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Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki

Abstract: This article is concerned with how Murakami Haruki has used the techniques of “magical realism” to challenge and explore the concept of individual identity in Japan. It argues that Murakami’s raison d’être as a writer is to expose the steady decay of individual identity in members of the generation born immediately after the Second World War, and in each succeeding generation thereafter. In doing so, the article suggests a plausible explanation for the fact that while Murakami’s works were initially aimed at his own generation—the youngest to participate in the Zenkyōtō movement—they remain consistently popular with readers between the ages of 20 and 30.

When Murakami Haruki (b. 1949) first appeared on the Japanese literary scene some 20 years ago with his Gunzō Prize-winning novel, Kaze no uta o kike (1979; Hear the wind sing), few would have predicted that he would, in less than two decades, establish himself as the major voice for the disaffected youth of Japan’s contemporary era. His style and his message were cool, detached, disillusioned. There was little in that first book that reached out and “grabbed” the reader in the way that, say, Murakami Ryū had reached out and grabbed readers three years earlier with his own Gunzō Prize-winning debut, Kagirinaku tomei ni chikai burū (1976; Almost transparent blue). In sharp contrast with that work, filled with the rage of an impotent counterculture determined to persist with its experiments with sex, drugs, and violence, Kaze no uta o kike was almost poetic in its understatement. Yet its quiet melancholy and abstract references to the failure of Zenkyōtō, chiefly through the rebellious character known as “Rat,” seem to have suited audiences and critics alike in 1979. One is struck not so much by the underlying anger of Rat as by the sheer impotence of the protagonist to quell his disillusionment with the end of the 1960s. This seems better to have captured the mood of Murakami’s contemporaries than the raw, livid anger of Ryū.
Few readers in 1979 needed reminding that, less than ten years before, Japan’s greatest political struggle in the postwar era—Zenkyōtō, the popular student uprising against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Anzen Hoshō Yoyaku, “AMPO” for short)—collapsed in utter defeat. Indeed, from the time AMPO was automatically renewed in 1970, the unifying causes of the Zenkyōtō movement were eliminated one by one. Richard Nixon’s peace initiative with the People’s Republic of China in 1971 began to thaw the dangerously confrontational situation on both sides, between which Japan had precariously been positioned; Okinawa was returned to Japanese sovereignty in 1972; U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam began around the same time, and the war ended in 1975. At home, the Japanese economy was about to embark on its now-famous “bubble” growth period, ushering in a level of affluence unseen even in the era of “rapid growth.” In short, during the period from 1970 to 1979, in which Murakami sets his early works, ordinary Japanese grew definitely less concerned with politics and more determined to share in the wealth and affluence of their country. As John W. Dower writes,

By 1972 the Left thus had lost hold of many of its most evocative peace issues: U.S. bases in Japan, the Security Treaty, nuclear weapons, arms production, Okinawa, and China. A year later, with the armistice in Vietnam, the last great cause that had provided a modicum of common purpose among the opposition was removed. The average citizen turned inward, to bask in Japan’s new international affluence as an economic power and become consumed by material pursuits, exemplified in such mass-media slogans as “My Home-ism” and “My Car-ism.”

Ironically, this very affluence, combined with a marked decline in political tensions both internal and external, may pose the greatest threat to the development of a sense of self or individuality in contemporary Japan. At least, this is the impression one has from reading the literature of Murakami Haruki, concerned less with the collapse of the Zenkyōtō movement than with the sense of identity and self that it provided its participants. The implicit question throughout Murakami’s literature has always been: how are Japanese of Murakami’s generation and beyond to define themselves as individuals in the post-Zenkyōtō era?

It is important to understand this as a generation-specific problem. Murakami belongs to the leading edge of the first generation to be born in the postwar period, without memories of hardship in the Second World War or participation in the reconstruction of Japan following it. Unlike the previous generation, which understood hunger and deprivation and could define itself

in terms of affluence via its own participation in the efforts of the rapid-growth era, Murakami’s generation, like the generation in the United States that reached maturity in the 1950s, did not understand affluence as a goal in itself, and thus could not identify itself in those terms.

