MURAKAMI HARUKI: THE PROBLEM OF GENRE

A Thesis

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Languages and Literatures
To My Parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Now that the final whistles and bells are on the thesis, I sit back, turn off the Anton Bruckner tape I have listened to for weeks, and breathe the late May air. And I thank a few people, now that the tape is off and the project is done, for their generous expenditure of time, and energy, and talent on my behalf.

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INTRODUCTION

Murakami Haruki's sales are astronomical for a writer of serious fiction in Japan. Four million two-volume sets of Noruwei no mori (Norwegian Wood, 1987) have been sold.¹ His Zen sakuhin (Complete Works, 8 volumes) were published in 1990-1991, and there have been over twelve book-length studies and innumerable articles, stories, book reviews, interviews and essays written about him.² In 1985, Murakami's earliest entry into Japan's bestseller charts, Sekai no owari to hadoboirudo wandālando (Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World, 1983), ranked at number 18.³ Murakami's multi-million selling Noruwei no mori premiered on the bestseller charts in 1987, coming in at number five. Noruwei would remain as one of the top five bestsellers in Japan for three consecutive years (1987, 1988, 1989). In 1988, Noruwei rose to become the number one bestseller in Japan, and the 1989 Shuppan nenkan (This Year in Publishing), in its annual review of the year in publishing, remarks on Noruwei's "explosive sales" and the start of the "Murakami phenomenon."⁴ In 1989, it fell to the number four position, but Murakami's Dansu dansu dansu (Dance Dance Dance, 1988), which had debuted the previous year at number three, was on the bestseller charts in
the number nineteen position in 1989. In 1990, Murakami’s TV piopuru (TV People, 1990) was the year’s number sixteen bestseller, with his Tōi taiko (Distant Drum, 1990) placing at number 20. Since then, Kokkyō no minami, taiyo no nishi (South of the Border, West of the Sun, 1992) and a collection of his essays Kanashiki no gaikokugo (Sad Foreign Languages, 1994) have been climbing the bestseller list. His latest work of serious fiction, Nejimaki tori kuronikuru (Chronicle of the Wind-up Bird, 1992-1994), which concerns the Nomonhan Incident of 1939, is already the object of features in Japan’s most prestigious literary journals and is being translated by Jay Rubin. There is little doubt that in terms of sheer output and sales, Murakami Haruki has dominated the Japanese literary scene in recent years.

Murakami Haruki first received measurable success in the United States with the publication of A Wild Sheep Chase. As Jay Rubin observed, "It was the first Japanese novel to attract widespread international attention since the ‘golden age’ of Kawabata, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō . . ., and Mishima Yukio in the 1950s and 1960s." There can be little disagreement that among Japanese writers working today, Murakami Haruki is the most popular novelist with a wide readership in the United States. Almost all of his major novels have been translated into English, and in America, during the period between 1989 and 1994, close to forty book reviews of Murakami’s works have appeared in magazines ranging
from *The New Statesman* to *The Village Voice*. Five stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*; one has appeared in *Playboy*; one has appeared in *Harper’s*; and one is to be reprinted in *Fantasy and Horror.*

Nakano Osamu argues that there are three elements in Murakami Haruki’s works that explain their mass appeal: (1) their unique mood, (2) vocabulary and style, (3) rhetoric and metaphor.

Nakano asserts that those infected with "Murakami Mania" find Murakami’s works appealing because of the mood created in them. This mood is evoked by the indecisive lifestyle of "boku," the I-protagonist of much of Murakami’s fiction. Because of the similar, albeit amorphous qualities of the first-person narrator in the majority of the stories, there emerges what seems to resemble a single, though collective, voice for "boku." According to Nakano, "boku" is a member of the political protest movement generation of the late 1960s and has suffered psychological damage, but he does not drag his sense of breakdown around with him -- "boku" is not tragic. He has the long-standing but undirected disaffection of a personality type, of someone who was never fully-socialized into society. Frustrated, the "boku" of Murakami’s fiction imagines action but does not do anything; "boku" thinks of transcending his personality type but cannot. The literary mood created in his writing is the result of the
political protest of the late 1960s frozen in 1970 -- an extension of indecisiveness which continues indefinitely.

There is something, writes Nakano, about the personality of "boku" and this lifestyle which is extremely attractive to the psychology of Murakami fans who belong to the 60s and 70s generations. As his readers are descendents of the Anti-Japan/US Security Pact demonstrations, they do not just feel familiarity with this personality and lifestyle; rather, they strongly identify with both.

Second, Nakano attributes the phenomenon of Murakami's popularity to Murakami's vocabulary and style, which he argues have developed out of a conscious effort on Murakami's part to employ words and styles similar to those his fans use when they write. If Yoshimoto Banana's writing style is close to speech, then Murakami's is close to the way people write.

Finally, in terms of rhetoric and metaphor, Nakano cites a Murakami rhetoric, which he believes is important in the creation of mood. He substantiates the argument for this rhetoric with a quote from the introduction to a short story collection he has on hand: "Ware ware wa jissai ni wa nani hitotsu to shite sentaku shite inai no da to iu tachiba o toru" (I take the position that says that we, in reality, never make choices about anything)." Throughout Murakami's works, aphorisms such as the one above form a kind of pattern. Within the stylistic context, there is Murakami's blending of reality and fiction and a certain self-moving quality of
imagery, and these belong to the paradigm of mood. When Murakami isevaluated by members of his avid readership, the responses are invariably "kawaii" (cute), "oshare" (fashionable), and "ki ga kiku" (cool). Nakano goes on to argue that one cannot deny that this generation also reads these aphorisms as moral instruction.¹⁴

Murakami has addressed the issue of his own massive popularity in a New York Times interview, valuable in that it is one of the few interviews he has ever granted, since he never permits interviews with the Japanese press. He believes that young people in Japan suffer from feelings of isolation, and as such, they identify with the sentiment expressed in works written by one who also has experienced feelings of alienation:

For instance, when I looked for an apartment in Tokyo the real estate people didn’t trust me because as a writer I was self-employed and didn’t belong to any company. Many people, especially young people, would like to be more independent and suffer from feelings of isolation. I think that is one reason why young readers support my work.¹⁵

He sees a "generational struggle in Japanese letters" between the "old gatekeepers" of Japanese literature, whom he equated in the 1992 interview to the "leaders of the communist party in Eastern Europe"¹⁶ and young, upcoming Japanese writers. When asked what older, traditional critics think of his work, Murakami replied:

It’s simple. They don’t like me ... The Japanese literary world has a strong sense of hierarchy and you have to go from the bottom gradually up. And once you are on the top, you are the judge of other
writers. You read each other’s work and give each other awards. But the ones on top don’t really care what young, upcoming writers are doing. When I made my debut as a Japanese novelist, they said Japanese literature was on the decline. It’s not on the decline, it’s just changing. Many people don’t like the change. The older writers live in a very closed world. They really don’t know what’s going on."

Clearly, Murakami has a strong sense that his works depart from the established literary antecedent.

Jay Rubin argues that the simplicity of style of Murakami’s works makes them an enjoyable market product, and this partly explains their popularity:

[A]side from Murakami’s penchant for leaving certain major images and events in his works unexplained, he does write simply, he does explain a great deal for us, in language that is lucid and lively and funny and often just plain fun. It is all there for the reader to take at face value, sometime between dinner and a trip to the local video rental shop for the latest Van Damme action video.

Alfred Birnbaum praises Murakami Haruki as a rebel against the conservative literary powers that be, and his argument strikes chords of an altogether familiar refrain: Murakami’s literature is literature for the masses, and as such, the author’s support comes from non-literary, Esquire-esque magazines such as Brutus. This singular, oppositional stance makes Murakami’s work exciting, even revolutionary in contrast to the staid literary canon.

However self-interested Birnbaum’s argument may be, the position is typical in its naming Murakami a furious new voice of Japanese literature. The Washington Post proclaims,
"Murakami's bold willingness to go straight-over-the-top has always been a signal indication of his genius," and *Publisher's Weekly* announces Murakami's creation of a still-nameless genre, "There ought to be a name for the genre that Murakami has invented, and it might be the literary pyrotechno-thriller." As such, the works are new, genreless, defiantly extra-literary.

So then, what does that cloistered circle of Tokyo's established literary world, the Japanese bundan, actually pronounce when they peer down from above? They rave. Is Murakami in strident opposition, as Birnbaum and others claim? In fact, the reaction of critics is so overwhelmingly positive that it flies in the face of the contention that Murakami is a revolutionary voice. With the publication of *Kaze no uta o kike* (Listen to the Wind Sing, 1979), Murakami won the Genzō Prize for new talent in 1979, and with *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (A Wild Sheep Chase, 1982), Murakami Haruki won the prestigious Noma Literary Award for New Writers. The novel that brought him early fame, *Sekai no owari to hādoboirudo wandārandō*, earned him the Tanizaki Prize. Concerning Murakami's receiving this award, Rubin writes: "The distinguished panel of writers who awarded Murakami the Tanizaki Prize in 1985 for *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* were hardly unanimous in their praise for the book, but among them Oe Kenzaburo [the recent Nobel laureate for literature] wrote how wonderfully invigorated he felt that
Murakami had won the prize for having so painstakingly fabricated his adventurous fictional experiment, and he noted that the novel could be read as a new "In'ei Raisan" (In Praise of Shadows, 1933-1934), suggesting, by reference to Tanizaki's most famous essay, that an aesthetic link could be found between Murakami and Tanizaki.  

The reason for the overwhelming acceptance by the Japanese literary elite may indeed be found in Kawamoto Saburō's argument that the descendents of the Anti-Japan U.S. Security Pact generations of the 1960s and 1970s find the personality of "boku" extremely attractive. This counter-culture, Kawamoto argues, has grown up and is now so mainstream in the literary world, that there is not much protest against Murakami's work.  

Indeed, there is something very traditionally Japanese about Murakami's borrowing from the West certain forms and styles of popular literature. Murakami's prior work as a translator of such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver, Stephen King, Richard Brautigan, Tim O'Brien, and his great admiration for Raymond Chandler seems to have had a conspicuous influence on his writing -- in that throughout there are the classic elements of detective fiction, romance, horror, and science fiction. Murakami is playing with literary styles, and as jazz riffs twist off into unknown spheres, so too do Murakami's tales spin off classic literary
genres into his own, quite unique variations on popular fiction.

Japanese literary luminaries of the past -- Shimazaki Tōson, Tayama Katai, and Nagai Kafū -- borrowed freely from the Western canon of modern realism. While their borrowings from Rousseau, Zola, and Gide often resulted in "autobiographical fiction" (watakushi shōsetsu), these canonical works are not read much anymore and have been under constant attack for the past two or three decades. Serious fiction in the West has become more and more autobiographical, conforming in large measure to the orthodox literature of Tokyo's literary establishment. So, in turning to the remaining alternative, semi-canonical popular American literature for models, Murakami is not much different from such turn-of-the-century translators/novelists as Mori Ōgai, Shimamura Hōgetsu, Futabatei Shimei, and Tsubouchi Shōyō.

