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Contemporary Japanese Literature in Its Transition Towards the New Postmodern Humanism: Haruki Murakami

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Abstract

Although Japan recorded no specific literary movement in the 1980s, in any classical sense of the term, we may say that today we are witnessing, in terms of our historical sensibility, a condensation of narrative viewpoints upon the present or, in other words, the transposition of the criteria of the present to another time, which is undoubtedly a consequence of the so-called “postmodern” will to reject grand narratives. This study aims to review and complete the inventory of the postmodern characteristics that specialised literature has identified in Haruki Murakami’s works, seen from the perspective of what the author of the present paper considers to be the “new postmodern humanism.”

Keywords: transition, postmodernism, new humanism, contemporary Japanese literature

Izveček

Čprav v Japonska 80. letih 20. stoletja ni zabeležila nobenih specifičnih literarnih gibanj, v kakršnemkoli klasičnem pomenu besede, lahko rečemo, da smo danes, v smislu zgodovinske senzibilnosti priča kondenzaciji pripovednih pogledov na sedanost, ali drugače rečeno, transpozicijo kriterija sedanosti na drugi čas, ki je brez dvoma posledica tako imenovane »postmoderne« volje po zavrnitvi velikih pripovedi. Ta študija preučuje in dopolnjuje popis postmodernih značilnosti, ki jih je specializirana literatura identificirala v delih Harukija Murakamija, gledano iz stališča, ki ga avtor sam imenuje “novi postmoderni humanizem”.

Ključne besede: tranzicija, postmodernizem, novi humanizem, sodobna japonska literatura

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*“Clouds make rain, and rain makes clouds.
The environment makes man,
and man makes the environment.”*
—*Multiple Designs* by Kobayashi Hideo 1995

1 Introduction

The literature of an epoch may be said to capture not only the present of creation, but also the present of culture, retrieving thus, a certain face of the past, as preserved in the memory of posterity or as resuscitated by that particular epoch; in this sense, Japanese postmodernism appears today both as a “return to Japan,” or a *rethinking* of traditional Japan, and as the expression of the need for “internationalism,” for assimilating new international cultural forms. Against this background, Haruki Murakami may be read as an emblematic author of his time, being considered a Japanese writer who has managed to swiftly assimilate and adapt the postmodern literary practices, *overcoming* the cultural frontiers that Japanese traditionalism has strictly enforced throughout time.

Founded on the aesthetics of the fragment, on the art of sight and, generally, of perception, postmodern fiction captures, in anti-mimetic manner, the difficulty of perceiving and understanding the contemporary world: it conveys a disquieting state of incompleteness deriving from the equally disquieting characteristics of the surrounding universe. Contemporary writers may also invent new meanings in the world and create new myths of completeness and determination.

An excellent observer of daily life, but also a subtle analyst of the banal and the commonplace, Haruki Murakami grounds his literary work on detailed knowledge of the mythology of the ordinary, whence he extracts cases that become relevant and emblematic, due to either internal or external circumstances. Living in sync with his time, Haruki Murakami tries to reveal this simultaneity and concomitance. He is a contemporary man who attempts to survive the alienation of his own epoch.

Haruki Murakami’s option for literature is similar to a rite of passage comprising three dialectical moments: desire, search, and overcoming failure. The desire to write is followed by a period of experiencing literature, when he moves from fascination to deception. Like any initiation journey, which is waylaid by darkness, delusions and downfalls, Murakami’s “progress through literature” has

occasioned him to encounter both full admiration (for Western literature) and contestation (of Japanese literature), an experience the writer has overcome by discovering a *new humanism*, focused upon the human being, who is grasped in the most concrete, physical-sensorial functions, *here* and *now*, but also upon moments of lights and shadows, pointing towards the realm of *beyond*.

2 The Postmodern Literature in Japan

The development of postmodern Japanese literature was occasioned by the gradual disappearance of influential models: Junichirō Tanizaki in 1965, Yukio Mishima in 1970, Naoya Shiga in 1971 and Yasunari Kawabata in 1972. Even if after Kawabata's demise the modern tradition of "pure" literature could still be sensed in the works of writers like Masuji Ibuse, Kōbō Abe and Kenji Nakagami, after their death (Nakagami in 1992, Ibuse and Abe in 1993), Kenzaburō Ōe was the only one left to defend this type of literature, which amounted to "teaching" rather than to "entertainment" (Strecher 1998b, 373).