Indeed, one significant reason that the student movement—the concept of counterculture in general—found such favor with young people in postwar Japan and the United States was that it provided a means of self-identification, connection with something positive and dynamic. Writing of the discontent of his own generation in the United States, Todd Gitlin points out that affluence in postwar America amounted to crawling out from the shadow of the Depression and the deprivations of the Second World War. But this is also precisely what engendered the famous “generation gap” of the 1950s and 1960s:

Where the parental generation was scourged by memories of the Depression, the children of this middle class in the late Forties and Fifties were raised to take affluence for granted. The breadwinners were acutely aware of how hard they had worked to afford the picture window, the lawn, the car, the Lionel trains; and since they could, most of them, remember a time when the sweat of their brow availed them little, they were flooded with relief and gratitude, and expected their children to feel the same.2

Could one not say the same of the generation—Murakami’s generation—that grew up in the relative affluence of rapid growth, without having known the hardships of the Second World War and the immediate postwar years? Murakami was three years old when the occupation ended and seven when the postwar period was declared “over” on economic grounds in 1956, a declaration that coincided with the beginning of rapid growth; he was raised in Ashiya, a notoriously affluent part of the Kobe area (he himself refers to it as a “yuppie” area). By the time Murakami and his contemporaries were reaching their teens, affluence was less a distant dream than an assumed way of life. No doubt life has grown more comfortable for every succeeding generation in Japan since the end of the Second World War. And yet, an awareness remains, echoed also in Gitlin’s comments above, that the sense of identity provided through an easy, affluent culture is a bestowed identity, not one created through the real challenges of survival.

For such people, the Zenkyōtō movement provided a means of self-expression not necessarily offered by the easy comfort of home life and possessions. It is little wonder, then, that the end of the movement should have generated so severe an identity crisis among Japanese of Murakami’s age and younger, particularly when the highly charged political movement

was replaced simply with more consumer capitalism. Consumers in the 1950s had been goaded into purchasing washing machines, in the 1960s color televisions, and in the 1970s larger automobiles. In the 1980s it was computers, video games, VCRs, and home entertainment systems. The products changed with the technology, but the game was the same. Tanaka Yasuo’s 1980 novel Nantonaku, kurisutaru (Somehow, crystal), which celebrated—and at the same time poked fun at—the plethora of consumer goods available in contemporary Tokyo, also made clear the fact that consumerism was now the symbol of culture in Japan. Around the same time, in a film intended to show various layers of Japanese cultural ideology, Donald Richie described Tokyo in the 1980s as “consumerism gone mad.” 3

It is, then, perhaps only natural that Murakami Haruki, with his quiet, detached assertion that Japanese are losing their capacity to know or understand themselves, should have struck so resonant a note with his readers in 1979. He spoke, initially, to his own generation in Kaze no uta o kike, which focuses on an 18-day period, from August 8 to August 26, 1970, hinting at the despair of returning to the universities in the autumn of that year, after the conclusion of AMPO 1970. But he also spoke to readers of later generations, who must have sensed that even as Murakami described his own struggle to understand who he was in the fall of 1970, he was also describing their own similar struggles at the end of the decade. From the start Murakami has shown contemporary readers their own anonymous faces in the mirror.

The Nameless, Faceless Narrator

To an extent, Murakami achieves this in the nondescript, detached narrator he habitually uses, “Boku” (I, familiar). Indeed, it was not until more than ten years into his career that Murakami gave his narrator a definite name at all, and most supporting characters, when named, were called something unconventional, often something derived from their function. The characters in Kaze no uta o kike, for instance, are “Rat,” “the Woman Missing a Finger,” a Chinese bartender called “J,” and “Boku.” All of the characters have something to offer the narrative, but none of them shows much character development. In 1973-nen no pinbōru (1980; Pinball, 1973), the sequel to Kaze no uta o kike, one meets twin sisters who have no names and a pinball machine that talks. Hitsuji o meguru boken (1982; A wild sheep chase) contains even more bizarre types: a clairvoyant called “the Girl,” sometimes “the Girl with the Ears”; “the Boss,” who rules Japan; “the Man in Black,” named for the black suits he always wears; “the

Sheep Professor”; “the Sheepman” (half-man, half-sheep); and so forth. In Dansu dansu dansu (1988; Dance dance dance) Murakami plays with his own name and calls one of his characters “Makimura Hiraku;” another is named Gotanda, no doubt after the high-rent area of Tokyo by that name. Excepting “Naoko,” a girlfriend who turns up early in Murakami’s literature and will be discussed at length below, it was not until his 1987 novel, Noruwei no mori (Norwegian wood), that the author gave his characters names that might be considered conventional.