Those who discover a "social content" or radical protest in Murakami, critics such as Birnbaum, Kawamoto and Nakano, tend to read the works as narrow allegories, in which certain incidents and characters correspond to specific historical occurrences, or Marxist paradigms. For example, Kawamoto argues that Murakami Haruki's obsession with "the sheep" is actually the self-abnegation and revolutionary thought that exists on the other shore of reality -- a reality that was held in common by the generation of the 1960s and 1970s who sacrificed themselves for higher ideals. And these
revolutionary ideas resulted in death and in so-called symbolic death through silence for many people, after the United Red Army Incident in 1970. "The sheep" represents this monolith of revolutionary ideas and political ideology in a form which overtakes and controls people.

In contrast to these positions arguing that the sources of Murakami's popularity are his radical rupture with the past and the appeal of the social significance of his work, this study will argue that the appeal of Murakami's works lies in their free-form associations and themes drawn from popular literary traditions and the avant-garde. The first part of the study considers the influence of Western popular literature. The second part concentrates on influences which make the literature modern and avant-garde in a Japanese context: the postmodern, the absurdist free-associations and solos of jazz, and the irresistible seduction of advanced capitalism. This study will illustrate how the incorporation of these generic elements into the form of the "boku shōsetsu" makes for an at once traditional and yet astonishing new genre of literature. This amalgamation provides a sense of modernity true to the Japanese experience which, like Murakami's literature itself, is an experience extraordinarily innundated by American popular culture. Finally, I will provide a translation to illustrate this amalgamation.
Notes


The Nomanhan Incident refers to the border conflict between the Japanese Kwantong Army's 23rd division and the Soviet Army, which occurred in the village of Nomanhan (between Northwestern Mongolia and outer Mongolia) during May to September, 1939. For a complete discussion of this incident, see Alvin D. Coox, Nomanhan, Japan Against Russia, 1939 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).


12. Rubin, "The Other World of Murakami Haruki" 492.

13. For Murakami's words, see Nakano Osamu, "Naze Murakami Haruki kenshō wa okita no ka," Eureka June 1989, 42.


17. McIreney 29.

18. Rubin, "The Other World of Murakami Haruki" 494.


23. Rubin, "The Other World of Murakami Haruki" 499.


25. The United Red Army incident refers to the *Rengō seikigun* members' flight, due to increasing police pressure, to Karuizawa (Nagano Prefecture) and the resulting seizure of the United Red Army Lodge on February 28, 1970; for a discussion of the 1960s and 1970s student movement in Japan, see Ellis S. Kraus, Thomas P. Rohlen, Patricia G. Steinhoff, "The Student Movement," *Conflict in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).
CHAPTER I
AMERICAN INFLUENCES

Murakami Haruki was born in Kyoto in 1949 and while in high school in Kobe, he was the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. As Murakami indicates, he was constantly reading American paperback novels at this time, and these were a source of crucial discovery and revelation for him: "What first attracted me to American paperback books was the discovery that I could read books written in a foreign language . . . It was such a tremendously new experience for me to be able to understand and be moved by literature written in a language acquired after childhood."²

Murakami Haruki has translated works by a considerable number of American authors, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver, C.V. Aulsberg, John Irving, Paul Sello, C.D.B. Brian, Truman Capote, Paul Theroux and Tim O’Brien. Other American stylistic influences include Raymond Chandler, Richard Brautigan, and Stephen King.³

Detective Fiction

William Marling has isolated four elements of the traditional detective code from the works of Raymond Chandler,
and in particular, from *The Long Goodbye*. As will be illustrated, all of the elements of this code are incorporated in Murakami’s *Dance Dance Dance* and *A Wild Sheep Chase*. The first of these elements is total honesty concerning money matters. The second is the hero’s absolute independence. The third is the honoring of the bond of friendship. And finally, there is the single-minded devotion to the search for the truth.

Both *The Long Goodbye* by Raymond Chandler and *Dance Dance Dance* by Murakami Haruki start with the recognition that the world has become essentially corrupt, and try to deal with the question of how the honorable man should live in a fundamentally dishonest world of murder, money, and greed. *Dance Dance Dance* basically concerns the issue that life has been devalued by external forces, in the sense that people seem ready to kill for less than a cigarette. William Marling argues that the theme of *The Long Goodbye* is "the alienation of modern man" with Philip Marlowe in the "role of the detective as a knight." "Boku," too, in Murakami’s fiction is something of a knight, and tries to make his way on the seedy streets of the modern age, in increasing pain and disaffection.

The first element of the traditional detective code, according to Marling, is total honesty in matters of money, and both *Dance Dance Dance* and *The Long Goodbye* start with the cynical recognition that filthy lucre does indeed make the
world go round." In Dance, Gotanda, "boku"'s increasingly neurotic yet affable movie star friend philosophizes on the way money controls and owns one:

"I owe a lot," he said. "I'm not even sure how much. Not as smart as I look, am I? Money gives me the creeps. The way I was brought up. Vulgar to think about it, you know. Didn't your mother ever tell you that? All I had to do was work hard, live modestly, look at the big picture. Good advice -- for then maybe. Whoever heard of living modestly these days? Whoever heard of the big picture? What my mother never told me was where the tax accountant fit in. Maybe my mother never heard about debts and deductions. Well, I got plenty of both. Which means I gotta work and I can't go to Hawaii with you."

Gotanda feels owned by money, gripped by post-industrial angst, and Marlowe forty years before raged against the evils of money, but "boku" alone has a cool flippancy about money and the modern age: "What a world, where you can sleep late with gorgeous women while listening to Bob Dylan and write off the whole works. Unthinkable in the sixties." Take what life offers: the eating, the drinking, all the merriment, and dance, for soon, the music may stop.

In demonstrating Philip Marlowe's complete honesty in money matters, Marling cites the example of Philip Marlowe refusing Terry Lennox's $5,000 when he does not feel he has earned it.10 According to Marling's characterization of the "good" in detective fiction, "If 'money value' is the ubiquitous measure, then absolute honesty in exchange is the only remaining virtue."11
In *Dance*, "boku" is likewise committed to honesty in monetary exchange, but he also is realistic and takes what life has to offer. For example, though "boku" worries about being bought by Yuki’s father Makimura ("boku" refuses to accept payment to look after Yuki), he does accept the trip to Hawaii. However, upon his return, even though Makimura has offered him the remaining traveler’s checks, "boku" declines, following the detective hero’s inviolable code of honesty in money matters. Says "boku," "I always keep on top of these business details. It’s not because I like them. I just hate sloppiness in money matters."  

"Boku", clinging as does Philip Marlowe to that last, lingering virtue of honesty in money matters, has methodically saved all of his receipts and rejects Makimura’s money in the same way as Marlowe rejects Lennox’s $5,000 when he feels he does not deserve it.

"Boku"’s refusal to accept Makimura’s largesse is a generic marker which signifies that, under advanced capitalism, human relationships have been reduced to mere money. However, room still exists in *Dance Dance Dance* for human romance, loyalty, friendship and love.

In the final scene of *Sheep’s Chase*, "boku" honors his code of honesty in money matters as well as his code of honoring bonds of friendship. In a stroke of altruism, "boku" offers to give his former partner, J, the huge check he has received so his partner can pay off his loans and they can go
into business together. "Boku" pulls out the check, and hands it to J, who remarks:

"This is unbelieviable money, unbelieviable."

"You said it . . . Say, J, it took a lot of money to move to this new location didn’t it? . . . What say you take on the Rat and me as co-partners? No worry about dividends or interest. A partnership in name is fine."

"But I couldn’t do that"

"Sure you could. All you got to do in return is take in the Rat and me whenever one of us gets into a fix."

"That’s no different than what I’ve done all along."

Beer glass in hand, I looked J in the face. "I know. But that’s how I want it." 13

"Boku" uses money, the system’s almighty symbol of control and power, against the system itself: first in refusing to be bought, and second in reaffirming the importance of friendship over material gain.

The second principle of the traditional detective code is, according to Marling, the hero’s "absolute independence." 14 In The Long Goodbye, "Marlowe is the original small businessman . . . Marlowe needs his hunger and his isolation to stay independent of the large organizations that increasingly dominate his world." 15 In Sheep’s Chase and Dance, "boku" is a freelancer with fire in his stomach, the whiskey-loving maverick who cannot be owned by a kaisha. In Dance, "boku" gives up his editorial office and goes to work for himself as a freelance writer. For three
months, the work came in slowly but regularly, but due to "boku"'s diligence, soon there is an avalanche, a reward of being a knight in our corrupt age. "Boku" expounds on his code:

Then, in early autumn, things began to change. Work orders increased dramatically. The phone rang non-stop, my mailbox was overflowing . . . The reason was simple. I was never choosy about the jobs I did. I was willing to do anything. I met my deadlines, I never complained, I wrote legibly. And I was thorough. Where others slacked off, I did an honest write. I was never snide, even when the pay was low. If I got a call at two-thirty in the morning asking for twenty pages of text . . . by six a.m., I'd have it done by five thirty. And if they called back for a rewrite, I had it to them by six. You bet I had a good reputation."

"Boku"'s code of honesty in business matters drives him to do an "honest write" when others would slack off: the independent businessman drives himself on alone and needs always to be a little more diligent than others in order to maintain his own sense of self-respect in being better than the masses of companymen.

In *Sheep's Chase* as well, "boku" is the quintessential independent operator, and in fact, he is hired because of his independence (an essential quality in a detective). It requires no small amount of individual determination to leave one's business and life in Tokyo to go in search of a fantastical sheep in Hokkaido. Divorced, "boku" is by nature a lone wolf, and though he does go to Hokkaido with his girlfriend, eventually she leaves him alone in the mountains. He spends days on end in solitary pursuits -- reading, cooking
and jogging — in a test of his moral worthiness, while waiting to uncover the truth of his mission.

In detective fiction and in Murakami’s novels, the "paid operator" always keeps his own counsel. "Boku" knows well and has come to expect human mendacity and all the lies of the system. He alone maintains a stance of unbiased omniscience -- at least until the end of the story -- pretending to but never buying into the glitzy, sordid illusions of other people and of advanced capitalism. Boku’s lone integrity is his stock in trade.

The third element of the detective code is the protagonist honoring the bond of friendship. Just as Marlowe honors the code of friendship, Murakami’s "boku" goes to jail and suffers the cops rather than betray a friend.

Dance’s "boku" (in a very similar situation to Marlowe) endures severe questioning and mental torture by the cops concerning what he knows about Mei’s death, but he will not implicate his friend, Gotanda, even though he knows doing so would end what turns out to be an agonizing ordeal of questioning and spending the night in prison. Says "boku":

We live such tenuous lives. I don’t want Gotanda to get caught up in a scandal. I don’t want to ruin his image. He wouldn’t get work after that. Trashy work in a trashy world of trashy images. But, he trusted me, as a friend. So it’s a matter of honor."

"Boku", honoring the code in the extreme, chooses to spend night after night in a prison cell, having been forced
to write down everything he had done at the time of the murder in question, and does not betray Gotanda.

