

Unlived Lives in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*^{*1}

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1. Introduction

In Alice Munro's short story "Walker Brothers Cowboy," a travelling salesman takes his two children on a sales tour in rural Ontario. When one of his prospective clients, instead of opening the door, empties a chamber pot from a window, missing the salesman only by a few inches, he decides to give up work for the day. He drives to a farm to visit a former acquaintance, Nora Cronin, whom he has not seen for years. In the course of the visit, it dawns on the reader that the salesman and Nora were lovers and that they might have married each other if it had not been for her Catholicism. The intimacy that develops between them almost immediately suggests that they would have had a more rewarding relationship than the rather loveless marriage that the salesman has with the children's mother. On the way home, the older of the two children, a girl, also suspects that there are areas in her father's life that she is not aware of; she begins to sense alternatives to the familiar version of his life that she has taken for granted:

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine. (15)

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff02023.htm>>.

“Walker Brothers Cowboy” is a good example of the motif of the unlived life as I would like to define it for the purposes of the present essay. In my view, a fully-fledged treatment of the motif requires the presence of four criteria. The first is a *counterfactual course of events*, a road that the action might have taken but has not, in the case of Munro’s short story a marriage between the girl’s father and Nora Cronin. The second criterion is a *retrospective focus* on the counterfactual course of events. This criterion is crucial because otherwise the motif would be ubiquitous. Most narratives feature roads not taken by the actual plot, but usually these are anticipated by the characters in the form of guesses, speculations or strategies while they are pondering the future and trying to make decisions.² Once a narrative has moved beyond such a moment of decision or crisis, a “kernel” in narratologist terminology,³ this moment and the alternative roads branching off from it are no longer heeded. The few cases in which they are, in which a character looks back on a decision and an alternative road, are significant exceptions. The retrospective criterion also entails the advanced age of the protagonists in works dealing with the unlived life; they tend to be somewhere between middle age and their deathbed.

The third criterion, a *sustained focus* on the unlived life, should be included to rule out the many cases in which a character and / or narrator casts no more than a fleeting glance at a road not taken. Consider the following passage from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, in which the narrator Jim Hawkins comments on the apple barrel to which he owes the discovery of the pirates’ conspiracy: “But good did come of the apple barrel, as you shall hear; for if it had not been for that, we should have had no note of warning, and might all have perished by the hand of treachery” (56). This remark opens a window on an alternative course of events. However, the window is closed almost as soon as it is opened. As the narrative moves on at its brisk pace, neither the narrator nor the characters have much time for dwelling on what might have been. *Treasure Island* is first and foremost about the here and now of the action, about the life actually

lived. The fourth criterion consists in the *involvement of the character or characters*. These have to be affected by, perhaps even suffering from, an awareness of the life that they did not live. The alternative life has to be so powerful and intriguing that it becomes the subject of regret or, at the very least, of a sustained preoccupation or contemplation.⁴

Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (the protagonist's unrealised relationship with Peter Walsh) may be cited as fully-fledged examples of the motif in addition to Munro's short story. An interesting approximation is provided by Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. For the first one hundred pages or so, Anne Elliott is preoccupied with the rewarding marriage she might have enjoyed had she only accepted Captain Wentworth's proposal. After these initial chapters, however, she begins to hope that he might ask her again. In other words, the novel changes from the retrospective focus on a life not lived and an opportunity not seized to the more common prospective focus on an opportunity and a life still to be had.⁵ Approximations of a different kind are afforded by Robert Louis Stevenson in "Will o' the Mill" and Henry James in *The Beast in the Jungle*; these tales cover almost the entire life span of protagonists who fail to walk down various roads. Thus, there is a gradual shift from a prospective focus on a choice to be made to a retrospective focus on a choice no longer available.

The texts mentioned in the preceding paragraph suggest that the motif came into being in the nineteenth century and that it flourished in the twentieth. One reason for this may be the pessimistic bias inherent in the motif, its connections with waste, failure and loss of purpose, themes that figure prominently in twentieth-century literature. Characters who are happy with their lives will not become obsessed with the roads they did not take. Conversely, characters will become preoccupied with these alternative roads if they sense that the lives they actually live are unrewarding and devoid of purpose.⁶ A second reason is the weakening of plot in the texts in question, another movement associated with twentieth-century literature, especially such avant-garde works as *Ulysses* or *Waiting for Godot*. The

unlived life takes place in the mind of the characters or is indicated in symbolic or implicit ways (which will be described in greater detail below). Conflicts and crises lie in the past; they are reflected, not acted on.