Why should this be? Again, the answer is related to identity. Who is the narrator of Kaze no uta o kike, or of 1973-nen no pinbōru, now that the excitement of the 1960s is over? Where is his unique individuality? What does it look like? How can it be seen, touched, used to express the Self? Put into the existentialist terms of Jean-Paul Sartre, or, later, the psychological theory of Jacques Lacan, Murakami’s implicit question is, always, how can the first-person protagonist forge connections with an Other (conscious or unconscious) and thereby identify himself, prove to himself that he even exists? This is the question that is explored from the earliest works to the most recent.

Magical Realism and the Unconscious

To speak of seeing or touching the “core identity” of the individual, of course, is to suggest a metaphysical process by which that inner mind can be accessed, and this forms one of the most recognizable trademarks in Murakami literature. In virtually all of his fiction, with the one notable exception of Noruwei no mori, a realistic narrative setting is created, then disrupted, sometimes mildly, sometimes violently, by the bizarre or the magical. As Yokoo Kazuhiro puts it, Murakami explores “how the world, our insignificant daily lives, might or might not change after introducing one tiny vibration.”

It is for this reason that Murakami’s work seems to fall into the general category of “magical realism,” though one must exercise great care in distinguishing Murakami’s strain of magical realism from other more politicized forms of the genre.

In a very simple nutshell, magical realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something “too strange to believe.” It is the underlying assumption that permits Tita to pour her emotions into her cooking in Like Water for Chocolate and have her diners experience those emotions as they eat; it is the slight aberration of historical fact that allows Salman Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai to claim in Midnight’s Children that the history of India turns on major events in his life; it is the

mechanism by which Mikage Sakurai and Tanabe Yūichi eat together in a shared dream in Yoshimoto Banana’s *Kitchen*. And, more to the point, it is the means by which Murakami Haruki shows his readers two “worlds”—one conscious, the other unconscious—and permits seamless crossover between them by characters who have become only memories, and by memories that reemerge from the mind to become new characters again.

As noted above, however, the concept of magical realism bears certain political and cultural specificities that should at least be addressed before applying the term to Murakami’s work. For instance, there are those who claim that magical realism is a specifically Latin American idea, one that expresses the natural wonder felt by the people of Latin America toward their land as a “marvelous”—yet real—place. Others argue for a more politicized, but equally region-specific definition of magical realism as a post-colonial discourse that rejects traditional Euro-American emphasis on realism and positivism in favor of a worldview that permits the “magical” to coexist with the “real.” The former is expressed by Alejo Carpentier, the latter by Angel Flores. But Flores wishes to liken magical realism to the Surrealism of Kafka, while Carpentier’s description of the “marvelous” in his term *lo real maravilloso* (the marvelous real) is reminiscent of Russian Formalism, specifically of Viktor Sklovsky’s *ostranenie*, or “defamiliarization,” in which the author, poet, or dramatist is urged to make the ordinary extraordinary, different, unfamiliar to the reader or audience member. Carpentier, similarly using terms reminiscent of avant-gardism, describes the marvelous as something “amazing because it is strange. Everything strange, everything amazing, everything that eludes established norms is marvelous.”

Others problematize the linkage of magical realism with any other theory, political or otherwise. Luis Leal, for instance, suggests that we view magical realism as a worldview that may appear under various circumstances, using various methodologies or literary styles. He is suspicious of any attempt to appropriate the methodology of magical realism for political or artistic purposes.

Magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature that [Julio] Ortega describes. . . . Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures. . . . In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it.