In *Sheep Chase*, "boku"'s loyalty to his friend brings the Rat, who had hanged himself a week earlier to escape the sheep's absolute control, literally back from the dead. "Boku" has done everything for his friend -- from leaving his life and home in Tokyo to coming to Hokkaido to find the sheep. In fact, what ultimately saves the Rat from the sheep is "boku"'s honoring the code of friendship -- and not the Rat's suicide. "Boku" and the now-deceased Rat discuss the suicide:

"Did you have to go that far?"

"Yes, I had to go that far. If I waited, the sheep would have controlled me absolutely. It was my last chance."

The Rat rubbed his palms together again. "I wanted to meet you when I was myself, with everything squared away. My own self with my own memories and my own weaknesses. That's why I sent you that photograph as a kind of code. If by some accident it steered you this way, I thought I would be saved in the end."

"And have you been saved?"

"Yeah, I've been saved all right," said the Rat, quietly."

In this context, the bond of friendship is seen as not only stronger than the mind-controlling sheep, but stronger than death itself.

Finally, in the works of Raymond Chandler and Murakami Haruki, the fundamental search for truth drives both plot and character. All other elements of the detective code are
subordinated to revealing the truth. In fact, if this were not the case, it would be difficult for the detective story to exist.

In *Sheep’s Chase*, the entire plot is driven by the search for the strange sheep with the star on its back. In *Dance*, the plot is a basic "whodunit," the search for the truth of who committed the five murders contained therein.

Every aspect of the classic American detective code is manifested in *Dance* and *Sheep’s Chase*. In this congruence between American detective writing and some of Murakami Haruki’s best work, there can be little doubt that Murakami has internalized American detective fiction to an amazing degree.

**Horror Fiction**

Murakami Haruki, a translator of several of Stephen King’s and other horror novels, has adapted to his fictions at least two main elements of the contemporary horror genre: the idea of physical place as a formidable, sentient force (as in the case of the haunted hotel) and the presence of psychic children.

The idea of a specific, physical structure or place having an immense pull on a hero, almost as if by sheer force of personality, is an idea in horror fiction as old as Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Contemporary horror writers such as James Herbert (*The Magic Cottage*) and
Stephen King (The Shining) have extended this idea and have in their popular novels constructed buildings which act on their heroes as omnivorous paramours of consuming obsession: the particular physical structure is the one true place of the hero’s belonging and his personal nexus, the essential part of his mind’s landscape.

In Dance Dance Dance, Murakami Haruki experiments with the idea of a specific place acting as one’s psychic center in his creation of the Dolphin Hotel, and an obvious point of comparison is with Stephen King’s classic horror novel The Shining and its Overlook Hotel. Hotels have always been favorites of horror writers because of their essential mystery: because so many people come but nobody stays, every hotel has its ghosts, every hotel has walls with stories to tell.

Murakami Haruki opens Dance Dance Dance with a prose poem:

I often dream about the Dolphin Hotel.

In these dreams, I’m there, implicated in some kind of ongoing circumstance. All indications are that I belong to this dream continuity.

The Dolphin Hotel is distorted, much too narrow. It seems more like a long, covered bridge. A bridge stretching endlessly through time. And there I am, in the middle of it. Someone else is there too, crying.

The hotel envelops me. I can feel its pulse, its heat. In dreams, I am part of the hotel.
With these opening words, so similar in tone and melody to the poetry of Raymond Carver and Richard Brautigan, Murakami invokes the already-familiar image of the Dolphin Hotel and continues chasing sheep, this time, in the wake of five mysterious deaths, all strangely linked to the "new" Dolphin Hotel.

The Dolphin Hotel has been an essential part of boku's mental landscape ever since Sheep's Chase. In Dance, the hotel figures in his dreams and his waking hours:

I couldn't get this place out of my mind. I tried to forget things, but then something else would pop up. So it didn't matter whether I liked it or not, I sort of knew I belonged here.21

We discover the immense psychic importance that the Dolphin has at the climactic point in Dance when "boku" finally meets the Sheep Man, who explains the point:

'This is your world,' said the Sheep Man matter-of-factly. 'Don't think too hard about it. If you're reseeking it, it's there. The place was put there for you. Special.'22

Moreover, the haunted house effects of the Dolphin Hotel are the rather standard hair-raising fare of popular horror fiction: the Sheep Man acts as the resident ghost; there is a trickster elevator (which, seemingly of its own volition, may stop on a floor regardless of the number pressed) as well as the inscrutable sixteenth floor. When "boku" goes to investigate what he has heard about the sixteenth floor and he
emerges from the elevator, everything appears normal, even cheery, though there is a disarming silence:

The sixteenth floor. Bright, fully lit, with "Love is Blue" flowing out of the ceiling. No darkness, no musty odor... The carpet was deep red, rich with soft pile. You couldn't hear your own footsteps. In fact, everything was resoundingly hushed. There was only "A Summer Place," probably by Percy Faith.33

The scene is flawless in its description of the ubiquity of the unnamed living presence that is the postmodern building. This could be any floor of any postmodern hotel: bright lights, programmed music, deep plush carpet. "Boku" again investigates the sixteenth floor, and this time, the haunted house show begins:

The darkness was deathly absolute... I was reduced to pure concept... I floated in space... Somewhere across the fine line separating nightmare from reality... I pulled my hands out of my pockets and reached out to touch a wall. I found one all right, alarmingly slick and chill, not exactly a wall you'd expect to find in the climate-controlled Dolphin Hotel...

Scared?

Damn straight.34

Murakami employs the horror novelist's stock fictional devices in this passage: as the tension builds, nightmare and reality have become indistinguishable, the walls have changed form, and the protagonist feels growing unease. And by the juxtaposition of what we normally consider reality with the magical and horrific, the absolute reality of either one becomes distinctly suspect. The issue of what is real and what is illusion, what is reality and what is nightmare, is
repeatedly addressed by Murakami, and the exploration attains full potency in the science fiction/fantasy *Hard-boiled Wonderland*.

Another aspect of *Dance* reminiscent of the horror genre is the inclusion of the psychic child. Stephen King has peopled his popular thrillers (*The Shining*, *Firestarter*, *Carrie* to name a few) with clairvoyant children to such an extent that their inclusion has indeed become one of his trademarks. A point of comparison can be found between the psychic child in *Dance Dance Dance* and the psychic child in the classic *The Shining*.

*Dance’s* Yuki is a beautiful, gifted and psychic 13-year-old. When "boku" goes to visit Yuki’s father Makimura on the golf course, he speaks of his daughter’s gift:

"Plus, Yuki’s the key here and I trust her instincts. Sometimes, as a matter of fact, her instincts are too acute for comfort. She’s like a medium. There’ve been times when I could tell she was seeing something I couldn’t. Know what I mean?"  

In Stephen King’s *The Shining*, the old cook, who is soon retiring from service at the Overlook Hotel, speaks of the gift that the innocent young boy Danny has for "shining": "People who shine can sometimes see things that are gonna happen, and I think they can see things that did happen." And even before the family leaves for the hotel, "Danny had one of those flashes of understanding that frightened him most of all; it was like a sudden glimpse of some incomprehensible machine that might be safe or might be dangerous." Call it
an "instinct" in Yuki's case or a "flash of understanding" in Danny's, there is very little difference. Both Yuki and Danny see things that others cannot, and sometimes have foreboding premonitions of things that did or will occur -- like a murder committed, or a murder yet to be.

In Dance, while watching Gotanda's movie with "boku", Yuki becomes ill and 'sees' that Gotanda in fact killed Kiki:

"He killed her. In real life. He actually killed her. I saw it," said Yuki, clutching my arm. "It scared me so much that I could hardly breathe. That whatever-it-is came over me again. I could see the whole murder, sharp and clear. Your friend killed that woman."28

In The Shining, Danny sees in his mind a premonition of a murder: "a shape turned the corner and began to come toward him, lurching, smelling of blood and doom."29 Yuki's vision is of a crime of the past, and Danny's is of a crime of the future. Only children -- those who have not undergone the vigorous and uniform programming of advanced capitalist society -- can, in their innocence, see through to the savage, human instincts that cast their horrific fictions against the vacuous screen of the controlled environment of the post-modern hotel.

Romance

The massively popular two-volume romance Norwegian Wood is the work that catapulted Murakami Haruki into the limelight of Japanese fiction.30 In both character and theme, Murakami has probably paid homage to F. Scott Fitzgerald and borrowed
from the prototypical American romance *The Great Gatsby.* By both works share the same unabashed brooding and nostalgic sentimentalism, as well as the themes of unrequited love and loss. What makes the romances of Murakami Haruki so very modern are the flashes of the absurd. The absurdity of sexuality is a theme often returned to by Murakami, and he peoples his works with male protagonists obsessed with fetishes -- in particular fat, ears, bracelets. Sometimes, there is absurdity of romantic theme, as in the short story "A Slow Boat to China." These absurdist sexual elements are probably brought in from Western popular fiction, and are pervasive in Murakami.

*Norwegian Wood* is the story of Watanabe Toru, who recounts his loss of Naoko, first to mental illness and then ultimately to suicide. After she succumbs to mental illness, she is hospitalized in the mountains and Watanabe waits for her recovery. They write letters continually, but in her absence, he starts to keep company with Midori, a lively girl with a penchant for short skirts and dirty movies. Though Watanabe is young and in college, as so many of his friends die by their own hands (Kizuki, Hatsumi, and Naoko), death seems to surround him from every angle. He makes friends with Nagasawa, a brilliant young student going into the foreign service. Nagasawa emerges as the hero of the work: a man who never feels sorry for himself, and goes on living in the present, never regretting the past. Watanabe visits Naoko in
the hospital on two occasions, and spends time with her and her roommate Reiko. Reiko is a slightly older woman who was divorced and driven from her neighborhood by the accusations that she raped her 13-year old female piano student, a girl who had in fact seduced Reiko. Meanwhile, Naoko’s condition gradually deteriorates, and she eventually hangs herself. In the end, Watanabe chooses life over death, and though Naoko’s memory is inscribed in his brain, he devotes himself to Midori, the flesh and blood girl who loves him.

Murakami Haruki, like Watanabe, always had a copy of *The Great Gatsby* in hand while he was in college, and Murakami’s affection for the work has probably influenced the writing of the *Norwegian Wood*. Watanabe says of his favorite writers (very likely speaking in the voice of the author, Murakami):

> To my eighteen-year-old tastes, John Updike’s *Centaur* had been the pinnacle of writing, yet after a few readings, it began to lose its original luster, making way for *The Great Gatsby* to ease into the number one slot. Whenever I felt like it, I’d take it down from the shelf, open it at random, and read a passage. It never once let me down. Never a boring page. Just amazing.33

Both *Norwegian Wood* and *The Great Gatsby* are sentimental and brooding remembrances of experiences of idealized love, now gone forever. One main point of comparison between *Norwegian Wood* and *The Great Gatsby* is their shared sentimentality, an inherent feature of the romance genre.