Therefore, Japanese postmodernism appears, on the one hand, as a "return to Japan," namely the "return to Japan" as described in Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country*, with its world being limited to *feeling* (Beauty), and, on the other hand, it verges on "internationalism" (Karatani 1989, 45), given its attempt to lay the foundation of *feeling* (Beauty) at the junction between *knowledge* (Truth) and *will* (Good). Haruki Murakami once confessed that as a child he had rejected the idea of becoming a writer after having read Tanizaki and Kawabata, whom he saw as holding literature "in good hands" (Strecher 1998b, 375); however, today he is considered to be the author who has brought postmodern Japanese literature to the forefront of contemporary critical appraisal.

Kenzaburō Ōe considered that "pure" literature must have a certain social responsibility and should essentially be a didactic model, an attitude which has, to some extent, prevented the development of postmodern literature in Japan (Strecher 1998b, 372). He stated once that Haruki Murakami's work failed in its attempt to address the intellectuals, in a broad sense, since it did not succeed in providing "models" for the present and the future of Japan (Rubin 1992, 499). In a similar manner, the critic Masao Miyoshi dismisses Haruki Murakami, accusing him of displaying an exotic Japan, "in an international version for foreign purchasers," which discourages any attempt to approach his work critically, with

possibly only a few exceptions: “only a very few would be silly enough to get interested in deep reading” (Miyoshi 1989, 153).

However, without paying any tribute to concession, Haruki Murakami remains interested in describing a society that is obsessed with comfort, renewal, and crazy consumption, a society experiencing convalescence after the demise of great ideas and ideals, sickened by overproduction, a society whose connection with the past and tradition is getting weaker and weaker, which engenders a sense of loss that is connoted negatively, as the source of both pessimism and nostalgia.

The Japanese generation of the 1980s, whose representatives include Haruki Murakami, faced the necessity to chart new pathways into the novelistic space, by either approaching new themes or attempting to explore new territories. Postmodernism, which appears as a result of the phenomena generated by the society of information, and is seen as the cultural logic of late capitalism, determines a split in the unity of personality and gives rise to an identity crisis. Moving the emphasis from centrality to marginality is likely to confuse values, cultivate indeterminacy, overbid relativism and foster continuous de-structuring. Nothing is stable any longer, anything is possible and may evolve in any direction: *shōsetsu*, the Japanese type of novelistic creation, becomes, to some extent, more similar to “annals” than to “narrative history” (Miyoshi 1989, 153):

Without doubt, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle #8* was a story told by Cinnamon. He had put sixteen stories into the computer under the title *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and it just so happened that I had chosen and read #8. Judging from the length of one story, sixteen such stories would have made a fairly thick book if set in type. What could “#8” signify? The word “chronicle” in the title probably meant that the stories were related in chronological order, #8 following #7, #9 following #8, and so on. That was a reasonable assumption, if not necessarily true. They could just as well have been arranged in a different order. They might even run backward, from the present to the past. A bolder hypothesis might make them sixteen different versions of the same story told in parallel. [...] I had no way of telling how much of the story was true. Was every bit of it Cinnamon’s creation, or were parts of it based on actual events? [...] Still, it was conceivable that some of the details were based on historical facts. [...] From the stories he had heard repeatedly from his mother, he derived further stories in an attempt to re-create the enigmatic figure of his grandfather in a new setting. He inherited from his mother’s stories the fundamental style he used, unaltered, in his own stories: namely, the assumption that a *fact may not be truth, and truth may not be factual*. (Murakami 1997, 350–351)

The rhizomatic logic which characterises postmodern narrative is governed by the principle of “connection” and “heterogeneity,” which means that any point on the rhizome may be linked to anything else:

As he began to understand language, Cinnamon asked me to tell him the story again and again. I must have told it to him a hundred, two hundred, five hundred times, but not just repeating the same thing every time. Whenever I told it to him, Cinnamon would ask me to tell him some other little story contained in the main story. He wanted to know about a different branch of the same tree. I would follow the branch he asked for and tell him *that* part of the story. And so the story grew and grew. In this way, the two of us went on to create our own interlocking system of myths. (Murakami 1997, 297)

It reunites disconnected forces and impulses, which are not only distinct, but may also originate from completely different orders. Moreover, the rhizome never builds permanent structures, but perceives the life of things as a continuous change, as a permanently renewed “movement” away from fixed forms and towards new possibilities. The rhizome operates through variation, expansion, conquest or interception.