Leal’s willingness to open up the field, to admit that virtually any form of literature or art may express itself as magical realist, is of some use to this discussion, for one may propose, using Leal’s description of magical realism as technique or worldview, that the literature of Murakami Haruki merely uses the techniques of magical realism without necessarily involving itself in the various political attachments that Carpentier and Flores would insist upon. In short, Murakami’s use of magical realism, while closely linked with the *quest* for identity, is not the least bit involved with the *assertion* of an identity. Put another way, magical realism in Murakami is used as a tool to seek a highly individualized, personal sense of identity in each person, rather than as a rejection of the thinking of one-time colonial powers or the assertion of a national (cultural) identity based on indigenous beliefs and ideologies.7

This view of magical realism is supported by Wendy Faris, who argues in “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction” that magical realism, now identified with postmodernism, particularly its “paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites,”8 i.e., the magical and the real, expands its sphere of influence from the political and cultural into the realm of entertainment. “Magic realist fictions do seem more youthful and popular than their modernist predecessors, in that they often (though not always) cater with unidirectional story lines to our basic desire to hear what happens next. Thus they may be more clearly designed for the entertainment of readers.”9

To be sure, this will help us to understand better Murakami’s place not only in Japan, where he stands at the apex of Japanese postmodern literature, but in world literature, where he is part of the same postmodern movement that has begun to erase the barriers between art and entertainment, popular fiction and popular film (Faris cites the popularity in recent years of magical realist films such as *Field of Dreams*, *Ironweed*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, and *Ghost* in addition to writers such as Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez). It also highlights the fact that Murakami, like Rushdie or Toni Morrison (in, for instance, *Beloved*), uses magical realist technique in

7. This is, however, by no means to suggest that such an agenda would be out of place in modern Japan, where an identity crisis has been noted since the early Meiji period. Susan Napier points to the works of Izumi Kyōka, and even some by Natsume Sōseki, as early examples of “fantastic” literature in Japan which are concerned with expressing Japanese identity. In more recent times, the same concern can be seen in Ōe Kenzaburō’s revival of rural Japanese mythologies in such works as *Man’en gannen no futobōru* (1967; The silent cry). See Susan Napier, “The Magic of Identity: Magic Realism in Modern Japanese Fiction,” in Zamora and Faris, eds., *Magical Realism*, pp. 451–75; cf. Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996).


order to advance his own agenda, political, cultural, or otherwise. As noted above, it supports most of all his desire to portray the function of the inner mind, or unconscious Other, to use the Lacanian term, and how this informs the construction of the Self, the individual Subject.

**Murakami's Construction of the Mind**

Murakami's model of the human mind is fairly uniform throughout his literature, his motifs and terminology largely unchanged in the past 20 years. In general it is presented as a uniformly coded division between the world of the light and that of the dark, the latter corresponding to the unconscious realm. Murakami envisions the inner world of the mind as dark, cold, and lifeless. At times the unconscious is only symbolized, other times it is real. In *1973-nen no pinbōru* the protagonist enters an ice-cold, pitch-black warehouse, formerly a cold-storage facility for chickens, to reencounter Naoko, a girlfriend who died at the very end of the 1960s. In *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* the same protagonist reencounters his dead friend Rat, this time in a mountain villa, but again in total, freezing darkness. *Sekai no owarī to hādo-boirudo wandārando* (1985; Hard-boiled wonderland and the end of the world) alternates its chapters between the conscious protagonist, who lives in daylight, and the unconscious one, who fears light, works at night, and must wear protective dark glasses when he goes out during the daytime. The protagonist of *Dansu dansu dansu* discovers a musty, dust-filled room in a deep corner of his mind, again, dark, gloomy, and filled with dust-covered memories that he cannot make sense of. Another room is filled with dusty skeletons, literally the skeletons of his past. And in *Nejimakidori kuronikuru* (1994–95; Wind-up bird chronicle), his unconscious is presented as an enormous, maze-like hotel, in which “Room 208” is the core, the center of his whole being. It is this center, the location of the core identity, that concerns us here.

