The Remains of the Day or a case of obsessional neurosis

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We'd like to take a slightly different look at James Ivory's fine 1993 film The Remains of the Day (based on Kazuo Ishiguro's book of the same name). It seems to us that this film is an extremely precise staging of an obsessive subject.

The doxa of the day, with the emergence of the category of "obsessive-compulsive disorder", forces us to consider the obsessive as a person beset by doubt, compulsion, rituals, tics and so on. But these are basically just a series of symptoms, more or less present, more or less obvious, which then only foments a rather flat phenomenology of what it's really all about. In Les vestiges du jour, on the other hand, we seem to have direct access to the being of an obsessive subject. What we're dealing with here, then, is a kind of ontology of the obsessional subject.

The film's central character, butler James Stevens, is a typical example of what it means for a subject to choose obsessive neurosis. That, at least, is our hypothesis. To put it bluntly, for such a subject, it's about nothing more and nothing less than shaping his desire under the incessant demand of the Other. What's the point? Simply to conceal, to make disappear, to mortify as much as possible his own desire. In other words, for the neurotic obsessive, it's a matter of never being there at all. Suffice it to say that such a subject tirelessly advances only in a highly masked fashion.

To put our hypothesis into perspective, and for the sake of clarity, we'll proceed as follows: we'll provide keys that may give access to the shape of an obsessional subject's being, traits that are extremely general, but which we'll systematically bring to light thanks to the exposition we've been given of Stevens' singular life. In this way, we hope, we'll flesh out the concepts, add an ounce of warmth to their stellar coldness, and introduce a grain of singularity at every turn. Exactly the opposite of the obsessed, we'll try to take sensations and emotions into account as much as possible, always wary of the signifier, and thus placing desire far ahead of demand.

It goes without saying that James Stevens - Anthony Hopkins, brilliant in the role - is particularly sensitive to the slightest request from the Other. A demand he often anticipates, always with pertinence, making him the perfect butler. If anything, he's the very type of butler. In any case, when it comes to requests, everything goes well

for him. Stevens likes to obey, to be told what to do. He knows how to delegate, and how to do it well, so that the staff in his charge always get things done quickly and efficiently. He loves his job to death. So it's never him who causes his behavior. It's "the master's speech", literally, that dictates it - or at least he can make people believe it, and even, above all, believe it himself. The profession of butler is, in fact, one of those jobs where a number of extremely codified rules govern a whole set of protocols, which must be meticulously respected, and where no false note is accepted. The role is defined down to the smallest detail, and the watchwords are "respect and dignity". There are rules, immutable, eternally defined and to be followed whatever their merits. It goes without saying that you don't excel in this line of work by chance. James Stevens finds himself, in any case, like a fish in water.

However, things quickly become complicated when it comes to the desire of the Other. A desire he does everything in his power to avoid, never to encounter. And that's where the disruptive element comes in (right in the middle of the film), with the appearance of a woman's determined desire. Miss Kenton, the housekeeper (Emma Thompson on screen), falls in love with Stevens, and soon declares her love for him explicitly. This is not without many hints, all tinged with the subtle discretion of the feminine when it comes to expressing her desire. There's a kiss almost consummated, in a proximity at last opportune, from which Stevens for once cannot escape. The butler becomes frightened, confused, agitated and angry, doing everything in his power to escape this all-too-direct confrontation with such a manifestation of a woman's desire. It's as if the Other, when he desires, is attacking his very being.

His desire remains, and must remain, totally mortified. He will thus remain an old boy all his life, keeping his desire for women mortified. Stevens is not even "women's friend"; he is their benevolent butler. The scene in which the young housekeeper Miss Kenton, in tears, lies on the floor in the room Stevens enters, is thus terrifying: the butler remains unmoved by the grief he himself has caused. No emotion will be expressed, everything will remain repressed: he had only come to tell her that a misplaced object had to be put back in its rightful place. Any disorder can be rectified with the right calculation, and good will is all that's needed. For the obsessive, others, like him, would have to turn out to be mere machines. He represses his affects so much that he can no longer feel empathy. It's not that he's not sensitive to the misfortune of others - the obsessive is not a monster. But it's simply that, locked up so tightly and for so long in their impregnable fortress, an ounce of empathy as soon as it erupts will immediately be chased away by a severe and constant repression. In the same way, he shows no emotion at all when his father dies, not because he didn't love him, not because he didn't feel anything - his confusion is palpable - but because, once again, in an almost Pavlovian way, he represses all affect from the moment they are born.

The show must go on, the train of things must go on: let's stifle the grief and get back to the request of the Other: a guest is in urgent need of hot water for his aching feet. And when those around him become aware of his trouble, which this time is too deep to be completely concealed and questioned: "Are you sure you're all right?", the

answer was nothing more than a calm and flat, most disaffected: "Yes, I'm perfectly fine, thank you, sir. It's been hard work.

By dint of never having to come to terms with a frank desire, and systematically masking it as such, the obsessive Stevens comes to understand nothing. He no longer knows what to do with desire, and can no longer hear its song. A song that can often only be heard between the lines. The only thing that counts is the statement, and Stevens remains purely and simply deaf to all enunciation. To reduce demand to desire is a heavy price to pay. So, when his master half-heartedly asks him to say a few words to his godson, who is about to get married, i.e. to tell him something about what desire is for a man, Stevens understands nothing, and takes it literally, going so far as to tell the young man about "the luxuriance of nature". The young man, a young fiancé, will understand afterwards what Stevens won't even know he's told him - that he's told him something about the famous "spring awakening".