A rhizomatic perspective does not allow for a complete separation of things. Accordingly, Haruki Murakami perceives the world as being composed of organised bodies which, paradoxically, are reminiscent of “the body without organs,” as the foundation of forms of organisation:

“Who are you?” I asked. The faceless man handed me the flashlight as if passing a baton. “I am the hollow man,” he said. Faceless face toward me, he waited in the darkness for me to speak, but I could not find the right words. (Murakami 1997, 384)

Haruki Murakami belongs to the generation of writers of the 1980s, who intended to capture the electrical and eclectic style of the life of Japan’s great cities. (Strecher 1998b, 354) His postmodern fiction tries to express, in anti-mimetic fashion, the difficulty of perceiving and understanding the world, outlining a disquieting state of incompleteness that derives from the equally disquieting characteristics of the surrounding universe. (Pavel 1989) Through his creation, which promotes the aesthetics of the fragment, the art of sight and the art of perception, of aural perception in particular, Haruki Murakami considers himself to be, first and foremost, a Japanese writer:

The opinion that my books are not really Japanese seems to me to be very shallow. I certainly think of myself as being a Japanese writer. I write with a

different style and maybe with different materials, but I write in Japanese and I'm writing for Japanese society and Japanese people. So I think people are wrong when they are always saying that my style is really mainly influenced by Western literature. As I just said, at first I wanted to be an international writer, but eventually I saw that I was nothing but a Japanese writer. But even in the beginning I wasn't only borrowing Western styles and rules. I wanted to change Japanese literature from the inside, not the outside. So I basically made up my own rules. (Gregory 2002, 115)

The evolution of his work in modernity could be compared to the trajectory of Zenon from Elea's arrow, which *vibrates, flies yet it does not fly at all*, in other words, it hints at no objective destination.

Contemporary writers may invent new meanings in the world and may create new myths of completeness and determination. Speaking about his generation colleagues, Banana Yoshimoto and Ryū Murakami, Haruki Murakami (Gregory 2002, 116) appreciates the honesty they write with, their letting loose of any tormenting thoughts or emotions experienced about the new world of Japan today. This is also what preoccupies *boku*, the protagonist from Haruki Murakami's debut novel, *Kaze no uta o kike* (1979) (*Hear the Wind Sing!*). For him, writing has become a way of life, attempting to salvage, through his own language, a strip of the real. However, sincerity in writing is by no means easy to achieve, not only because of the desire to conceal the truth at times, but also given the difficulty of reaching the linguistic accuracy necessary to reproduce precisely the authenticity of living and feeling:

Still, it's awfully hard to tell things honestly. The more honest I try to be, the more the right words recede into the distance, I don't mean to rationalize, but at least this writing is my present best. There's nothing more to say. And yet I find myself thinking that if everything goes well, sometime way ahead, years, maybe decades from now, I might discover at last that efforts have been my salvation. (Murakami 1994, 6)

In Haruki Murakami's fiction, modernity relies on assuming the real and exerting the rights of an unlimited subjectivity: "But you don't belong to that world, sorry. The world you belong to is above that or below that." (Murakami 1997, 37) Selfhood has imposed itself vigorously, but has been contested as well, to the point of identifying with alterity. Postmodernism entails change, but also seeks a synthetic, integrative vision of the world, which is momentarily marked by uncertainty. In a context where history is threatened by the loss of meaning, everything must be reconsidered with a view to providing memory with a new

self-image and fostering a new project of reconstruction and prospection. This is the moment of a dialectics of the “eternal present,” of the relativity of knowledge, of lags, dissymmetry, the pluralism of interpretations, fragmentariness and discontinuity, the de-ideologisation of discourses.

The characters from Haruki Murakami’s first novels seem, indeed, to lack social commitment and the awareness of belonging to a place, but they evolve and turn from isolation and social irresponsibility to political and civic consciousness. Similar to *boku* from the novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, whose shadow was let loose, Haruki Murakami also seemed, at the time of his debut, to be much more detached from the culture and society that had created him:

I don’t write political novels—or at least when I write I don’t think of politics except subconsciously. But I agree with you that all my books, even the early ones, have all involved political factors; it’s just that these factors were never treated directly. So these political issues were present in my books only in the background; even though it is undeniable that politics and economics have helped produce the circumstances that my characters find themselves in, I have never been interested in writing about such things directly. (Gregory 2002, 117)

One more point about writing. And this will be the last. For me, writing is extremely hard work. There are times when it takes me a whole month just to write one line. Other times I’ll write three days and nights straight through, only to have it come out all wrong. Nonetheless, writing can also be fun. Compared to the sheer difficulty of living, the process of attaching meanings to life is altogether clear sailing. (Murakami 1994, 9)

On attempting to surpass the traditional judgement that has always surrounded terms like “serious” and “popular,” “mimesis” and “formulaic” (“full of formulae, clichés”), postmodernism illustrates the idea that the *entire* literature is just a continuum between the two poles of inventiveness and conventionalism: “Of course, the mimetic and the formulaic represent two poles that literary works lie somewhere between.” (Strecher 1998b, 356) Haruki Murakami plays a sort of structuralist game with his readers, as he creates texts that are obviously “formulaic,” although displaying goals and results that are truly “postmodern” in nature.