Murakami himself uses the expression “black box” to describe this portion of his narrator’s unconscious. The expression first comes up in *Sekai no owarī to hādo-boirudo wandārando*, when the protagonist is told by a scientist who has been tinkering with electrical circuits in his brain that the core consciousness is like the “black box” used to record flight data on aircraft: it contains all the information necessary to form the individual identity, but it is impervious to attempts to open it and observe its contents. This is identity.

“In other words,” I said, “the ‘black box’ is the subconscious mind of the individual?”

“That’s right. All people act according to certain principles. No one is exactly like anyone else. In short it’s a matter of identity. What is identity? A unique system of thought based on the collected memories of our expe-
periences from the past. A simpler term for it is the mind. No two people have
the same mind. Of course, most people have no real grasp of their own
cognitive systems.” 10

Nevertheless, the fact remains that most of Murakami’s literature is con-
cerned with opening up that “impregnable” box of memories and experi-
ences, and holding it up to the light for analysis. Nor, one might add, is this
strictly a fictional concern for the author, who uses the same “black box”
metaphor in discussing the Aum Shinrikyō cult members in Yakusoku sareta
basho de: Underground 2 (1998; The place that was promised: Under-
ground 2): “In Underground, I dealt with the Aum Shinrikyō . . . as a men-
acing but unknown quantity—a ‘black box,’ of sorts. In this new book I
have attempted to open up that ‘black box’ a bit.” 11 What Murakami is after
in the end is some means of looking at the core identity of the individual
and discerning what leads it either to become part of the “system” of Japa-
nese society, or, alternatively, to fall through the cracks.

The Early Works: Metonymical Links and Hints

In his early works, however, Murakami is less certain of what he is deal-
ing with in the mind. The compactly conceptualized metaphor of the “black
box” has not yet come into being. Instead, he focuses initially on what
emerges from the mind and how it impacts the protagonist. And yet, even in
these early works one finds a sophisticated understanding on the part of the
author of the unconscious as the source for the assertion of the conscious
Self, or subjectivity. In its simplest form the model resembles the Lacanian
one, which envisions the “unconscious Other” as a sounding board against
which the Self, the speaking Subject, or je, constitutes and understands it-
self. Murakami is also in agreement with Lacan that the relationship be-
tween the conscious Self and the unconscious Other is essentially a linguis-
tic one, for he himself conceives of the images that lurk within and emerge
from the inner mind as language. And finally, just as Lacan grounds much
of our psychological interaction with the unconscious Other in the desire to
gain possession of that Other, Murakami’s protagonists unconsciously cre-
ate metonymical links with the contents of their inner minds in order to draw
them out, engage them in discourse, and then send them back to where they
came from.

This is not to say that the conscious Self is capable of manipulating the
unconscious Other at will, however; rather, as Lacanians have frequently
pointed out, these connections are wholly unconscious, nonvolitional. Fur-

10. Murakami Haruki, Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandârando, in Murakami Ha-
thermore, because the unconscious is inaccessible, the Other is unattainable, and these connections, even when successfully made, as they are in Murakami’s fiction, are finally unsatisfying. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan writes of desire and the unconscious Other, “Lacanian Desire is both representational—a referential content of images and meanings inscribed in the place of the Other(A)—and an indestructible force that shows up in the order of chronological time as an insatiable mechanism of yearning.”

The mechanism is “insatiable” because the real object of desire, the unconscious Other, is inaccessible to the conscious Self, and therefore various substitutes, grounded in linguistic connections (one might think of this in terms of psychological metaphors), must be created. In Murakami’s magical realist universe this is taken a step further, however, and the linguistic connections, which in real life are unknown, unconscious, or even unintelligible, become magically visible and tangible. In short, they become magically real.

Murakami begins to reveal his model of the mind to readers in earnest with the novel 1973-nen no pinbōru, and the short story “Binbō na obasan no hanashi” (1980; The story of the poor aunt). In both works he presents the notion of memory—the object of desire—in a textualized form, that is, one constituted of language, specifically, of words.