In the present essay, I will analyse two fully-fledged examples of the motif that follow the characteristic pattern of the elderly character reviewing his or her life: Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love* (1997).⁷ Ishiguro's protagonist is Mr Stevens, a long-time butler at an English country house, which was formerly owned by Lord Darlington and is now, in 1956, the property of an American, Mr Faraday. Stoppard's protagonist is A. E. Housman, author of *A Shropshire Lad* and classical scholar; he is lying on his deathbed in a London nursing home in 1936. Both of these characters go on a journey. Having received a letter from Mrs Benn, a former housekeeper at Darlington Hall, Mr Stevens travels by car to Cornwall, where Mrs Benn now lives. The aim of this trip is, or so he believes, a professional one. Faced with a shortage of staff, Stevens intends to persuade Mrs Benn to return to her old position at Darlington Hall. Housman's journey is a boat trip in the company of Charon, the ferryman who ships the souls of the dead across the Styx to Hades. Evidently, this journey takes place entirely in the mind; it consists of memories and imaginings that take Housman back to earlier stages of his life, in particular to his undergraduate days at Oxford. Both Housman's and Stevens's thoughts revolve around a life they did not have, particularly around a relationship that did not come to fruition. In the case of Stevens, this is a relationship with Mrs Benn, who would have become Mrs Stevens had he responded to one of her many attempts to establish greater intimacy between them.⁸ In the case of Housman, it is a homosexual relationship with his university friend Moses Jackson, which was precluded primarily by the latter's heterosexuality but also by Housman's reticent and inhibited personality.

In my reading of Stoppard's play and Ishiguro's novel, I will first analyse how the unlived life is represented. What are the literary

modes and techniques used to evoke the lives that the characters did not have? Some answers to this question will be given in the second part. Another question, to be dealt with in the third and final part, concerns the gains which characters (as well as audiences) may reap from a preoccupation with unlived lives. One such gain is the self-knowledge that both Stevens and Housman attain. In addition to this common feature, however, there are also significant differences, which will be pointed out in the concluding paragraphs. Thus, the final part will do justice to the unique character of each text, while the following part will emphasise similarities rather than differences, treating both texts as representative examples that showcase typical techniques of evoking the unlived life.

2. Representing the Unlived Life

A first distinction that needs to be made is between *explicit* and *implicit* modes of representing the unlived life. An example of the explicit mode occurs in the climactic scene of Ishiguro's novel in which Stevens and Mrs Benn finally meet. It is Mrs Benn who openly refers to the life they might have shared:

'But that doesn't mean to say, of course, there aren't occasions now and then—extremely desolate occasions—when you think to yourself: "What a terrible mistake I've made with my life." And you get to thinking about a different life, a *better* life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr Stevens. [...]' (239; italics in the original)

An example of the implicit mode occurs in the final speech of Act I in Stoppard's play. Housman is teaching a Latin class at London University College: he is giving a translation and an analysis of Horace's ode 4.1, welcoming latecomers with sarcastic politeness ("good morning, you'll forgive us for starting without you" [48]) and pouring ridicule on the students' translations. The impression we get is that of a deeply embittered scholar who takes out his frustrations on

others. But towards the end of the speech the tone suddenly changes. What starts out as a sarcastic humiliation of the students turns into a moving evocation of love:

[N]ec vincire novis tempora floribus, rendered by Mr Howard as to tie new flowers to my head, Tennyson would hang himself—never mind, here is Horace not minding: I take no pleasure in woman or boy, nor the trusting hope of love returned, nor matching drink for drink, nor binding fresh-cut flowers around my brow—but—sed—cur heu, Ligurine, cur—

Jackson is seen as a runner running towards us from the dark, getting no closer.
—but why, Ligurinus, alas why this unaccustomed tear trickling down my cheek?—why does my glib tongue stumble to silence as I speak? At night I hold you fast in my dreams, I run after you across the Field of Mars, I follow you into the tumbling waters, and you show no pity.

Blackout. (49)

While giving a free translation of the final three stanzas of Horace's ode, Housman is also talking about himself. Like the speaker of the poem, who, at the age of fifty, is surprised by his passion for Ligurinus, the elderly Housman is overwhelmed by a powerful memory of the man he is still in love with. The image of Jackson, who is running towards us without getting closer, expresses the intensity of Housman's love but also its futility; the relationship with Jackson is imaginary, a life not lived.⁹

For reasons that will be explained below, implicit representations of the unlived life are much more frequent and characteristic than explicit ones. In the following pages, I will thus focus on the former, distinguishing six typical techniques or methods, which may be labelled as follows (in a list that is not exhaustive and only semi-systematic): *duality or division of character, metonymic memory, excessive repetition, foil character, projection, and symbolic analogue.*

A *duality or division of character* is pertinent in this context because a preoccupation with an unlived life often results from a choice or development that has allowed a character to develop only one of the two or more facets of his personality. The roads he or she did not take correspond to the facets that have been neglected or suppressed. Interestingly, Henry James's novella "The Jolly Corner," an intriguing

example of the unlived life, is also one of the classic examples of the doppelgänger motif; the double here represents the man the protagonist would have become had he stayed in New York instead of spending his life in Europe.¹⁰ The duality of Stoppard's protagonist is highlighted in a scene in which the undergraduate Housman talks to "AEH," his seventy-seven-year-old self, a scene that is a moving encounter between innocence and experience.¹¹ The duality is also alluded to in the opening exchange with Charon, who is waiting for a second passenger:

Charon. A poet and a scholar is what I was told.

AEH. I think that must be me.

Charon. Both of them?

AEH. I'm afraid so.

Charon. It sounded like two different people.