The obsessive is not a psychopath or an anti-social person, quite the contrary. The other does exist for him, and as an alter ego. He feels emotions and can easily put himself in the other person's shoes. It's just that he represses all affect as much as he can. That's why he's always masked, a master in the art of concealment. Lacan spoke of "the smuggling of desire in the obsessional subject". He smuggles his desire under the cloak. Desire is not absent in him, it's simply hidden. Miss Kenton makes no mistake about it, and she's a woman in her own right: "Why is it, Mr. Stevens, that you hide your feelings? At no point is she fooled. Stevens isn't a cold monster incapable of feelings, he just has to take great care to constantly conceal them. In fact, for reasons of economy, he often prefers to flee the encounter with his desire rather than have to repress it. He avoids contact with beautiful women, for example - again, the perceptive housekeeper Miss Kenton will point this out to him, and rightly so.

Nevertheless, Stevens' constant avoidance of desire leads him to constantly cancel himself out. Indeed, there can be no real life without desire, which is "the very essence of man". "To give one's whole heart to one's master, that is what makes a man complete", says the butler. A maxim apparently shared by his father, who told a gathering of all the servants that "what makes a butler great is his dignity". Dignity means conforming to the very type of butler, to the point of erasing the man beneath the function.

As Lacan put it, the obsessive's avoidance of desire can lead to its outright annulment. What else is the goal for such a subject if not to avoid castration anxiety? Anxiety that is literally unbearable for him. So, in a way, he precedes the event, giving his imaginary castration to the Other on a platter. A meticulous, scrupulous and sublime abnegation, in which the Father, the Master, the Institution, or the Party, prevails over his own being. To make oneself the answer to demand, in order to annul one's own desire, such is its purpose. What is the goal? That he can never be blamed for his desire. For him, in fact, desire is fantasized as nothing more and nothing less than a terrible prohibition. It must therefore be masked at all costs. In other words, the obsessive strives to count for nothing. He lives his life under the

gaze of an Other whom he considers ideal, and to whom he gives "his whole heart". This ideal Other, in Stevens' case his master, he sees as flawless. He is unable to see that the Other is barred, perforated, that he too is lacking. What's more, in his belief in the flawless Other, he doesn't even leave himself room, as would be perfectly logical, to realize that this Other, even if he existed, if he consisted as he saw him, would nevertheless be far too busy with his own Other to be able to think about him. No matter how much they may want to, obsessional subjects, like all subjects when it comes to fulfilling a function, are perfectly replaceable. Anyone can learn to respond to demand in the most appropriate way - it's a matter of willpower and hard work.

Nevertheless, Stevens is sometimes unable to suppress his emotion. In spite of himself, a bit of life escapes from him. An emotion will then appear, and with force, but at a time and about an object that has nothing to do with its real source. Not having been able to close his father's eyes himself, not having allowed himself the slightest outpouring in front of his father's lifeless body, he nonetheless goes on a rant a few moments later when he has simply dropped a bottle. There's a displacement here. What is a broken bottle compared to the death of a father?

In this way, the compunction, the often exquisite and refined politeness of the obsessive subject, sometimes masks, by displacement and reversal into its opposite, a strong aggressiveness. Sometimes, the cup overflows, and it's a noisy, ferocious explosion of fierce anger that occurs. Stevens is very much in this position, where desire is reduced to demand. He wouldn't hurt a fly, but only on condition that the Other, in return, doesn't desire him, contenting himself at most with making demands. The Other must thus remain, if not predictable, at least calculable. What the obsessive cannot tolerate, what he shuns above all else, is the unexpected, the impromptu event that pops up without warning and is often nothing more than a sudden, spontaneous manifestation of desire. The desire of the Other is extremely dangerous for the obsessed, who sees it as a threat to the very survival of his being.

The misfortune of such a subject, however, is to be acutely aware of the prison in which he has forced himself to live. Anticipating his own death to cut short the anguish he feels more than anyone else at knowing himself to be perishable, he has frozen his desire. In this way, he avoids anguish, but in exchange, he misses out on his life.

his life. Indeed, he was never there, and his last glance can only be tinged with a deep, bitter melancholy.

This magnificent film, *The Remains of the Day* - a title whose meaning we can now better understand, since it was in fact about exposing a past life in a dimension of frozen eternity, of eternalized and mortified time, which only obsessive desire allows, magnificently annulling itself - nevertheless conceals a fundamental trait very often present in the obsessive subject, and which consists in asking himself the question which is for him the fundamental question: "Could the Other possibly miss me? This translates into thoughts revolving around the subject's own death, staging his own funeral for example. He wonders whether he will finally be missed, and by whom. It's not whether he'll miss others that's important to such a being, since he never misses anything. Having taken care to annul all desire within himself, castration is for him a phantasmatic impossibility; it's knowing whether he himself could miss the Other that's important. Is Stevens indispensable to his successive masters? The film doesn't say. Nevertheless, the butler's first master, Lord Darlington, did not miss him in the least, even though he speaks of him faithfully, honoring his memory, when he comes across a curious young doctor who asks about him.

But wasn't this, once again, responding to demand, being a faithful person, responding to the codified ideals of his function, responding simply as propriety dictates, the eternal and timeless bien-pensance? Let's face it: he doesn't miss his masters. The obsessive never has to mourn.