In an early scene, Murakami describes what could be memory or, equally likely, fantasy in Watanabe’s remembrance of Naoko walking off into the fields. The description recalls
the endearing but perhaps heavy-handed tone so reminiscent of Fitzgerald:

Without a word, she stepped forward and started walking. Autumn light filtered through the branches and danced on the shoulders of her jacket. The dog barked, perhaps a little nearer than before. Naoko climbed a little rise, strode out of the pine woods, and rushed down a gentle slope.34

And as Murakami writes of autumn light filtering on the figure of the beloved as she beautifully walks into the distance, so too did Fitzgerald write with similar tone and "romantic affectation" of the lingering lights falling on the adored, idealized Daisy:

For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affectation on her face, her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened -- then the glow faded, each light deserting her with a lingering regret like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk.35

But even more than these sentimental tones, a more striking borrowing is that of the theme of the utter loss of the one who was always so unattainable. One of the most famous images of The Great Gatsby, the green light of Daisy’s dock, is like Daisy herself, forever elusive, forever just out of grasp. But Gatsby nonetheless believed in that light with singular devotion:

And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it.36
Norwegian Wood’s Watanabe believes in the light of Naoko, and remembers, in soft, delicate Gatsby tones, a firefly’s light which is almost attainable, but forever in the distance:

I closed my eyes and for a while immersed myself in the dark night of memory. The sound of the wind came through clearer than ever. I opened the jar and let the firefly out. Ages later, the firefly took off.37

Just as Daisy’s green light on the dock seems so close but remains so elusive, the firefly light dances just out of hand’s reach:

The firefly had vanished, but its light trail still lingered, a pale glow through the thick eyeshut darkness like some homeless spirit wandering on and on without end . . . Over and over I stretched out my hand into the night. My fingers touched nothing. That trace of light was always just a little beyond my fingertips.38

Gatsby never attains Daisy, she never leaves her husband Tom Buchanan -- though Gatsby always "believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us."39 The theme is thus the loss of the dream lover who, of course, one never possessed in the first place. This same theme, so characteristic of the romance genre, operates in Norwegian Wood. Naoko is dead, and the reason she asked Watanabe to remember her is "more unbearable, because Naoko never even loved me."40 And so, tragically, Naoko’s light flickers out of grasp, finally to go out completely.

What makes all of Murakami’s romantic sentimentalism bearable by contemporary standards is his introduction of absurdity for variation in the romance genre that is probably
taken over from the likes of John Irving, Tim Robbins, Richard Brautigan, or Raymond Carver.\footnote{1}

The absurdity in these writers’ works is, as in Murakami’s, the feeling that the out of the ordinary is happening. Suddenly, someone or something different is now in one’s midst -- breaking up one’s rituals, throwing everything askew, casting a light whose foreign embers are such as were never seen before -- in a world which had a moment ago seemed so mundane, so predictable, so normal. And one changes for it. In \textit{Norwegian Wood}, the absurdity is sexuality and the introduction of Naoko’s sensitive, lesbian/pedophilic roommate in the mental ward. In \textit{Hard-boiled Wonderland} (a science fiction novel with distinctly romantic overtones), though the narrator is constantly involved in fairly emotionally deep affairs with members of the opposite sex, he is ridiculously obsessed with fat. Observes "boku" early in the novel:

\begin{quote}
I’ve slept with fat women before and the experience wasn’t bad. If your confusion leads you in the right direction, the results can be uncommonly rewarding . . . Sex is an extremely subtle undertaking, unlike going to the department store on Sunday to buy a thermos.\footnote{2}
\end{quote}

In \textit{Hard-boiled Wonderland}, "boku" is strangely enamored of and repulsed by fat. But what "boku" really likes are bracelets; he is obsessed for weeks with the two silver bracelets his peculiar eye glimpses on a girl who speeds by with her boyfriend, and "boku" wonders if she leaves them on during sex.
In Sheeps Chase, whatever romanticism that exists is relieved by the incorporation of fetishism; "boku" is overwhelmed by his girlfriend’s ears. She is an ear model, so before he even met her, he first saw her ears in the giant ad pictures on which he was doing a write-up. He pins them on his office wall, and looks at them for a whole week. And so begins the obsession:

The job was finished in a week, but the ear shots stayed taped up on my wall. Partly it was too much trouble to take them down, partly I’d grown accustomed to those ears. But the real reason I didn’t take the photos down was that those ears had me in their thrall. They were the dream image of an ear. The quintessence, the paragon of ears. Never had any enlarged part of the human body (genitals included, of course) held such a strong attraction for me.⁴³

One source of Murakami’s stylistic borrowing of the absurdist element of fetishism is likely Richard Brautigan. Murakami has translated many of his works, and in Brautigan’s perhaps most absurd work, Sombrero Fallout (subtitled "A Japanese Novel"), the narrator is wholly obsessed with his Japanese girlfriend’s hair. The narrator watches her sleep early in the work:

As Yukiko slept, her hair slept long and Japanese about her. She didn’t know that her hair was sleeping. She did not think like that. Her thoughts were basically very simple.

She combed her hair in the morning.

It was the first thing that she did when she woke up. She always combed it very carefully. Sometimes she would put it in a bun on top of her head in the classic Japanese manner. Sometimes she would let it hang long, reaching to her ass.
Her hair dreamt about being very carefully combed in the morning.\footnote{44}

But this passage is not so much about the hair dreaming about being combed in morning as much as it is Brautigan’s dreaming of the hair; and if Murakami’s dreams are of bracelets and ears, Brautigan’s dreams are of hair -- where does all this literary fetishism originate? Perhaps from Tanizaki Junichirō. The opening page of Brautigan’s Sombrero Fallout has the following dedication: "This novel is for Junichirō Tanizaki, who wrote The Key and Diary of a Mad Old Man."\footnote{45}

Science Fiction

Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World is Murakami’s Tanizaki award-winning science fiction novel.\footnote{46} The genre of science fiction has been imported from the West, and Murakami’s bold attempt at the genre shows that he is as equally adept with science fiction writing as he is in writing other forms of popular literature.

The story is set in the near future. This time around, "boku" is a data processor, whose mind has been surgically split by a brilliant professor so that "boku" can perform highly-sensitive, covert data analysis called "shuffling." As an ambidextrous data operator, he is equally dexterous with both sides of his brain. "Boku"’s reality is split, and he lives in two parallel worlds, one in which he is a data processor for "Calcutech" and moonlights shuffling data for the professor, and the other in which he is the vision-scarred
"Dreamreader" and he reads dreams which remain in the skulls of dead animals. With the disappearance of the mad scientist and the appearance of a couple of henchmen who destroy "boku's" apartment, he is entwined in yet another mystery, yet another search for the truth. He is called on to stop the world from coming to an end; but, as "boku" discovers, it is only his world (his conscious, waking reality) that is coming to an end, and he will join the world of the "Dreamreader" entirely.

The inclusion of the alternate universe is a traditional theme of the science fiction genre, going back decades in America. The "dreamworld" of the Hard-boiled narrator is, in some aspects, campy and reminiscent of a "Star Trek" planet, and perhaps serves a similar function, characteristic of the genre: by the juxtaposition of our world with an alternative world, the particular characteristics of our often too familiar world become more striking by the contrast. Consider the following exchange, in which the narrator is talking to his shadow in "dreamworld":

"Just let me finish what I have to say. It is not only that I may have forgotten how things used to be. I am beginning to feel an attachment to this town. I enjoy watching the beasts. I have grown fond of the Colonel and the girl at the Library. No one hurts each other here, no one fights. Life is uneventful, but full enough in its way. Everyone is equal. No one speaks ill of anyone else, no one steals. They work, but they enjoy their work. It's purely for the sake of work, not forced labor. No one is jealous of anyone. There are no complaints, no worries."
"You’ve forgotten no money or property or rank either. And no internal conflicts," says the shadow."

Quite clearly, this exchange lends itself to serious allegorical interpretations as well as the perception of social criticism -- this world could certainly be interpreted as the Marxist paradigm of the communist utopia. This is a feature of many works of American science fiction since the 1930s -- the creation of a kind of subversive alternative reality acts as a vehicle for social commentary (as in Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 and George Orwell’s 1984).

The fantastical features of the "dreamworld" are also typical of the science fiction genre: the beasts "of every imaginable shade" which pass nightly through the gates; the mythical landscape (the forbidden woods, the mystical pool, the "[g]rasses moving in the breeze, white clouds traveling across the sky, sunlight reflecting on a stream"). This world operates with its own distinct set of values and singular mode of operation, as the narrator discovers upon his initiation, the receiving of his first dreamreading task:

"And what do I do with the dreams I read?"

"Nothing. You have only to read them."

"How can that be?" I say. "I know that I am to read an old dream from this. But then not do anything with it, I do not understand. What can be the point of that? Work should have a purpose."

She shakes her head. "I cannot explain. Perhaps the dreamreading will tell you. I can only show you how it is done.""
The themes of *Hard-boiled Wonderland* are the quintessential themes of the science fiction genre: with the relentless advance of science, what becomes of traditional morality? Is science an uncontrollable beast that will subsume all in its path? How can we maintain our individual identities in the face of the automation of the machine? When "boku" discovers that his memories have been stolen in the name of science and that his conscious reality will come to an end (leaving only the subconscious reality of the "dreamworld"), he has an existential awakening:

They had shoved memories out of my conscious awareness. They had stolen my memories from me! Nobody had that right. Nobody! My memories belonged to me. Stealing memories was stealing time. I got so mad, I lost all fear. I didn't care what happened. I want to live! I will live. I will get out of this insane netherworld and get my stolen memories back and live. Forget the end of the world, I was ready to reclaim my whole self.  

With *Hard-boiled Wonderland*, Murakami has created a science fiction work, in some ways, typical of the genre, in that it acts as a vehicle for social commentary and poses the question: where will the slippery slope of scientific advance lead us?

This study does not argue that Murakami is unique in borrowing popular American literary genres. From the end of the Meiji period through the Taishō period, Tanizaki Junichirō, Satō Haruo, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and most notably Edogawa Rampo created detective fiction of very high quality.
In the twenties, Unno Jūza, Zakai Fuboku, Oguri Mushitarō, and Hisao Jūran began experimenting with original science fiction. In the end, there are innumerable writers who have adopted elements of foreign pulp fiction to Japanese contexts. What is being argued in the case of Murakami Haruki is that he has so internalized these foreign genres that he can "play them," much as a jazz pianist plays the piano, departing at times on challenging, absurd riffs and variations. The point of these exercises in both music and fictional writing is, first, entertainment. However, Murakami's fictions form instruction books of sorts -- providing reliable, cutting-edge aphorism and style relevant to readers living in an age of the emptiness of advanced capitalism.
Notes

1. Rubin, "The Other World of Murakami Haruki" 491.
2. Rubin, "The Other World of Murakami Haruki" 494.
6. Marling 142.
7. Marling 139.
10. Marling 139.
11. Marling 139.
15. Marling 139.
17. Murakami Haruki, Dance Dance Dance 179.
21. Murakami Haruki, Dance Dance Dance 82.
22. Murakami Haruki, Dance Dance Dance 84.
23. Murakami Haruki, *Dance Dance Dance* 64.