AEH. I know. (2)

The scholar Housman is associated with the lived life: a solitary life characterised by academic work and an almost pathological contempt for other human beings, in particular for students who cannot translate Horace and for fellow textual critics who do not meet his exacting scholarly standards. The poet Housman is associated with the unlived life. In his paraphrases of Latin love lyrics and in his own poems, he obliquely expresses his continuing love for Moses Jackson. Furthermore, the poet is born precisely at the fork in the road where Housman's and Jackson's ways part. The first of the many quotations from Housman's poems occurs after Jackson has realised that his friend is homosexual and after Housman has offered to move out of their common flat:

Housman.

He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?

He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.

I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder.

Light on AEH.

And went with half my life about my ways. (78)¹²

Housman and his life are divided. The half actually lived is the one that turns him into the old and embittered AEH, singled out by the stage lighting at this crucial moment; the other half, which must remain in the imagination, will stay with Jackson.

The method of *metonymic memory* takes the protagonist back to the time when the unlived life was still an option, when he or she was close to the fork in the road but had not yet chosen one of the two options. Such memories focus on episodes that reveal the potential for the unlived life, that show the character leaning very strongly in the direction of the road he or she failed to take. (The term *metonymic* has been chosen because the unlived life is a temporal, spatial or psychological extension of these memories, a chain of probable, if unrealised, consequences following from the remembered episode.) Ishiguro's Stevens, for instance, recalls an episode from the mid-thirties when Miss Kenton, the housekeeper who later becomes Mrs Benn, enters his office while he is immersed in a book. She asks him what he is reading, does not heed his repeated refusals to tell her, and eventually pries the book from his hand, getting so close to him that he feels as if "the two of us had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether" (167). She then finds out that the book is nothing but a sentimental love story. After expressing his disapproval of Miss Kenton's behaviour, the narrator Stevens explains his choice of reading matter, as he explains everything else, along professional lines. He claims that it allows him to combine relaxation with a lesson in elegant English, thus enabling him to use appropriate diction when he converses with ladies and gentlemen. The reader, however, interprets the episode differently: it reveals Stevens's longing for love in general and his desire for Miss Kenton in particular; her proximity triggers an erotic response whose true nature he does not seem to be aware of. The episode also reveals Miss Kenton's love for Stevens; it contains one of her many attempts to pierce his professional armour and to find the man inside the butler.

The episode is about reading in the literal sense and also about reading in a metaphorical sense. It shows how Stevens the narrator reads

Stevens the character. He consistently misinterprets himself, giving professional reasons for actions whose real motives are quite different. This is one of the reasons for his unreliability as a narrator, a topic that has received much attention in the critical studies of *The Remains of the Day*.¹³ It is also one of the reasons why the unlived life is represented implicitly rather than explicitly. As a character, Stevens rigorously represses any thought or feeling that goes against his role as a dignified butler. As a narrator, Stevens likewise resists any interpretation of his actions that might call his adherence to this role into question. In the words of Deborah Guth, "the text enacts memory as an ongoing act of repression, repeating in recall the same erasure of emotion that characterised the relationship [between Stevens and Miss Kenton] itself" (131). It is due to this ongoing act of repression and erasure that the narrator Stevens cannot dwell openly and explicitly on the relationship he did not have with Miss Kenton. The same forces that worked against the unlived life in the story are also present in the narrator's discourse, diverting the representation of the unlived life into the spaces between the lines. The unlived life is also an unspoken life and thus rendered implicitly rather than explicitly.

In connection with the role of repression in the representation of the unlived life, one should remember the Freudian commonplace that the repressed has a way of returning. This is the key to another method of hinting at the unlived life, the *excessive repetition* of references associated with it. Since the unlived life is frequently the object of a desire that remains repressed or at least unfulfilled, the desire will continue to exist, seeking some sort of outlet or expression. Repetition here indicates an excess of desire, an overflow of feeling that has never been translated into action. Thus, Stevens refers to Mrs Benn's letter time and again—one can almost see the butler holding it in his hands and cherishing the object that physically connects him with the woman he loves and with his past, constantly rereading her words and worrying about their precise meaning.

The best example of this kind of excessive repetition from Stoppard's play is, at the same time, an example of a metonymic memory

(Stoppard here combines two of the techniques that I have distinguished). While crossing the Styx, Housman and Charon come across three Oxford undergraduates: Housman's younger self, Moses Jackson and their friend Pollard. The three students have gone on a boating trip on the Thames and are having a very good time, especially Housman, who falls in love with Jackson on this very day, as we learn later on: "After that day, everything else seemed futile and ridiculous" (77). The boating trip is re-enacted time and again on the stage, with the three young men rowing in and out of the dying Housman's thoughts and memories, a poignant image of carefree camaraderie and happiness. The enormous significance that the trip has for Housman is pointed out by the discrepancy between his memory of the trip and that of the other two participants. Only a few years after the event, Housman has already persuaded himself that it occurred on a regular basis: "The three of us used to take a boat down to Hades, with a picnic" (66). Pollard, however, states that it happened only once, and the beloved Jackson seems to have forgotten the outing altogether (77).¹⁴

A fourth method of indicating the unlived life is to create *foil characters* who find themselves in a situation similar to that of the protagonist. Unlike the protagonist, however, the foil characters seize the day and take the plunge. Henry James's "Diary of a Man of Fifty," the first fully-fledged example of the motif that I am aware of, relies primarily on this method. The narrator, an elderly English general, is staying in Florence, where he befriends a young man, also English, who is courting a Florentine lady. This reminds the general of his own situation a generation ago, when he fell in love with the lady's mother but could not make up his mind to marry her. The general advises his countryman to follow his own example and renounce the lady, but the young man acts against this advice and marries her. The ending of the story suggests that the marriage is a happy one, which provides the general with a lot of food for second thoughts about his own decision and the life he missed.