Haruki Murakami also becomes postmodern by reshaping the concept of “freedom,” which, he argues, is not “natural” or “true” for human nature, but represents an ideal, an intellectual construct.

The predictability of a formula—"I'm very interested in structure," Haruki Murakami admits (Gregory 2002, 113)—such as the adventure novel, the SF novel or the love story, juxtaposed with the unpredictability of the contemporary world, in other words, the infusion of mimetic in what is, by definition, non-mimetic literature may help Haruki Murakami's fiction transcend, in a "postmodern" direction, the aesthetic canons which delineate "pure" from "consumerist" literary creation: "(...) in this combination of the mimetic and the formulaic, and consequently of 'high art' and 'mass culture', Murakami produces a quintessentially postmodern tone in his literature." (Strecher 1998b, 370)

More exactly, the Japanese author's writing does not fail to achieve "pure" literature (*junbungaku*), but suspends the opposition, affixed at the beginning of the twentieth century in Japan, between "high" and "mass" literature (*taishū bungaku*).

Conveying meaning that is concealed between the lines, sometimes rather difficult to decipher, and at other times displaying "story-less stories," Haruki Murakami's fiction fascinates because it oversteps the boundaries of the world we call "real," moving beyond into a surreal and even hyperreal world: "Murakami experiments with language, genre, realism, and fantasy, in order to explore the outer limits of postmodern expression." (Strecher 1998b, 356) Postmodern literature is characterised not only by a paradoxical reclusion in the area of silence, but also by complementary displacement into unidentified regions of the fantastic.

Haruki Murakami's literary creation focuses upon the problem of achieving a valid form of the self in a fictional world where it becomes ever harder for oneself to arrive at self-definitions. The "normal" condition of the postmodern man, this "weak being," as Nietzsche might call him, is to be located in a world where intensified communication (liberated either at the "technical" or at the "political" level) opens a gateway towards an actual experience of individuality as multiplicity. In this context, the Japanese writer's novel provides the imaginary with a formal caution against the real, imparting it at the same time with the ambiguity of a double sign, both real and verisimilar, since it is believed that "the true is supposed to contain a germ of the universal or, to put it differently, an essence capable of fecundating by mere reproduction several orders of things among which some differ by their remoteness and some by their fictitious character." (Barthes 1987, 56) The mission of literature becomes thus to put on a mask and designate it at the same time. To create fiction is, in fact, a way of

cluding reality and especially of annulling the notion that reality is truth. Consequently, fiction could also entail the creation of an autonomous reality, after the model of the real world and still different from the latter. The reference is specific: it may be that of self-referentiality or of internal reference, as opposed to external reference. Haruki Murakami's fictional worlds replace the illusion of knowing the reality "here" with the dreaming of another world, from "beyond." No longer decorative or prudent, the humanism of the postmodern age proposes a different moral of the "joy of living." The new humanism no longer loves man against his body, the spirit against its language, values against facts, but speaks in a sober and chaste tone about man and about spirit, about the way in which man and spirit emerge through the movement whereby "the body becomes gesture, language becomes creation, and coexistence becomes truth." (Eco 1989, 272)

Lifted from the abyss in which thought seemed to soar gleefully above words, the Japanese novel writing of the twentieth century passed through all the stages of gradual solidification: it was at first an object of sight (Yasunari Kawabata), then of action (Kenzaburō Ōe) and, eventually, of crime (Yukio Mishima), experiencing a new avatar today: absence (Haruki Murakami). In this last type of writing, characterised as "neutral" and also called "writing degree zero," one may easily detect a tendency towards negation and the incapacity to fulfill it continuously, (See Barthes 1987, 52) as if, having attempted for an entire century to relocate its contours into a shape with no ancestry, literature would only be able to find its purity in the absence of any sign, in white writing.

What does Haruki Murakami represent for contemporary Japanese prose? An apathetic observer who over the years has become an ever more active participant in political and social life. A writer who has erased the border delineating the "high" and the "pure," traditionally characterising Japanese literature, and had made the "common" and the "ordinary" possible thematic "pretexts" for literary creation in the novelistic genre. This does not mean, however, that Haruki Murakami only writes about quotidian experience. As a matter of fact, his performance resides in trying to grant every moment its price, in the hope that there is always something "beyond" appearances. This is not the extinction of a tradition, but perhaps its rebirth: "Far from heralding the death-knell of Japanese culture, we might choose to view this merely as a new chapter in the fascinating story of Japan's cultural evolution." (Strecher 1998a, 69)

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