27. King 85.


29. King 33.


35. Fitzgerald 18.

36. Fitzgerald 189.


39. Fitzgerald 189.


41. Examples of absurdity abound in John Irving’s works: In *The World According to Garp*, we find Roberta, the former football player who has had a sex change operation as well as Irving’s novel-spanning obsession with bears (compare to Murakami’s sheep). More examples of absurdist fictional elements are found Tim Robbins’ popular *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, whose main character is a woman with an enlarged thumb, who finds it her natural calling to hitchhike. Richard Brautigan has written absurdist variations on most popular genres including romance, detective fiction, and mystery. In Richard Brautigan’s mystery *Willard and his Bowling Trophies*, Willard is a papier-mâché bird whose bowling trophies have
been stolen. In the short stories of Raymond Carver, it is the absurdity of everyday life (see "A Small, Good Thing," "Where I'm Calling From").

CHAPTER II
APHORISMS FOR LIFE IN POSTMODERN TIMES

"Murakami Haruki sees a vast emptiness in the age, in himself, and probably in language itself. He is constantly fixated on the emptiness of the world."


It is tempting find Murakami’s social consciousness in such sweeping, genre-specific themes as, in the science fiction novel, the futuristic evils of technology or, in the detective novel, the corruption of the modern world. But these formulaic themes have surely been imported along with the genres of detective and science fiction themselves. It seems that Murakami makes casual bedfellows with various literary forms, and in so doing, freely manipulates each one’s genre-specific themes and rhetoric. And one needs only to glance at the popular fiction bookshelves to know such themes are about as superficial and mass-produced as any of the ubiquitous brand-name market products found in Murakami’s writing. Murakami probably has as much commitment to these themes as his characters do to their particular brands of soda. It is beneath Murakami’s agile generically-based rhetoric where his true social and thematic significance lies.
He is a writer who has most convincingly captured the fundamental angst of the postmodern age: the experience of nothingness. In this recognition of nothingness, there is the odd, anxiety-producing sense that the "superficialities" of literary forms, fashions, market products may be all there is. But with this rejection of any particular, substantial significance of the material world comes for Murakami a triumph of the interior, an affirmation of the viability and the ultimate reality of the landscape of the mind.

Advanced capitalism and market forces alone are what makes all of these genres and their genre-induced themes possible. For Murakami, this marks the end of independent ideologies, such as Marxism, because the demand for certain literary products produces certain genres, and each genre comes with its own prefabricated theme, which Murakami simply articulates. So it is clearly vastly inappropriate to interpret any of these generic, market-produced themes allegorically, because they are empty themes in which Murakami may or may not have any particular belief or faith. Murakami is not calling for revolution, as Kawamoto and Birnbaum suggest, he is simply playing with literary genres and their inherent themes, enjoying and profiting from the status quo.

The following analysis of ambiguity of place in Murakami Haruki’s works will place him with contemporary postmodern writers, in both his rhetoric and his distrust of
representation, and will illustrate, by example, his articulation of the essential nothingness of the world.

Empty Geographies

If a man is the stones and sands of his familiar places, then what do we make of Murakami Haruki’s predominant literary voice, "boku." Murakami’s preference for ambiguity of place represents a departure from the implicit preference of Murakami’s prewar, realistic literary predecessors for grounded characters living in often specific, highly-detailed locales.

This propensity seems to derive from Murakami’s essential distrust in representation, a distrust from which emerges a distinctly metahistorical approach to fiction. This, in turn, produces hazy, unnamed landscapes and places. Murakami’s inclination toward ambiguity of place represents a departure from the implicit belief of Murakami’s predecessors in language’s ability to represent Truth. This being said, the phenomenal success of Murakami’s works cannot lie in the reader’s ability to escape into easily-visualized, seemingly-accessible alternative geographies, but rather lies with mood, style, rhetoric, and metaphor.

The Critique of Representation and Metahistory

The "critique of representation" denounces the once-pervasive literary dogma which posits that "there is a real
world directly apprehensible by our consciousness, and through our language, we are able to represent the truth of that world."¹ The two-fold challenge rejects the assumptions that (1) reality is apprehensible, (2) language can represent the absolute truth of that reality.

Similarly, the "critique of representation" formulated by Jacques Derrida seems to have at its base the idea of differance, which is "specifically a critique of representation, a critique in the belief in the mimetic nature of language and life."² Derrida, following Saussure, has formulated the construct that language and names are merely signs, and "reality is defined as the words chosen to describe it."³ Thus, the relation is not between Truth and language, rather, between signifier A (whatever is signified by the word "reality") and signifier B (whatever language the author uses to signify signifier A). "Language becomes a slippage from signifier to signifier rather than from signifier to absolute signified," and rather than the so-called loss of center representing any loss whatsoever, it "remarks a 'joyous affirmation': it suggests a world not based on a closing down of meaning through false acquiescence of power but rather on an opening up of the privilege of active interpretation."⁴

Thus, the very idea of history as a set of absolute truths which can be accurately represented by language is, as we have said, quite suspect, "[P]ostmodern fiction rejects any totalitizing view of history . . . choosing instead to
problematize the very notion of history [problematizing] the claim of art as the medium of transcendental, universal values."

Murakami Haruki likewise rejects representation and a totalitizing view of history in "A Slow Boat to China." He begins the work with "boku" endeavoring to create a personal history, thinking "When did I meet my first Chinese?" His mind’s archeologist begins sifting, labeling "all the artifacts, categorizing, analyzing." With the question of "when" burning inside of him, "boku" goes to the library, having decided it was the year Johnson and Patterson fought for the world heavyweight title. He tries to represent what is a free-floating remembrance of the past, to satisfy that archeologist. Before he goes to the library to himself sift through the "Year in Newses" to find the year of the fight, he stops out in front of the library and smokes. He watches "chickens pecking at their feedbox busily" in a henhouse placed next to the main library entrance "for who knows what reason."

After the cigarette, a fairly mundane ("for what it’s worth") change occurs in him, as randomly-occurring as a henhouse in front of a library:

After my cigarette, something’s changed in me. Again, who knows why? But, for what it’s worth, the new me -- five chickens and a smoke away from what I was -- now poses myself two questions:

First, Who could possibly have any interest in the exact date when I met my first Chinese?
And second, what exactly is there to be gained from spreading out those Year in Newses on a sunny reference room desk?" Given the arbitrary nature of the world, even if there is absolute truth, it is irrelevant, worthless and unnatural to try to put dates on random occurrences. Indeed, instead of labeling, categorizing and analyzing the "tell" of his past, "boku" smokes another cigarette, gets back on his bike and "bids farewell to fowl and file copies. If birds in flight go unburdened by names, let my memories be free of dates."10

Further, nothing can be gained by spreading out those Histories known as Year in Newses on a sunny reference room desk (the sun with its very real, sensual warmth being contrasted with the contrivance of chronicles of history). Murakami directly critiques the view of history as something which can be known by analyzing, and we are now thrust into the world of the postmodern, where history is "discourse, something that is manipulated first by the teller and then by the receiver."11

Murakami starts from this admission -- that he has not checked those "Year in Newses", and the narrative will proceed, however brazenly, from this point. He further cautions us:

My recall is a damn sight short of total. It's so unreliable that I sometimes think I'm trying to prove something by it. But what would I be proving. Especially since inexactness is not exactly the sort of thing you can prove with any accuracy."12
The author invites us into the realm of "historic metafiction," a fluid, interactive world where it is neither the author's nor the narrator's role to chronologize or chronicle the past.

In "Slow Boat", "boku" positively revels in his necessarily "active role" as a manipulator of history -- his "impressibly iffy" memory, the fabrications, the mingling, the inexactness one cannot prove with any accuracy:

I get things the wrong way around, fabrications turn into fact, sometimes my own eyewitness account interchanges with somebody else's. At which point, can you even call it memory anymore? 13

Murakami raises the gauntlet, simultaneously inviting and daring the reader to participate in his theater-in-the-round, as "boku" tells us not just to read but "[w]itness the sum of what I'm capable of dredging up from primary school (those pathetic six years of sunsets in the heyday of postwar democracy)." 14 And because Murakami has dispensed with any pretense of representation, we can think of history as discourse rather than as something to be known or conquered. Murakami writes the contrivances and chaos of history, raising his voice, challenging us to join.

Moreover, fiction and memory, says Murakami in the rather melancholy "The Last Lawn of the Afternoon," form "this pile of kittens lolling all over one another. Warm with life, hopelessly unstable ... No matter how hard you try to put everything neatly into shape, the context wanders this way and that, until the context isn't even there anymore." 15 Again,
with considerable grace and understatement, Murakami tells us that his memories are kittens, and when writing, he goes back, again and again, "gathering kittens and piling them up again,"¹⁶ a stance which is about as far away from representationalism as one can be.

The Marxist Paradigm of the Empty Room

Thus, if History is history and memories are kittens, what happens to place, if, according to M.M. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, time and place are inseparable? It seems that places in Murakami Haruki's works are often unnamed with a nebulous sense of geography. The elementary school in "Slow Boat" is simply referred to as "The Chinese elementary school," and it seems the rule rather than the exception that there is no mention of the city or the town in which the action takes place in any of the short stories -- as in "Barn Burning," "Family Affair," "The Second Bakery Attack," to name a few. One has the feeling that each story is occurring in suspension, territory without the anchor of geographical naming.¹⁷

According to Kawamoto, when place is mentioned in Murakami's works, it is usually a place notorious for consuming: such as Sapporo as a place where consumers go to ski, or Roppongi, where consumers go for drinks, dancing and the consumption of flesh. These names appear but, rather than signifying a real sense of people living in them, they signify
strong empty images. These are the show windows of capitalism, says Kawamoto, as simply signs, brand names.

Kawamoto also discusses the idea of the "empty room" in relation to Murakami's 1973 story "Pinball." In this story, the Rat, hanging up in an empty room, tries to remember the image of the room of his girlfriend. He can remember the orange tablecloth, the bookshelves occupied by audio cassettes of Bach, Mozart, Haydn. He realizes that he has forgotten the light on the ceiling and the carpet -- completely forgetting what makes a room a room. Thus, the room lacks reality and is floating in the darkness.

This reality without reality represents the latest stage of advanced capitalism in the Marxist framework: the inhabitants of the room have become entirely alienated from their surroundings (the mass-produced cassette tapes, the marketed products) and, in the process, have become alienated from self, other men, and nature. In the case of the room the Rat tries to remember: it is full of things, but there is so little identification with any of it that he cannot remember that which separates the room from the outside and thus makes it a room, the ceiling and the floor. This room cruelly represents ourselves, in that the room, ourselves, and society are without purpose.

Kawamoto argues this is why Murakami's places are so vacuous. Though there are cities and they have buildings,
they are without the smell of human life. Every major city is like a hotel, with no sense of place -- gray, ubiquitous, inanimate.

Is Murakami’s world so irredeemably stark and sad? The following setting, from "The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday’s Women," is typical in its Murakamian vacuity (recalling the Marxist paradigm of "the empty room"):

I’m in the kitchen cooking spaghetti when the woman calls. Another moment until the spaghetti is done; there I am whistling the prelude to Rossini’s La Gazza Ladra along with the FM radio. Perfect spaghetti-cooking music.