Ishiguro creates a foil character of this kind in a young maid who, under Miss Kenton's supervision and guidance, develops her talents and seems to be headed for a housekeeper position when she suddenly elopes with the second footman, thus sacrificing her career prospects to a relationship (154-59). The foil character in *The Invention of Love* is Oscar Wilde. Housman and he are similar in many respects. Both are undergraduates at Oxford in the same period and brilliant classicists. Both write poems and have a talent for biting wit and satire. Both are painstaking searchers for the *mot juste* and even for the right punctuation mark: "Oh, I have worked hard all day—in the morning I put in a comma, and in the afternoon I took it out again!" (47). When this remark of Wilde's is quoted to him, Housman fails to see the joke; as a textual critic, he considers caring about commas utterly normal. Wilde, however, is also very different from Housman in that he dares to live out the longings and desires for other men that the latter bottles up within himself. Wilde's tragedy is not the tragedy of an unlived life, but of a life lived to the full. The contrast between the two characters is encapsulated in the following exchange from the final moments of the play when Wilde and Housman finally meet:

Wilde. [...] I had genius, brilliancy, daring, I took charge of my own myth. I dipped my staff into the comb of wild honey. I tasted forbidden sweetness and drank the stolen waters. I lived at the turning point of the world where everything was waking up new—the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman. Where were you when all this was happening?

AEH. At home.

(96-97)

The fifth method resembles the preceding one in that it involves other characters whose representation throws light on the protagonist and his or her unlived life. The method consists in the *projection* of one's regrets for an unlived life onto another person. This is what Stevens is doing in one of his many comments on Mrs Benn's letter. After perusing it yet again, he gives the following interpretation of her state of mind:

It is of course tragic that her marriage is now ending in failure. At this very moment, no doubt, she is *pondering with regret decisions made in the far-off past* that have now left her, deep in middle age, so alone and desolate. [...] Of course, Miss Kenton *cannot hope by returning at this stage ever to retrieve those lost years* [...]. But then Miss Kenton is an intelligent woman and she will have already realized these things. Indeed, all in all, I cannot see why the option of her returning to Darlington Hall and seeing out her working years there should not offer a very genuine consolation to *a life that has come to be so dominated by a sense of waste*. (48; my italics)

Stevens may not be entirely off the mark in his assumptions about Mrs Benn. From the quotation given at the beginning of section 2, we know that she sometimes thinks “about a different life, a *better* life [she] might have had” (239). But whatever their applicability to Mrs Benn, Stevens’s comments, in particular the italicised phrases, definitely have a bearing on himself and his unlived life. Incidentally, the fact that here and elsewhere he refers to Mrs Benn as “Miss Kenton” shows his vain “hope [...] to retrieve those lost years.” He thinks of her not as the woman who married Mr Benn, but as the woman who might have become Mrs Stevens.

Symbolic analogue, the sixth method, is not easily distinguished from the other five. All of these, being implicit or indirect renderings of the unlived life, are “symbolic” in a loose sense, especially a metonymic memory like the scene in Stevens’s office which evokes the potential for an unlived life without showing this life directly. The difference between the methods lies in the type of symbolism. In the case of metonymic memories this is based on contiguity; the unlived life is a hypothetical extension or effect of the remembered episode. In the case of symbolic analogues, the symbolism relies, as the term indicates, on analogy or similarity. Many of these analogues are related to the metaphor of life as a road or journey. On the first day of his trip to Cornwall, for instance, Stevens is taking a break when a stranger recommends that he walk up a footpath that branches off from the road and leads to a lookout. Significantly, the time span for taking this path is limited; the stranger himself is too old to manage the climb. Stevens is reluctant to deviate from his itinerary, but a remark made

by the stranger goads him into walking up the path, reaching the promised lookout and getting, for the first time, into the spirit of travelling and feeling liberated from the constraints and routines of Darlington Hall. What he also finds at the end of the path is the hope of renewing his relationship with "Miss Kenton"—a hope that is disguised, to be sure, as the solution of a professional problem: "And indeed, it was then that I felt a new resolve not to be daunted in respect of the one professional task I have entrusted myself with on this trip; that is to say, regarding Miss Kenton and our present staffing problems" (26).