**Textualization of the Inner Mind**

As noted above, Murakami Haruki’s early literature pivots on the intersection of the nostalgic, the linguistic, and the magical. In order to conceptualize for himself and readers how the conscious Self is informed by the unconscious Other, he posits a specific nostalgic object of desire in his protagonist’s mind. He then “textualizes” it in the sense of creating a chain of linguistic connections between the object itself, usually the memory of a missing or deceased friend, and how it will appear to the conscious protagonist. Finally, he permits the narrator’s obsessive desire for the object to bring it magically from inside the mind out into the external world. The result is something just a little more than a mere image—for these objects are tangible, they are real—but less than realistic, as I have suggested above, in the sense that their presence is incongruous with the detailed realistic setting created by the author.

“Binbō na obasan no hanashi” illustrates the textual nature of these “nostalgic images.” In this work, the protagonist lounges by a fountain in a park, when suddenly the idea of a poor, middle-aged woman flashes through

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his mind. In that instant the idea of the “poor aunt” is imprinted on his consciousness, and soon after he discovers the vaguely defined image of a “poor aunt” on his back. Because of her positioning behind him he cannot actually see her directly, but because she is part of him, he knows she is there. Moreover, precluding the dismissal of the “poor aunt” as a mere hallucination, Murakami makes certain that other characters in the story do see her. The protagonist attempts in a variety of ways to explain to us what she is. She is like the member of the family who always turns up at weddings, but to whom no one speaks; she embarrasses herself by using the wrong fork; she brings an unwanted gift. Everyone knows who she is, and she inspires a vague sense of pity, but no one really wants to have anything to do with her.

Because she is a “text,” those who see the “poor aunt” visualize her in different ways. To one she appears as a dog who died in pitiful agony of esophageal cancer; to another, she looks like a school teacher he once had, who lost her husband during the war and was herself burned in an air raid. The metonymical link here is simply a vague kind of pity, an emotion familiar to all, but one to which each individual responds differently. Finally, appearing on a talk show to explain his oddity, the protagonist declares that the poor aunt on his back is *tada no kotoba*, “just words.” In describing his image thus Murakami renders the emotion of pity into a text which he then invites the reader to rewrite and reinterpret *ad infinitum*, bringing the text to life anew each time it is read.

Such play with linguistic connections is also parodied in early Murakami literature. In “Kangarū tsūshin” (1981; The kangaroo communiqué), the protagonist is a department store manager who must write a letter of apology to a dissatisfied customer. His impulse to write her a fairly long and intimate personal letter, however, comes from seeing kangaroos at the zoo. How is this connection formed? We are not told. Murakami merely teases his readers by claiming that there are 36 specific steps, each of which must be followed in precisely the right order, to get from kangaroos to the letter in question. Similarly, in “1963/1982 Ipanema no musume” (1982; 1963/1982 Girl from Ipanema), the protagonist contends that there is a mysterious connection between the famous song and a hallway in his high school. The textual weaving leads from this to combination salads, and finally to a long-lost girlfriend who loved vegetables.

These are, of course, little more than games, exercises in word association. One is sympathetic to Masao Miyoshi’s somewhat irritable declaration that Murakami’s writing amounts to little more than “a symbol-deciphering game.” In these cases it is even less than that; stories like the two just

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noted may at best be described as "play" in nostalgic connection-building, but in which the symbols are never really even present.

More serious and sophisticated examples may be found, particularly in the longer works. *1973-nen no pínboru* provides two interesting examples of metonymical linking that may be analyzed with a fairly high degree of certainty. These center, as noted previously, on two distinct narratives, each involving missing friends: "Rat," who has gone missing at the end of *Kaze no uta o kike*, and "Naoko," the narrator’s girlfriend in 1969, who is dead. The setting of the novel, as the title suggests, is 1973, but the narrator’s nostalgic focus is on the transitional period from 1969 to 1970.