I hear the telephone ringing but tell myself, Ignore it. Let the spaghetti finish cooking. It’s almost done, and besides, Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra are coming to a crescendo.13

Again, the room is full of images: the cooking spaghetti, the FM radio playing Rossini’s La Gazza Ladra, a ringing telephone. Though the Italian spaghetti and Italian opera are both reaching their respective crescendos, Rossini’s La Gazza Ladra is probably playing in a million households, the brand of spaghetti was probably bought by no fewer people. The whole experience is entirely purchasable. All the while, "boku", cooking his spaghetti, listening to the radio, is not overwhelmed by an aching sense of the emptiness of it all. Quite to the contrary, pleased and contented, he does not wish to answer the phone.
The pleasure "boku" finds in the empty room makes the dark, melancholy Marxist aspect of Murakamian nothingness fairly untenable. Murakami Haruki does not "battle nothingness," as argued by Kawamoto. Rather, the works start with an acknowledgment of the nothingness and vacuity of the world and a fundamental distrust in language's powers of representation. And though the rooms are empty in the sense that everything in them is mass-produced, the characters do not often seem to feel like the empty products of the post-industrial age. Instead, they dance. At monotonously interchangeable discos in Roppongi, they stare into the eyes of their only ones. In their worlds of postmodern semi-alienation, people still fall in love, fall in bed, drink gin and mow lawns. So, has anything much changed and is anything all that ominous?

Vacant Hotels

The preference for ambiguity of place represents a departure from the prewar, realistic tendency toward detailed description of setting, as we see when we compare the hotel in "Kanojo no machi to kanojo no menyō" (Her Town and Her Sheep, 1982) with the hotel in Mori Ōgai's "Fushinchū" (Under Construction, 1911). The post-modern everyman experience in "Kanojo no machi" is fairly antiseptic, gray, and universal -- in that the hotel has no meaningful name, is without unique description, and is altogether common (as is the Dolphin Hotel
in *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Dance Dance Dance*). It is simply "a place" to which the narrator departs after talking with a friend whom he had chanced to meet on the plane. He goes to his room, sits on the bed, and tunes the television to a local channel. He orders a salmon sandwich and watches the woman on the television describe her rural town, and closes his eyes thinking of the heads of 100 sheep. He never goes anywhere in Sapporo, is predictably uninterested in the nondescript hotel, and does not even wish to visit the woman’s town.

Compare this to the lush opulence of the hotel in Mori Ogai’s "Fushinchū." The main character Watanabe is led into the overly-large "salon" of the "Seiyōken Hoteru." There is a sofa by the window and miniature grape vines bearing fruit. He goes through this room to another room of the appropriate size. The table is set, there is a basket of orange flowers. It is a small, cozy room which could be used for four people, but is too small for six. He goes back to the Salon and waits there alone. He hears noises and suddenly stops, and, looking at his watch, sees it is just five. He sits on the sofa, starts smoking his cigar, opens a window. He looks out and sees lumber which he thinks probably will be used for the front door, and, in the distance, sees some red, brick houses. Inside the salon, there are hanging scrolls on the wall and the subject of each seems unrelated. At the entrance of the small room, there is a pair of hanging writings which supposedly have pre-Sinitic Japanese orthography. Watanabe
thinks that Japan is not a nation of art. He hears footsteps and people talking, stands from the sofa, puts out his cigar, and sees the woman he once knew years ago.

While in "Kanojo no machi," the hotel experience is drab and commonplace, Watanabe's experience at the Seiyōken Hoteru is one to be savored slowly like a good cigar. It must still have been a glorious, somewhat singular affair to go to a fancy hotel in those days, so Ōgai allows his reader to drink in vicariously every sumptuous detail. The mood of the two works is decisively different -- "Kanojo"'s is monotone, ambivalent and placeless, as opposed to "Fushinchū"s baroque opulence. This realistic opulence, however, may be exactly the kind of "closing down of meaning through a false acquiescence of power" to which Marshall refers.\(^\text{11}\)

Obviously, the tactile, realistic description of place in "Fushinchū" would be very appealing to a reader interested in escapism -- the reader can sink into the couch in the salon of the Seiyōken hotel, smell the cigar, and look out the window at red, brick houses. So the question becomes, where do we find depth in Murakami Haruki, given that one cannot similarly depart into easily-visualized pictorial landscapes of fiction?

The Recognition of Nothingness

"Boku's" interchangeable, empty places often signify a narrator who is not particularly emotionally tied to where he is, and seem to speak of the shiftless, groundless
disaffection of a kind of drifter -- the man to whom every
town seems like the last, every hotel like the one before.
Even countries cease to have borders: In *Dance*, Hawaii is
just like any place in Japan, only less expensive and faster
to reach than most destinations.

In this framework, Murakami's empty, meaningless rooms,
the names of places, even genre itself may be recognized as
merely gaudy, superficial colors painted on a backdrop of
nothingness -- and concurrently, a rejection of the external,
material world. And this very rejection marks the victory,
for Murakami, of the *interior*. In *Hard-boiled Wonderland*,
when the narrator's material world is about to end, and he
will be left with his interior, fantastical world of
dreamreading and unicorns, at first he resists. But in the
end, he not only accedes to but embraces what was before
considered the end of the world. What emerges from this is
the overriding, intertextual, genre-spanning Murakamian theme:
the material world is at its base illusory, arbitrary and
vacuous, and all we have or have ever really had are our own
interior worlds. In *Dance*, when "boku" recognizes that the
hotel, with its programmed music, plush carpet and resident
Sheep Man is the only place he ever belonged, it is not the
hotel itself which he has found -- rather, it is the hotel as
metaphor for the transcendent self. And this marks the
triumph for the autistic self living in the arbitrary world --
the self in "A Slow Boat to China," who puts a girl on a train
going the wrong way for no reason at all or the self who cannot resist being lobotomized by the television in "TV People." For if the material world is vacuous and arbitrary, Murakami tells us to look within.

The intellectual force and thematic significance of Murakami's works seem to be found in his rapid-fire aphorisms, which shock the reader into realization of interior life, in all its infinite absurd variation. Examples abound in every work that he has written. There are turns of the phrase about life, sex, death, and all manner of things. Of course, Murakami's classic quip about life is from the mouth of the Sheep Man, "Dance. As long as the music plays." In Wild Sheep Chase, Murakami philosophizes on sex: "Our human sex life -- how should I put it? -- differs fundamentally from the sex life of the whale." In Hard-boiled Wonderland, Murakami begins the novel thinking about fat and death: "There must be as many paths of human fat as there are ways of human death."

In Murakami, there is almost a "portable" quality in the way one can abstract certain aphorisms, subsets, phrases or scenes and store them in the brain, as one can put cookie fortunes in the pocket. These witticisms, these scenes, even the sheep as image or metaphor are of infinite utility at dinner parties, but more than that, can be seen as perhaps Murakami's small ministry to a troubled world. The "portability" and the cleverly-articulated easy truth of what
he says combine in formidable force: the words are mentally inscribable in their brevity as well as intelligent and meaningful in their content.

We can see how a kind of "ministry of aphorism" works in the Murakami's novels. His characters themselves use literary aphorisms in their daily lives and abstract them out of context in moments of difficulty or revelation for solace or insight, just as Murakami's readership might do the same with his aphorisms. We never see anyone turn to organized religion or any kind of scriptures in Murakami's writing, but we always see characters turn to literature and aphorism as a means of perhaps more relevant self-therapy. In *Wild Sheep Chase*, when "boku" secludes himself for weeks in the cottage waiting for the Sheep Man, his mind turns to the asceticism of books, simple meals, exercise, and whiskey. When his friend the Rat finally returns, their early conversation includes an aphorism: "Didn't someone once say, 'A friend to kill time is a friend sublime'?" In *Hard-boiled Wonderland*, when the narrator's conscious world is about to completely end, so much of what he has read comes back to him in his time of crisis: the Karamozav brothers (whose names he can't remember), *Lord Jim*, and an unnamed work by Joseph Conrad. The narrator quotes Joseph Conrad to himself, to assure himself that he is not alone, that he is not "[a]drift on the open sea." Writes Murakami, "From my position on the ground, the sky seemed the logical culmination of all existence. The same with the sea.
If you look at the sea for days, the sea is all there is. Quoth Joseph Conrad."26 Murakami’s characters seem to find a level of peace and even sanctuary in the written word, as expressed in short, extractable quips, as Murakami’s readership might also find.

But Murakami is not a dictatorial prophet: a certain disjointability of his works allows for any number of personal, interpretive games to be played by the reader, and this fact is ironically substantiated by the very ones who would ascribe a single meaning to his works. The number of ways his works are critically received, and specifically, the manner in which the image of the sheep has been so often removed from the text and constantly reinterpreted is lucid proof of his works’ disjointability.27 Further, Murakami himself invites us out to play, as exemplified by his steadfast refusal to explain what the sheep "means." So we can pick up Murakami’s words as moral instructions or verbal playthings, take them completely out of context, remember them by their brevity -- and do with them what we will.
Notes


27. This paragraph’s formulation owes much to Umberto Eco’s discussion of "cult objects" such as *Casablanca, The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Hamlet*. See, Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 127-128.
CHAPTER III

BRIEF INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION OF "POOLSIDE"

"Poolside" embodies much of the style of Murakami's mature fiction. All of the hallmarks of Murakami's writing are in this short story: the borrowing of genre, the discovery of the emptiness of advanced capitalism and consumption, quick aphorisms taking the place of ideology, and sexual fetishism.

First is Murakami's pastiche of borrowed literary genres. "Poolside" is a day in the life story in the style of Raymond Carver: one wakes up, on this day like all days, does one's little daily rituals, and suddenly, the world falls utterly apart but soon comes back together. Along the way, Murakami's "boku" discovers the emptiness of life and the postmodern consumer lifestyle: the green MG, the young lover, the classical music collection -- none of these make growing older any easier. In "Poolside," aphorisms take the place of ideology; as when "boku" is lying on the floor listening to Anton Bruckner's symphony in the middle of the night: "It was the kind of peculiar feeling of bliss you could only imagine with music: a vast expenditure of time and energy and talent . . ." In the end, there is a complete lack of any political
or ideological significance to the work; it cannot be interpreted allegorically.

And then there is element of sexual fetishism. His friend’s eye catches the flash of "boku"'s silver ring, and imagines the long, slender finger stroking the bodies of his wife and lover. The ring as an object is what catches the eye and is what is desired; it makes very little difference in this context whether the object is worn by a man or a woman.

In short, this story represents in microcosm all of the major postmodern elements of Murakami’s fiction.
"Poolside"

In the spring that he became 35, he realized for sure that he had already gone around the turning point of life.

No, that isn’t it exactly.

To be precise, wasn’t it that in the spring of his 35th year that he had decided to go around the turning point of life?

Of course, nobody knows how many years his life will last. But, what if he were going to live until 78, then the turning point would be 39 and he would have four years to spare. And, considering the good state of his health and the average life expectancy of a Japanese male, then 78 was not even a particularly over-optimistic conjecture.