A similarly symbolic incident does not involve a path or road but an unopened door. It occurs on an evening on which two important events coincide: Miss Kenton accepts Mr Benn's proposal, and Lord Darlington hosts a secret meeting between the British prime minister and the German ambassador. When Stevens is taking a bottle of port to the gentlemen, he stops before the door to Miss Kenton's room, convinced that she is crying. Stevens is "transfixed by indecision as to whether or not [he] should knock" (212). Is she really crying, regretting her rash decision to accept Mr Benn's proposal, or is Stevens only attributing his own regrets to her? There is no definite answer to this question. At any rate, the image of Mr Stevens standing, tray in hand, before a door to a different life is an emblem of his failure to seize the moment and of his future life after this moment, which he spends thinking about what was actually going on behind that door and what knocking on it might have led to.¹⁵

Another symbolic analogue is centered around Stevens's father, who, in his old age, has been hired as an under-butler at Darlington Hall. Like his son, he is deeply and exclusively devoted to his work and thus plunged into a deep crisis when he begins to fail in his professional tasks. His most dramatic failure occurs when he falls while carrying a heavily laden tray to the summerhouse, an incident that leads to a change in his duties. After this demotion, Stevens senior revisits the site of his fall and retraces his steps while his son and Miss Kenton are watching him from a window:

[T]he sun was still lighting up the far corner where the grass sloped up to the summerhouse. My father could be seen standing by those four stone steps, deep in thought. A breeze was slightly disturbing his hair. Then, as we watched, he walked very slowly up the steps. At the top, he turned and came back down, a little faster. Turning once more, my father became still again for several seconds, contemplating the steps before him. Eventually, he climbed them a second time, very deliberately. This time he continued on across the grass until he had almost reached the summerhouse, then turned and came walking slowly back, his eyes never leaving the ground. In fact, I can describe his manner at that moment no better than the way Miss Kenton puts it in her letter; it was indeed 'as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there.' (67)

The passage conveys the pitiable spectacle of a man who stubbornly refuses to accept his age and his physical decline. It also provides a symbolic analogue to what his son will be doing some thirty years later. Stevens will also retrace his steps, rehearse the past and search for a lost jewel—a life with the woman who is now watching this very scene with him.¹⁶

In *The Invention of Love*, the symbolic analogue centres on the ferry trip to Hades. Usually, this is a one-way journey, but Stoppard focuses on the rare cases in which someone goes down to the underworld to bring a beloved person back to the land of the living. On their boating trip, Housman claims that he has brought his two comrades up from Hades (14). Moreover, he repeatedly quotes from Horace's ode 4.7 (5, 39), which alludes to Theseus' vain attempt to reclaim his friend Pirithous:

AEH. My greatest friend and comrade Moses Jackson. '*Nec Lethea valet Theseus abrumpere caro vincula Pirithoo.*'

Charon. That's right, I remember him—Theseus—trying to break the chains that held fast his friend, to take him back with him from the Underworld. But it can't be done, sir. It can't be done. (5)

In a way, the entire play is based on this conceit. Like Theseus, who tries to bring back his comrade Pirithous from Hades, Housman travels through the underworld of his mind and his memories to resurrect his friend and to recover a missed life. Ultimately, this at-

tempt proves to be futile. When AEH, the seventy-seven-year-old Housman, addresses the young Jackson across the gap of time, exclaiming “Mo!” (4, 46), he receives no answer. Transforming the un-lived life into a lived life is as impossible as bringing a dead human being back to the realm of the living.

On occasion, Stoppard also seems to use textual criticism as a symbolic analogue. In connection with Housman’s editorial work on Latin texts, it is frequently pointed out how the extant works (or the extant versions of works) differ from those that might have, but did not, come down to us—just as the lived life differs from its hypothetical alternatives. When Pollard remarks that “the best survives because it is the best,” suggesting that the roads taken by the history of textual transmission are always superior to the roads not taken, Housman gives an eloquent plea for the works that might have survived but did not:

Have you ever seen a cornfield after the reaping? Laid flat to stubble, and here and there, unaccountably, miraculously spared, a few stalks still upright. Why those? There is no reason. Ovid’s *Medea*, the *Thyestes* of Varius who was Virgil’s friend and considered by some his equal, the lost Aeschylus trilogy of the Trojan war ... gathered to oblivion in *sheaves*, along with hundreds of Greek and Roman authors known only for fragments or their names alone—and here and there a cornstalk, a thistle, a poppy, still standing, but as to purpose, signifying nothing. (71-72; italics in the original)

In a related dialogue, Housman learns that Charon is familiar with Aeschylus’ *Myrmidones*, a play that has been lost except for the title and a few fragments. Fired up with excitement, he begs Charon to recall some of the actual words, to bring a lost play back to life. But like the retrieval of Pirithous or the recovery of the un-lived life, this “can’t be done.” As a figment of Housman’s imagination, Charon can remember no more than the fragments that Housman already knows. The variants of textual criticism are also mapped on to the roads taken and not taken in life in the dialogue between AEH and his younger self, in which AEH expresses a deep skepticism about the hypothetical alternatives to the lived life: “You think there is an answer: the lost

autograph copy of life's meaning, which we might recover from the corruptions that have made it nonsense. But there is no such copy, really and truly there is no answer" (41).¹⁷

3. Finding Meaning in the Unlived Life

To go by the protagonists of *The Remains of the Day* and *The Invention of Love*, the preoccupation with an unlived life is not exactly conducive to happiness. On the contrary, it would appear to be a backward-looking, unproductive and unhealthy activity. Instead of looking forward to the future, one becomes obsessed with the past; instead of embracing and shaping one's life, one succumbs to passivity and despair. Thus, the case against the preoccupation with an unlived life is easily made. However, can one also make a case *for* this preoccupation? Can characters gain anything from contemplating a hypothetical past?