*1973-nen no pínboru* is organized much as *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* later came to be, into chapters that alternate between the world of light and that of darkness. In the former the reader sees the first-person protagonist, "Boku"; in the latter, "Rat" appears in a lyrical, third-person narrative. The interest in this part of the novel lies not merely in watching the movements of Rat, who (we eventually realize) lives in the unconscious mind of the protagonist as a memory, but in seeing how he emerges into the external, conscious world to interact with the protagonist. As with the "poor aunt," however, appearances are always unstable, and when Rat emerges "into the light," he bears no resemblance to his original form. This, incidentally, is foreshadowed in the final lines of *Kaze no uta o kike*, which ostensibly quote Friedrich Nietzsche: "Can one understand the depths of the gloom of night in the light of day?" 15

This essential metamorphosis of the object of desire into something else mirrors the process of signification and metonymy, but it also signals the mystery of the unconscious and the insatiable nature of that desire. The nostalgic image is one of a symbolic nature, strictly a surrogate, and for this very reason it can never be satisfactory. As a critique of representation this strikes a resonant chord with postmodernism as well: neither history nor the past can ever be anything more than text, thus one can never apprehend the past as anything but language or words. Linda Hutcheon argues similarly that one of the chief projects of the postmodern is to undermine the notion that "history" is somehow more real or true than "fiction" by virtue of its reliance on fact. Because facts must be expressed as language, or text, she argues, they are no more certain or true than fiction, which uses the same medium.

The twentieth-century discipline of history has traditionally been structured by positivist and empiricist assumptions that have worked to separate it from anything that smacks of the "merely literary." In its usual setting up of the "real" as unproblematic presence to be reproduced or reconstructed,

15. *Kaze no uta o kike*, in Murakami Haruki zensakuhin, 1979–1989, Vol. 1, p. 120.
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history is begging for deconstruction to question the function of the writing of history itself.  

Hutcheon’s interrogation of history goes beyond the mere question of whether we can ever get to “the Truth” to question more importantly the effectiveness of language, the written text, to substitute for history itself: “What is the ontological nature of historical documents?” she demands. “Are they a stand-in for the past? What is meant—in ideological terms—by our ‘natural’ understanding of historical explanation?”

In similar terms, one may understand why the “past” in Murakami’s texts—in this case specific memories—may not appear in the present (conscious world) as it did in the past (unconscious world). As language, it must be represented metonymically, symbolically, just as the historical document or text stands in for the reality of history itself. It should, then, come as no great surprise that the memory of Rat in 1973-nen no pinbōru, when it emerges, bears no visual or physical resemblance to the man himself. In fact, it appears as twin sisters, roughly 20 years old, whom the protagonist discovers sleeping on either side of himself one morning after a night of heavy drinking.

Entrances, Exits, and Rodent Traps

The metonymical connection between Rat and the Twins (as they come to be known, for they have no names) seems obscure at first but in fact is quite discernible. Once again, the reader must play a game of signification. The process is as follows: the Twins, realizing that their lack of names is becoming problematic for the protagonist, invite him to name them, and provide some suggestions: “Right and Left,” “Vertical and Horizontal,” “Up and Down,” etc. This kind of naming is a source of controversy in Murakami’s literature and has led Karatani Kōjin, among others, to argue that Murakami seeks to deconstruct meanings and realities in the world. “To dissolve proper names into fixed signifiers is to dissolve them into bundles of predicative terms, or to put it another way, into bundles of generalized concepts,” he claims. “What Murakami Haruki tries so persistently to do is to eliminate proper names, and thus make the world more random.”

But the names the Twins offer, while unconventional, are neither random nor general; rather, they suggest very clearly a symbiotic relationship in which one half of the pair is meaningless without the other. The relationship between the Twins suggests a structuralist model, yet as with his model

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17. Ibid., p. 93.
of the internal and external minds, interchange is possible. When the protagonist notices that the Twins can be identified by their sweatshirts—one says “208,” the other “209”—they wordlessly peel off the shirts and exchange them. Clearly there is to be no permanent, visible means of identifying the Twins.