All the same, he did not have a single shred of doubt in deciding that his 35th birthday was the turning point. This is what he thought: he could stagger inch by inch the great distance to death, and in so continuing, surely he could completely lose sight of the sharply-defined turning point in life. You could think of your appropriate life expectancy going from 78 to 80, 80 to 82, 82 to 84. That way, you extend life second by second. And then, one day you would notice that you are already 50, but 50 is too late as far as turning points are concerned. Because who really lives to be 100? If a man did that, his life’s turning point would vanish, without his even knowing it. This is what he thought.
Since about the time he was a little past 20, he had been feeling that this concept of turning points was an essential factor in his own life. Its basis was that one must first know exactly where one is standing in order to know oneself.

Perhaps his way of thinking was in no small way influenced by the fact that he had been a first-class competitive swimmer for close to 10 years, from the time he had entered junior high school until he had graduated from college. In sports like swimming, marking off segments is certainly necessary. The fingertips touch the pool wall. In the same instant, his body dances in the water like a dolphin’s and in a single blink changes direction. Then with the back of his feet, he resolutely kicks the pool wall and plunges into the last 200 meters. This is the somersault turn.

In a swimming competition if there were no somersault turn and no marking off of distance, swimming the 400 meter race would doubtless be an unmitigated, dark hell. It is because of the somersault turn that he could mark the 400 meters into 2 parts. He could think, "Now, it’s at least half over," and then divide the remaining 200 meters again into half. "And now, it’s three-quarters over," and again halve it. This is how the long road is increasingly subdivided, and just as the distance is divided, likewise is the will. "Before anything else, I’ll finish the next five meters." And
if you swim five meters at a time, the distance of 400 meters is shortened by 1/80. Just because of this type of thinking, while vomiting and convulsing, he could finish swimming those last 50 meters with all his might.

I do not know what kind of thought process other athletes embrace when they swim laps in a pool. But, this formula for dividing seemed to be the most fitting, and further, the most honest way of thinking there was for him. He had learned in the 50-meter pool the fact that no matter how gigantic a task might seem, and no matter how minute the will that was directed toward it might appear, if you broke it down into 5-meter segments, nothing was impossible. The most important thing in life is a clear, distinct recognition of things.

So, with his 35th birthday drawing right before his eyes, he didn’t hesitate at all in thinking that this was his life’s turning point. After all, isn’t 35 nothing more than just half of 70? And 70 would be enough, wouldn’t it? And if he did live to be past 70, that would be that, and he would appreciate it and live on that much more. But according to his formula, his lifetime would be cut at 70 years. He decided to swim full speed ahead to 70. In so doing, he told himself, I will, without a doubt, ride through the rough parts and will have gotten through my life in very good shape.
And so, with this, half of my life is over, he thought.

March 24th, 1983 was his 35th birthday. His wife gave him a green cashmere sweater. In the evening, the two of them went to their favorite restaurant in Aoyama, and had a bottle of wine, ate some fresh seafood. And then, as usual, they each four or five gin and tonics at a quiet bar. He had decided not to tell his wife about what he’d been thinking about his decision about "turning points." He knew quite well that such views sometimes seem stupid in the eyes of others.

They took a taxi home, and then they had sex. He took a shower, then went to the kitchen and grabbed a beer. When he went back to the bedroom, with the beer can in his hand, his wife was already sleeping soundly. He hung his necktie and suit in the wardrobe and quietly folded his wife’s silk dress and put it on the table. He rolled up her shirt and stockings and threw them in the bathroom hamper.

He sat on the couch, and drinking his beer by himself, studied his wife’s sleeping face for some time. She had just turned 30 in January. She was still on the other side of the watershed. He was already on this side of the divide. A strange sensation came over him as he thought this. He downed the rest of his beer, folded his arms behind his head and laughed silently to himself.

Of course, some revision was possible. It would also be all right if he settled on the idea that he would live to be 80. If this were so, the turning point would become 40, and
he could stay on the other side of the divide for 5 more years. But, the answer was no. He had turned 35 and had already made the turning point. And wasn’t that just as well?

He went to the kitchen and drank another beer. Then, he lied face down in front the stereo in the living room, put on headphones, and listened to a symphony by Anton Bruckner until 2:00 a.m. When he listened to Bruckner’s majestic symphonies in the middle of the night, he always experienced a sense of ironic joy. It was the kind of peculiar feeling of bliss you could only imagine when surrounded by music: a vast expenditure of time and energy and talent . . .

In the first place, I should let you know that I’m writing down exactly what he said from beginning to end. Of course, there are matters of stylistic dramatization, and I also abbreviated, at my discretion, parts that I thought were unnecessary. Also, there are sections where I had asked him a question and then filled in the details. There are also some places, albeit very few, where I made full use of my creativity. But, as a whole, I don’t think there’s a problem in considering what I’ve written to be exactly what he said. His way of talking was precise and to the point, and where it was important to be accurate, I carefully and faithfully described the situation. He told me this story at the sports club where we were members, by the side of the pool.
The day after his birthday was Sunday. He woke up at nine, boiled some hot water and made coffee, then ate a lettuce and cucumber salad. Atypically, his wife was still sound asleep. He finished his breakfast and, while listening to music, did fifteen minutes of the tough set of hard calisthenics that had been part of his demanding training when he had been on the swim team. He took a rather tepid shower, washed his hair and shaved. He spent a long time carefully brushing his teeth. Using only a little toothpaste, he worked his toothbrush over the front and back of each tooth, one by one. He used dental floss on the debris between the teeth. In the bathroom, for himself alone, he had three kinds of toothbrushes lined up in a row. In order that he would not, by some quirk, use the same one over and over, he had constructed a rotation, and each time their use was split up.

With this daily ritual finished, he didn’t go for his usual walk in the neighborhood. He stood, naked as the day he was born, in front of the full-length mirror on the dressing room wall. He inspected his body thoroughly. At any rate, this was the first morning of the second half of his life. Just as a doctor examines the body of a newborn baby, he looked over every corner of his body with a sense of mystery and wonder.

First it was his hair, then scalp, teeth, chin, hands, stomach, chest, penis, testicles, thighs, feet. He spent a
long time checking them one by one and made a mental note inside his head of his physical pluses and minuses. Comparing the amount of hair on his head with the time he was in his twenties, it had gotten somewhat thinner, but it wasn’t much of anything to be especially concerned about yet. Maybe he could make it to fifty like this. As for my body, it’s in great shape, he said to himself, and because, in my case, my head has a nice shape, it won’t look bad or embarrassing even if I become bald. Since he was a young child, he had been fated with a fair number of cavities, and a number of his teeth had been replaced. But, since three years ago, and owing to his conscientious brushing of his teeth, the progress of decay had stopped dead in its tracks. "If you had started this 20 years ago, you wouldn’t even have one false tooth," said the dentist. Yes, that’s true enough, but it’s useless to lament about what is done and gone. It’s just everything to maintain the present now. He asked the dentist until what age he would be able to chew with his own teeth. "Until about 60," said the dentist, "if you keep on taking good care of your teeth like you have been." And that was long enough for him.

The coarsening of the skin on his face was typical of a person his age. Because his coloring was good, he looked at a glance very youthful, but when he approached the mirror and looked at his face intently, there were small irregularities on the surface of the skin. Every year, when summer came, he
tanned excessively and he had smoked too many cigarettes for a long time. From now on, good quality lotion or skin cream was necessary. There was more to his chin than he had though there was. This was a hereditary thing. However much exercise he did and pared away the flesh on his checks, the fleshy veil on his face which looked faintly like accumulated snow would not melt off. Like the years that piled one on top of another, this was inevitable. Was I, too, destined to have a double chin, like my father? Ultimately, all one can do is resign one’s self to it.

As far as his abdomen was concerned, the pluses versus the minuses were 60/40. Due to exercise and diet planning, his abdomen was much tighter compared with three years ago. For a 35 year old, that was very good. But, the fleshy parts from the side to his back could not be trimmed off with half-hearted exercise. As he turned and looked at himself from the side, the line of his waist which, in his college days, had been so sharp and clean as if it had been cut with a knife, was now gone. His genitals had not changed much. Compared with before, it seemed as if their vitality was lessened, but, on the whole, perhaps this was all in his head. The number of times he had sex was not as often as before, but as of now, he had never been impotent and there wasn’t any sexual dissatisfaction between him and his wife.

Taken as a whole, his 173 centimeter 64 kilogram frame, there was no was comparison with those of the men his own age
that he knew since he was so well preserved. He could even
pass for 28. Indeed, his ability to call forth energy
instantly was waning, but in the area of endurance he had
progressed beyond what he could do in his twenties because of
his training.

But, his careful eyes missed nothing of the inevitable,
slowly-approaching shadow of old age. On his mental
checklist, he clearly marked the pluses and minuses on a
balance sheet, and nothing spoke more eloquently of this
reality than the balance sheet of pluses and minuses he had
carved on his mental checklist. No matter how much he might
deceive others, it would not be possible to deceive himself.

I’m growing older

It was an immovable fact. No matter how much one tries,
a man cannot avoid aging. Just like a cavity: its advance can
be put off, but no matter how much you delay it, the decay of
age will have some effect. What is called a man’s life has
that particular condition programmed into it. As the years go
by, the amount you try to do versus the amount you gain
becomes less and less, and eventually nothing.

He came out of the bathroom, dried himself with a towel,
and laid down on the couch, doing nothing for a long time but
stare at blankly at the ceiling. In the next room, his wife
was doing the ironing and humming a Billy Joel song coming
from radio. It’s the one about the steel mills closing. A
typical Sunday morning. The smell of the iron, and Billy Joel, and the morning shower. "Speaking honestly about aging and my body, it’s not so much that I’m afraid. Like I said before. It’s just in my nature to want to resist and confront things. Even so, it’s not that I find it really very trying or painful," he said to me. "For me, the biggest problem is far more vague. I know it’s out there, but it’s not something you can face squarely and fight. It’s that kind of thing."

"This thing you’re talking about, is it something you feel?" I asked.

He nodded. "Maybe that’s it." Then he tapped his fingers on the table as if he were feeling awkward. "Of course, I know enough to realize that it is foolish for a man of 35 to be bringing up and rehashing all this in front of people. It’s as if everyone has this intangible element in their lives. Don’t you think so?"

"You’re probably right," I echoed.

"But, to tell the truth, in reality, this is the first time in my life that I have ever understood it so clearly like this. In short, I’ve felt this indescribable, intangible thing somehow lurking inside me. But what I don’t know is what the hell to do about it."

Since there was nothing for me to say, I remained silent. Doubtless he was experiencing confusion inside, but even in his confusion, what he said made sense. So I said nothing and continued to listen to his story.
He was born in the suburbs of Tokyo. It was the spring of 1948, still the immediate postwar period. He had one older brother, and later, a sister, five years younger than he, was born. His father was originally a realtor of medium-sized buildings, and later, he achieved considerable success by going into the business of renting office space along the Chūō train line during the high-growth period of the 1960s. When he was fourteen, his parents divorced, but due to complicated circumstances, all three children remained with their father.