One benefit that characters may reap is self-knowledge. Comparing the road they have taken with its hypothetical alternatives, they may arrive at a more complex and honest assessment of their lives. In the case of Stevens, the mere realisation that there was an alternative road is a huge step forward in his progress towards self-awareness. It seems that he comes to this realisation only in the course of his final meeting with Mrs Benn. Only when she openly refers to "a different life, a *better* life [...] I may have had with you, Mr Stevens" (239), does he become fully aware of the opportunity that he missed. This anagnorisis leads to a thorough self-examination. Stevens is beginning to have doubts about his ideals and about his identity, doubts that he expresses in the following words addressed to a fellow butler on the pier at Weymouth:

'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. [...] 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)

Stevens here questions his core values: loyalty to one's employer and professional dignity. He begins to realise that he has made himself in the image of others, primarily of his father and of his employer. His unlived life, the one that he has denied himself, is a life of his own.

In addition to increased self-knowledge, Stevens also reaps an emotional benefit from his realisation of an unlived life, a kind of catharsis that allows him—and also Mrs Benn—to release the repressed emotions of a lifetime. This occurs at the end of their meeting in Cornwall, in the course of which Stevens realises that Mrs Benn does not intend to leave her husband and that she will not return to Darlington Hall. At the end of the meeting, they are waiting for the bus which will take her back to Mr Benn. Thus they have only a few minutes together before they will part, presumably forever. Because of the crossroads associations of the bus stop, the scene is a highly symbolic one, a re-enactment of the parting that took place some twenty years ago. In one important respect, however, the scene deviates from the former parting. Stevens brings himself to ask whether Mrs Benn is mistreated in any way by her husband and why she has been, at least on occasion, unhappy in her marriage. For the first time in their relationship, Stevens transcends his professional role and shows an interest in her feelings. Mrs Benn interprets Stevens's questions as what they actually are, a declaration of love, and responds with her own declaration of love: the statement, already quoted, that she sometimes thinks about a life she might have had with him. The emotional release created by this mutual declaration of love is indicated by the tears in Mrs Benn's eyes when she steps onto the bus. Stevens describes his own feelings in his characteristically stilted manner, but at the end of the usual hesitations, qualifications and circumlocutions we find a statement that is as extraordinary by his standards as his questions about Mrs Benn's happiness: "[I]t took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreci-

ate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed—why should I not admit it?—at that moment, *my heart was breaking*” (239; my italics).

The confession of love is, however, retrospective. Coming twenty years too late, minutes before the final parting, it is exclusively a statement of feelings, not of a commitment. The feelings will not be translated into a shared life, and thus become all the more poignant and intense. This pattern—overwhelming emotion divorced from action—is reminiscent of eighteenth-century sensibility. Henry Mackenzie’s novel *The Man of Feeling*, published in the heyday of sensibility in 1771, provides an illuminating parallel to the scene at the bus stop. Harley, the man of feeling referred to in the title, is in love with a neighbour, a woman of feeling by the name of Miss Walton. But he declares his love for her, and she responds with an admission of hers for him, only when he is at death’s door. His declaration of love is made in his last words:

“I am in such a state as calls for sincerity [...] To love Miss Walton could not be a crime;—if to declare it is one—the expiation will be made.”—Her tears were now flowing without control.—“Let me intreat you,” said she, “to have better hopes—Let not life be so indifferent to you; if my wishes can put any value on it—I will not pretend to misunderstand you—I know your worth—I have known it long—I have esteemed it—What would you have me say?—I have loved it as it deserved.”—He seized her hand—a languid colour reddened his cheek—a smile brightened faintly in his eye. As he gazed on her, it grew dim, it fixed, it closed—He sighed and fell back on his seat—Miss Walton screamed at the sight [...]. Every art was tried to recover them—With Miss Walton they succeeded—But Harley was gone for ever. (92)

It is obvious that this scene has been constructed for maximum emotional release, on the part of the characters as well as on the part of the readers. We share the joy of Harley and Miss Walton, the immense gratification of a long-delayed declaration of mutual love. At the same time, we also feel the pleasurable pain of pity and mourning, the emotions most cultivated by the sensibility movement. We mourn not just a character but also a relationship that is cut off precisely at the moment of its inception.

