacy, of dramatic confrontations and juxtapositions. I would suggest that this basic difference can be observed also in of the two works analyzed by Niederhoff.

In *The Remains of the Day,* one finds, indeed, as Niederhoff claims, "increased self-knowledge" (180), but, as I see it, this is rather fugitive and transitory. This nuanced effect is at least partly due to features characteristic of the genre. The scene when Stevens says farewell to

Mrs Benn at the bus stop is really, in Niederhoff's words, "a highly symbolic one" (180), and it is true that, "[f]or the first time in their relationship, Stevens transcends his professional role and shows an interest in her feelings." So Niederhoff is right to talk of "this mutual declaration of love" (180) and emphasize Stevens's statement, "*my heart was breaking*" (181). However, this feeling lasts only for a very short moment, and the first-person-narrator continues: "Before long, however, I turned to her and said *with a smile* […]" (239; my italics). Stevens has successfully and completely overcome any amount of "increased self-knowledge" he may have had.

The same applies to the second essential insight about his unlived life that Stevens has subsequently, towards the end of the novel. He even weeps when he considers the frustrating situation his self-sacrificing service has led him into, and he remarks to a casual acquaintance about his employer and his own role:

> Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. […] 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 in 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)

When the man he is talking to, however, criticizes him, "Don't keep looking back all the time, you're bound to get depressed" (243), he is easily pacified and quickly gives up his awareness of the lost life his dependence has brought him. He most readily follows the man's advice, "You've got to enjoy yourself. The evening's the best part of the day" (244). He adopts the same opinion and agrees, "for a great many people the evening is the most enjoyable part of the day" (244). (This, incidentally, is ironically underlined by the title of the novel).

We, the readers, of course, see the shallowness and superficiality of the life Stevens has chosen for himself and that he completely justified when he complains that he cannot even say that he made his own mistakes. And that the remaining phase and the end of his life will not

be as pleasant as he tries to convince himself is demonstrated for us quite clearly by the example of Stevens's role model, his father. The end of his father's life is clearly without dignity. When he can no longer perform the services of a competent butler he is degraded, and when he dies, his son does not even find the time to stay with him because he has to provide his lordship's guests with drinks. So when Stevens afterwards is convinced that the contribution he makes by sacrificing his life is surely "in itself, whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment" (244), we know that he goes on deceiving himself. As various critics have found,[2] Stevens is a completely unreliable narrator, we cannot trust him and must make our own judgement.

This is also confirmed by the very ending of the novel. Stevens observes how people are gathering in groups on the pier, and "they are laughing together merrily" (245). Instead of following their example and perhaps join them, the keywords "laughing […] merrily" trigger a narrow professional response. Since his new employer, the American Mr. Farraday, wishes him to give witty answers, he considers "that bantering is hardly an unreasonable duty for an employer to expect a professional to perform" (245). He has "already devoted much time to developing […] [his] bantering skills," and so he resolves, "I will begin practising with renewed effort" (245). We must understand that he has not in the least gained any self-knowledge from his unlived life and that he has completely lost his independent personality and is in a very deplorable state. This is the ironically tragic message the novel conveys mainly through features specific to the genre, in particular the unreliability of the narrator. (*Tragic*, of course, is not meant here in the narrow sense of the Aristotelian theory, where the hero, at the end of the play, has an anagnorisis, but in the basic sense of the *SOED*, "Resembling tragedy in respect of its matter; relating to or expressing fatal or dreadful events; sad").

Stoppard, in *The Invention of Love*, on the other hand, works with the typical means of drama, by representing contrasting points of view through different speakers. There is "A. E. Housman, aged 18 to 26"

(vii), the poet in his formative years, and "AEH, A. E. Housman, aged 77" (vii), who, more or less on his deathbed, looks back on his life, and in whose memory the whole action takes place. AEH also meets his younger self; he is obviously a disillusioned man, who treats his students with cynicism and impatience. The love of his life has never materialized, although, from a practical point of view, there is no "road not taken," as Niederhoff terms it (183). Moses John Jackson, the man he falls in love with in his days in Oxford, does not understand and fundamentally rejects any homosexual relationship. So Housman shares a flat with him in London as his comrade—until one day the remark of a girlfriend opens Jackson's eyes about Housman's true feelings, and then Housman moves out of the flat. Though Housman says of his friend, "Jackson knows more than Plato" (46-47), the scientist Jackson is really beneath Housman: he has absolutely no sense for classical antiquity, which he refers to as that "veni, vidi, vici" stuff (55), and after he has been to a theatre performance with Housman he is fascinated not by the play but by the modern electricity (cf. 52). Housman exclaims three times in the play, "I would have died for you but I never had the luck!" (5, 46, 100). Yet a real love relationship never is an option, though Niederhoff is right when he observes, "Housman's poems are intimately bound up with the unlived life in that the first quotation from the poems occurs precisely at the moment when Housman moves out of the flat he has shared with Jackson" (183).

The most important foil to Housman in the play, however, is undoubtedly his contemporary Oscar Wilde, who appears on the stage towards the end. Wilde is, like Housman, a homosexual and a poet, but, in contrast to Housman, he has lived his life to the full. He can proudly say of himself: "I had genius, brilliancy, daring, I took charge of my own myth" (96). When he asks Housman, "You did *have* friends?" he is answered, "I had colleagues" (94). And when Wilde asks, "Where were you when all this [the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the

New Woman] was happening?" Housman has to make the unimpressive confession: "At home" (97).

Nevertheless, Wilde, at the same time, encourages Housman that his life has not been in vain and that it has found a unique fulfilment, when he asserts: "You didn't mention your poems. How can you be unhappy when you know you wrote them? They are all that will still matter" (97). Wilde also gives a double interpretation of the title of the play. Love is always a matter of invention: "We would never love anybody if we could see past our invention" (95). And by the creative invention of the poet, love is sublimated further, as long quotations from Housman's poetry, where his love is celebrated, document.

So it is understandable that, in spite of occasional elegiac elements and overtones, Stoppard's play can be seen as a comedy, which entertains the audience right from the beginning with comical misunderstandings and numerous puns.[3] This effect is at least partly created by the genre-specific confrontations and juxtapositions. Ishiguro's work, however, depicts an unlived life that leads only to a very transitory experience of self-knowledge, where the loss of an independent personality is permanent and absolute, and it must therefore be understood as a novel that is movingly tragic.

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NOTES

[1]I quote this passage also in my essay on Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* (153).

[2]Brian W. Shaffer, e. g., talks of "Stevens's deceptive self-conception" (87); Barry Lewis states: "Not only does he [Stevens] deceive others and himself" (86); Cynthia F. Wong finds, "Stevens seems both to know and *not to know* his present life" (55).

[3]See my essay, particularly section VI, where I refer to "the comic tenor of the play by humourous elements at different levels" (161).

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