He went from the private, first-rate junior high school to a high school of the same organization, and then ascended as if by escalator to college. His grades were not bad. When he started college, he moved to his father’s highrise apartment in Mita. And so, five days a week he swam at the pool, and the other two he allocated for dates with girls. He did not play around in an obvious way, but he did not want for companionship, either. Until he was engaged, he never had a steady relationship with a girl. He had tried marijuana, and he had once attended a political demonstration at a friend’s behest. He did not study in any way that one could really call studying, but because he made a point to never miss a class, he left behind above-average grades. His approach was to never take a single note. If one were going to take notes at some moment, it would be more productive just to listen that much more intently at that time.
Of all the people around him, no one could grasp the essence of his personality. Not his family, not his friends, not the girls he saw. What he thought about deep in his soul, nobody could know. The mystery was, even though he didn’t seem all that bright and he almost never studied, he constantly managed to get grades near the top of the class. In spite of this ambiguous streak, his in-born gentle kindness itself drew many kinds of people, very naturally, to him. And a result was that he was able to achieve many things for himself. He made a good impression on his superiors, too. But, when he left college, contrary to everyone’s expectation, he did not go to work for a first-rate company, instead, he chose to work for a small, no-name educational materials sales company that nobody had ever heard of. The average person was dumbfounded by this, but of course, he had expected as much. For three years, he worked as a salesman, going around to the junior highs and high schools in all over Japan, and observed in great detail from both sides of the teachers and the students what kind of hardware and software they wanted. He also examined, school by school, how much they had allotted for educational materials. He also learned about giving rebates. He drank with the young teachers, and listened to their complaints. He enthusiastically visited classes. And during this time, his performance record at business continued to rank at the top.
In the fall three years after he had joined the company, he came up with a thick proposal for new educational materials, and presented it to the company president's office. It was a landmark educational software system, interfacing videotape and computer, which allowed for teacher and student to jointly participate in the production of software. Work out a few of the technical kinks, and in principle it was a workable system.

The company president gave his independent okay, and with its creator as the central figure, a project team was formed. After two years, he had achieved overwhelming success. The educational system he had created was expensive, but it was not completely out of reach; and once the buyer purchased it, it was so designed that the company profited by its upkeep alone.

Everything went according to his calculations. This was, for him, the ideally-sized company. It was not the kind of big company where new trials were crushed by strings of bureaucratic meetings, nor was it so small that it lacked capital. The management was young and sufficiently motivated.

In this way, before he even became 30, he had virtually executive power. His annual income was higher than anyone else his age.

In the autumn of his 29th year, he married a woman he had dating since two years before, five years younger than him. She was not startling beautiful, but she was good looking and
attractive enough to draw people's attention. Her upbringing was good, she was faithful and didn't want too much. She had a gentle disposition and pretty teeth. One's first impression of her wasn't so great, but she was the type of girl you feel better about the more times you saw her. Upon his marriage, he bought an apartment in a mansion in Nogizaka from his father's company for practically nothing.

In their married life, they didn't have even one problem. They were very happy with each other, and their living together went along very smoothly. He liked his job, she liked homemaking, and they both liked going out and having fun more than anything else. They chose some married couples for their friends, and they did things like play tennis together and eat out. He took a used MG off the hands of one of their friends at a really good price. Compared to a new Japanese car, the mandatory automobile inspection cost more money, but even with that, it was still a bargain. Because that married couple had had a child, the MG, having only two seats, had become useless for them. But he and his wife had decided not to have children for now. For them, it seemed that life had only just begun.

"I'm not so young anymore," he thought to himself for the first time on the second spring after their wedding. Of course, he stood naked in front of the mirror, and noticed that the line of his body had changed radically as compared with before. It was completely someone else's body. In
short, the legacy of the swim training he had done until he was twenty-two had been completely laid to waste in those 10 years. Alcohol, gourmet food, city living, a sports car, moderate sex and a lack of exercise had stuck to his frame in the shape of ugly fat. He thought that after three years, he would certainly become an ugly middle-aged man.

He first went to the dentist and had his teeth completely fixed, then drew up an agreement with a diet consultant for a comprehensive diet menu. First, he cut down on his sugar, restricted his intake of rice, and classified his fats. There was no restriction on alcohol, as long as it he did not overdo it, but he could only have ten cigarettes a day. It was decided that he would have meat only once a week. He thought it wasn’t necessary to be fanatic about everything, so he decided to eat his favorite things in moderation when he ate out.

He knew well that he would have to do something as far as exercise. Sports like tennis and golf that seemed like good exercise were no good for paring down the flesh of the body. Each day, he did 20 or 30 minutes of precise calisthenics, and combined it with the right amount of swimming and running, and he thought that was enough.

After eight months, his weight went down from 70 to 64 kilograms. His full, sagging stomach dropped off, the shape of his navel became clearly distinct. His cheeks hollowed,
his shoulders broadened, the position of his testicles was lower than before, and his breath got better.

And then he found a lover.

She was a woman 9 years his junior whom he had met sitting next to him at a classical music concert. She wasn’t beautiful, but she had something about her that men liked. After the concert, they went out for a drink and then went to bed. She was single, worked at a travel agency, and had many boyfriends besides him. Neither he nor she expected that it would be anything more involved than what it was. They would meet once or twice a month at a concert, then go to bed. His wife wasn’t the least bit interested in classical music, so his quiet affair continued smoothly without incident for two years.

He learned one particular fact through this affair. The surprising thing was, he had already reached his sexual prime. At 33, he could give a 24-year old woman exactly what she needed, not too much or too little. It came to him as a new discovery, that he was in a position to be the giver. No matter how much weight he lost, he couldn’t go back to being a young person again.

Lying on the sofa, he lit his first cigarette of the day.

This was the first half of his life, 35-year half on the other side of the divide. He had asked and he had received many of the things he had sought. He had worked hard and his
luck had been good. He had a worthwhile job, a high annual income, a happy marriage, a young lover, a firm body, a green MG and his classical music collection. If there were anything more to be wanted beyond this, he couldn’t think what else it could be.

He smoked his cigarette, lying on the couch. He couldn’t think well. He put out the cigarette in the ashtray and looked absently at the ceiling.

Billy Joel was singing a song about the Vietnam War. His wife was still ironing. He did not have one complaint. But, then he noticed that he was crying. Hot tears fell from both of his eyes. Tears rolled down his cheeks, one after the other, staining the sofa cushion. He did not know why he was crying. There shouldn’t even be a reason for it. Maybe it was because of that Billy Joel song; maybe it was the smell of the iron.

Ten minutes later, when his wife had finished the ironing and came close to him, he had stopped crying. He had already turned the cushion over. She sat down next to him, and said that she wanted to buy a new guest futon. He said that he couldn’t care less about guest futons, but just get the one you like. With that, she was satisfied. They then went to Ginza and saw the new Francois Truffant film. Before they were married, they had seen his film the "Wild Child." The new one wasn’t as good as the "Wild Child," but it wasn’t bad either.
When they left the movie theater, they went to a coffee shop and he drank a beer, and she ate some ice cream with steamed chestnuts. Then he went to the record shop and bought a Billy Joel LP. It was the one that had the songs of the closing of the steel mills and the Vietnam war on it. He didn't think it was particularly great music, but he bought it so he could see one more time what kind of emotion it would evoke in him.

"Why did you feel like buying a Billy Joel album?" she asked, surprised.

He smiled and didn't answer.

* * *

There was a glass wall on one side of the Terrace Cafe and it overlooked the panorama of the pool below one's eyes. There were long, slender skylights on the ceiling, and from there, the brightness of the sun shone in and danced on the surface of the water. The bright beams reached to the bottom of the pool; other beams reflected off surface of the water and created a strange, meaningless pattern on the flat white painted wall.

He thought that when you looked steadily down at it, the pool lost, little by little, the feeling of actually being a pool. Perhaps it was because the water was too clear, he thought. It seemed that because the water was clearer than it needed to be, it created a white void between the surface of the water and the bottom of the pool. In the pool, there were
two young women and a middle-aged man, and rather than swimming they seemed to be gliding over the white space. At the side of the pool, there was a white, painted lifeguard deck, and a fine-figured young lifeguard wore a bored look as gazed out at the surface of the pool.

He had pretty much finished his story and, raising his hand, called the waitress over and ordered another beer. Until the beer came, they did nothing but stare absently at the surface of the pool.

I had only known him for two months. We were both members of the sports club and you could call us swimming buddies. He was the one who corrected the right arm stroke of my crawl for me. We made small talk over cold beers at this same Cafe Terrace after swimming. One time, we were talking about our jobs and when I said that I was a novelist, he sank into silence for a brief time. Then asked me if I wouldn’t listen to a little story.

"It’s about myself," he said. "I think it’s fairly unremarkable, and you might find it boring. But, no matter what, I’ve been thinking all along that I wanted someone to listen to it. If I hold it too close to me forever, I’ll never make sense of it."

I said that it was fine with me. He didn’t seem like the type of person to go on at great length with a boring story and bother someone. If he had something he specifically
seemed to want to tell me, I thought at least it might be a story worth listening to.

So he told me this story.

And I listened to his story.

"So, since you’re a novelist, what do you think of it? Is it interesting or boring? I want you to answer honestly."

"It’s a story which has interesting elements," I carefully and honestly replied.

He smiled and shook his head. "Yeah, maybe that’s it. But I really don’t know which parts of this story are interesting. I can’t seem to grab the central, interesting part of this story. If I could just seize that, I get the feeling that I could understand the situation that surrounds me more precisely."

"You could be on to something," I said.

"Do you know where the interesting parts of this story are?" he said and looked into my eyes.

"I don’t know. But I think there are places where your story is quite interesting. From the eyes of a writer, it looks good. But with any story, until I sit down with my pen and set to work, I don’t really know where it’s interesting. It’s that kind of thing. As for me, until I get something into writing, I can’t see the shape of things well."

"I know what you’re trying to say," he said.

We were quiet for a long time and each drank his beer. He was wearing a beige button-down shirt and a pale green
cashmere sweater, and rested his elbows on the table, propping his chin on his hands. The silver of the wedding ring, on his long, thin ring finger, was glowing. I imagined that finger stroking his alluring wife and young lover.

"But, it’s fine with me if you write this story," he said.

"But, it might get published somewhere if I do."

"That’s fine. I think it’s probably better if you were to publish it," he said.

"But what if it gets out, about you and the girl?" I said. In my experience, if you model a character after a person, it’s about 100 percent likely that the people around will know that you have. "All right. I’d expect as much," he said as if it were nothing.

"Even if it gets out," I confirmed.

He nodded.

"I don’t really like to lie," he said as we started to leave. "Even if the lie doesn’t hurt anyone, I don’t want to lie. I don’t want to live the rest of my life having to deceive and use people like that."

I wanted to say something in reply, but the right words wouldn’t come. This was because what he said was the truth.

Even now, when I’m at the pool, I see him once in a while. We no longer have long conversations. Sitting poolside, we only talk about things such as the weather or
recent concerts. What he would think if he read this story, I have no idea.
LIST OF REFERENCES