Obviously, Mackenzie's engineering of emotions does not seem altogether credible and sincere. Tears, the epitome of the natural and the spontaneous, are all too visibly and artificially fabricated. Moreover, the complete divorce of emotion from action runs counter to the original impulse of the sensibility movement, which is ethical and altruistic. Although Ishiguro renders the parting of the lovers in a much more restrained manner than Mackenzie,¹⁸ he, too, lays himself open to criticism by using a rather contrived situation to create an emotional climax. He allows his character, to a certain extent at least, to undo the past and to recover the unlived life. Admittedly, Stevens and Mrs Benn cannot recuperate the relationship they did not have, but at least they can speak the words they did not speak. Other writers who have dealt with the unlived life have not allowed themselves such retrospective declarations of love, feeling, like Stoppard's Charon, that "it can't be done."

Like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, Housman in *The Invention of Love* also gains self-knowledge. What he primarily learns in his imaginary journeys down the roads he did not take is to understand and to accept his love for men. Thus, AEH rejects pejorative or euphemistic terms for this love in his conversation with his younger self: "Love will not be deflected from its mischief by being called comradeship or anything else" (43). The growth in Housman's self-awareness and self-acceptance is also shown by his changing attitude to Oscar Wilde. At one point in their undergraduate days, Pollard reports Wilde's newest *bon mot*, while Housman hardly listens, intent as he is on a boat race in which Jackson is participating (15-16). In a later conversation, he misunderstands the introduction of Wilde as a topic ("the fellow isn't worth the fuss" [55]), thinking the reference is to Horace and textual criticism. Thus, initially, Housman rejects or ignores Wilde, following the example of the homophobic Jackson, who considers Wilde an effeminate poser with suspicious sexual leanings (18, 55-57). Later on, however, Housman introduces Wilde as a topic into a discussion after the latter has been arrested (81-82). He also sends him

a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* (91) and has a long conversation with him towards the end of the play, imaginary of course (92-97).

In addition to helping Housman to know and to accept himself, the unlived life also strengthens him as an artist. Matthias Bauer points out precisely this aesthetic dimension of the motif in his introduction to a previous volume of this journal: “[A]ny imaginative or fictional literary representation is a ‘road not taken’ in that it shows us not what is but what might have been, or, in the words of Aristotle: ‘it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen [...]’ [*Poetics* section 9]” (2). Stoppard’s Housman is a case in point. As the play is set entirely in the theatre of his mind, he has the role of the Aristotelian poet, staging not only the events that happened, but also those that might have happened. In his final speech, Housman describes himself in precisely these terms, not as a character talking to another character but as a poet or director addressing the audience: “You should have been here last night when I did Hades properly—Furies, Harpies, Gorgons, and the snake-haired Medusa, to say nothing of the Dog” (102). As I pointed out above, 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 that he has shared with Jackson. In other words, the poet Housman is born when the unlived life with Jackson begins.

If, as the title of the play implies, love may be invented, life may be invented, too. The eloquent spokesman of such self-inventing and self-fashioning in Stoppard’s play is Oscar Wilde. In a characteristic series of paradoxes, he inverts the hierarchy between the lived life and the unlived life; values such as truth, reality and importance, which are generally associated with the former, are attributed to the latter. What emerges is a poetics of the unlived life in which it figures as the source of aesthetic freedom and creativity. Thus, Wilde argues in his exchange with Housman that “*biography is the mesh through which our real life escapes*. I was said to have walked down Piccadilly with a lily in my hand. There was no need. To do it is nothing, to be said to have

done it is everything. It is the truth about me" (93; my italics). In his final words in the play, he asserts that "[n]othing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance" (102). Thus, it hardly matters which road we actually choose. The road taken may be less significant than the road not taken. The life lived may be less real than the life not lived, the life that needs to be invented and imagined.

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NOTES

¹This essay was originally presented as a paper at the 10th International *Connotations* Symposium "Roads Not Taken," which took place in Freudenstadt in 2009. I would like to express my gratitude to Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker for organising this event, and to the participants for their responses to my paper. Thanks are also due to Sandra Lee, Lena Linne, Henrike Vahldieck, Sven Wagner and the *Connotations* reviewer for their comments on drafts of this essay.

²See Marie-Laure Ryan, who shows that such counterfactual plans or visions form an integral part of narrative plot; she also uses the category of counterfactuality to tackle the difficult question of what precisely the term *fiction* means.

³Seymour Chatman defines kernels as "branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths" (53). Chatman's term is based on Roland Barthes' "noyau"; see the latter's classic article "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits" (9).

⁴Edward Engelberg's *Elegiac Fictions: The Motif of the Unlived Life*, the only study of the motif that I am aware of, defines it much more broadly than I do. In addition to missed opportunities and alternative pasts, Engelberg also includes wasted, empty or meaningless lives. A second difference between his approach and mine results from his emphasis on psychology and philosophy; he shows no interest in the forms and techniques of representing the unlived life which will be discussed in the second part of this essay. Another relevant study is Hilary Dannenberg's *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*, which draws on narratological research as well as on philosophical and psychological contributions to possible-worlds theory. See in particular chapter 5, a theory of counterfactuality in fiction, and chapter 7, a history of counterfactuality from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* to Philip Roth's *The Plot against America*. As these titles indicate, Dannenberg's scope is much broader than my own; she includes brief references to an alternative course of events, "parahistories" or "uchronies" such as Roth's novel (i.e. works that chart an alternative course for real-world history) and also science fiction narratives that juggle with a plurality of alternative worlds. In another sense, Dannenberg is more restrictive; she limits her analysis to explicit references to counterfactuality, while I also acknowledge

implicit modes of representing the unlived life, which will be discussed at length in the second part of this essay. For a concise introduction to Dannenberg's ideas on counterfactuality and to the theory of possible worlds in narratology, psychology and philosophy, see her article published in 2000.

⁵At the *Connotations* Symposium in Freudenstadt (see n1) a discussion erupted about the respective merits of *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. Which of these two novels by Jane Austen is more relevant to the motif of the unlived life? To my mind, the answer depends on which aspect of the motif one is interested in. The plot of *Mansfield Park* differs from that of other novels by Austen in that it offers a greater degree of openness and contingency. 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). However, my interest is not in how probable an unlived life is, how close to becoming a lived life. My interest is rather in how prominently it figures in the narrative—hence the four criteria outlined above. A counterfactual plot development that is the subject of a character's sustained retrospective preoccupation will have a prominent place in the narrative, regardless of its likelihood. If one thinks of the motif in these terms, then *Persuasion* is the more rewarding text. The case for the relevance of *Mansfield Park* is made by Angelika Zirker in her contribution to the present volume.

⁶However, it is not inevitable that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, that the road not taken offers a more pleasant prospect than the road taken. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, the eponymous protagonist is preoccupied with the life she has not had with Peter Walsh; nevertheless, she thinks that she made the right choice in becoming Mrs Dalloway rather than Mrs Walsh, and the novel as a whole seems to support her opinion. See Dannenberg 112 for a related distinction, derived from psychological studies, between upward counterfactuals, which improve on the actual course of events, and downward counterfactuals, which are worse.

⁷Stoppard's interest in the motif of the unlived life is also shown by one of his (as yet) unrealised projects, which is pointed out by Ira Nadel in "Tom Stoppard and the Invention of Biography": "The one autobiographical play he considered writing was about the life he did not have: a fantasy autobiography about a Tomas who stayed in Czechoslovakia" (166).

⁸Despite its promising title, "Inside (Counter-)Factuality," Silvia Bigliuzzi's article about Ishiguro's novel does not deal with the motif of the unlived life. Instead, it presents a rather dense argument on the unreliability of the narrator, which I touch upon below (see n13).

⁹For a reading of this scene along similar lines, see Hans Ulrich Seeber 376-77 and Kenneth Reckford 130-31; Reckford, a classicist, provides a thorough analysis of Stoppard's use of motifs and texts from classical literature.

¹⁰On "The Jolly Corner" and the unlived life, see the essays by Elena Anastasaki and Edward Lobb in *Connotations* 18.1-3.

¹¹On the duality of Stoppard's protagonist, see Borgmeier 155-56, Mader 70-74, and Südkamp 214-20.

¹²The poem is No. VII in the "Additional Poems" published by Housman's brother one year after his death; see Housman 222.

¹³See, for instance, Kathleen Wall, whose article on *The Remains of the Day* helped to ignite the current discussion of unreliability among narratologists; a recent, very thorough contribution to this debate and to the analysis of Stevens in Ishiguro's novel is made by James Phelan 31-65.

¹⁴The outing of the three undergraduates is curiously similar to another literary evocation of a road not taken. In Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, the most powerful image of the un-lived life is also a metonymic memory of a boating trip. Furthermore, the memory recurs more than once because Krapp repeatedly rewinds the tape to hear the passage describing the scene in the boat.

¹⁵The incident is referred to several times in the novel. At first, Stevens states that it occurred after the death of Miss Kenton's aunt, but later he changes his mind and tells us that it took place on the evening on which she had accepted Mr Benn's proposal, thus sealing her decision to leave Darlington Hall and Stevens (176, 212, 226). The different reasons that Stevens gives for Miss Kenton's grief in his two accounts of the incident create a connection, also present in the previous episode of the death of Stevens's father, between mourning for a deceased person and regretting an un-lived life. This connection is also drawn, with regard to other texts, by Engelberg, who, in the title of his book about the motif of the un-lived life, refers to works dealing with this motif as "elegiac."

¹⁶See also Deborah Guth, who considers the entire narrative a "mirror image" of this scene (133).

¹⁷For a related reading of the passages on textual criticism, see Südkamp, who connects Housman's search for the true text with the questioning of biographical truth in the play (227-33).

¹⁸Stevens's tears come as a delayed reaction, in his talk with the fellow butler at Weymouth, as his tears did in earlier episodes (105, 243). In the scene at the bus stop, Stevens does not reveal to Mrs Benn that his heart is breaking. Instead, he maintains his usual self-restraint and advises her, "'You really mustn't let any more foolish ideas come between yourself and the happiness you deserve'" (240). For an appraisal of different views of Stevens's behaviour in this scene, see Phelan 53-65: the butler's self-restraint may be viewed as a relapse into wrong-headed pretence or, alternatively, as an act of unselfishness that allows Mrs Benn to move on in her life without feelings of guilt or regret.

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