At the same time, the Twins seem to represent the opposite, yet symbiotic relationship between the protagonist and Rat as well: the protagonist is a settled, fairly conventional man, whereas Rat is a rebellious, angry retro-hippie who has been out of place since the end of the Zenkyōtō period. Finally, however, the metonymical relationship between Rat and the Twins is cemented through the linguistic connections that Murakami weaves. In response to the “names” offered by the Twins above, the protagonist suggests “Entrance and Exit,” which leads him to philosophize on the nature of entrances and exits. “Wherever there is an entrance there is also an exit. Most things are built that way: mailboxes, electric vacuum cleaners, zoos, turkey basters. Of course, there are also things that are not built that way. Mouse traps, for instance.” Invoking the mouse trap, and the memory of once having caught a mouse (nezumi), brings the protagonist back to the more important rodent in his life, Rat himself. The protagonist’s nostalgic desire for his missing friend thus pivots on the word nezumi, brought, via obsessive nostalgic desire and magical realism, into the external world in the form of the Twins.

Lost Lovers and Pinball

A similar analysis can be performed on the image of “pinball,” which appears in the title but does not become important until well into the text. One may, of course, make the obvious parodic connection between 1973-nen no pinbōru and Ōe Kenzaburō’s 1967 novel, Man’en gannen no futobōru (1967; Football, 1860, trans. as The silent cry), but parody, while certainly visible in the relationship between Ōe’s brother characters, Mitsu-saburō and Takashi, and their representation of passive and active heroes, respectively, is secondary to the use of pinball as a metonymical image of nostalgic desire. In fact, while one could hardly imagine the title of Murakami’s book to be accidentally similar to that of Ōe’s, the parodic element strikes one more as a diversion from the real issue at hand. The actual focus of this work is nostalgia and memory, and the importance of pinball lies in its relationship to Naoko, the protagonist’s deceased girlfriend.

In fact, 1973-nen no pinbōru begins with Naoko. The opening lines con-

20. During a conversation with the present author on October 24, 1994, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Murakami admitted the similarity between the books’ titles, but denied that he had intended to parody the content of Ōe’s work.
tain the protagonist’s confession to being obsessively fond of hearing stories from strange lands. This leads him to relate some of the stories he has heard over the years, including some supposedly told to him by visitors from other planets. Finally he comes to his favorite stories of all, those related by Naoko herself. In one instance, he recalls, Naoko told him the story of a man whose job was to locate good spots for digging wells, and how he was struck and killed by a train; in another, we learn of a lonely train platform on which a dog paces endlessly back and forth. Are these stories supposed to be true, or are they merely fabrications for the protagonist’s amusement? One suspects the latter, for none contains a coherent plot; rather, all the stories give the sense that they are intended as descriptive sketches of mental images rather than real narratives.

Our confidence, however, is shaken when, in the “real time” of 1973-nen no pinbōru, the protagonist suddenly decides to visit “the” train platform in Naoko’s story of four years earlier and to look for “the” dog. He waits for about an hour, measured in the number of cigarettes he is able to chain-smoke, but sees no dog, only a group of old men fishing in a nearby pond. Finally, however, he notices a dog sitting next to one of the men. Coaxing the animal through the fence separating the pond from the train platform, he pats it on the head several times, then leaves satisfied.

But he cannot be wholly satisfied. As he returns home, he realizes that the closure he seeks for his relationship with Naoko is not so easily obtained. This is hardly surprising when one reflects that the best he can hope for is to encounter a textualized image of Naoko, something which, as noted above, can never satisfy his desire. This occurs to him on the way home:

On the train going home the same thing kept repeating itself over and over in my mind: everything is finished, forget about it. Isn’t that why you came all this way? But there was no way I could forget that I had loved Naoko, or that she was dead. Because nothing was really finished.21

Not long after this, the image of the dog reemerges, this time in the form of a telephone switch panel that has gone dead in the protagonist’s apartment. When the Twins ask the repairman from the telephone company what the switch panel is for, he replies that it is like a mother dog who looks after her puppies. “But if the mother dog should die, then the puppies also die, right? So we bring in a new mother dog to replace the old one.”22 Thus the pivot word is “dog,” which links Naoko’s story (and thus Naoko herself) to the switch panel which, as a mechanical device, leads shortly thereafter to a pinball machine.

As if to make certain that no one misses the connection between Naoko

22. Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 156.
and the switch panel, the Twins insist on holding an impromptu funeral for it at a local reservoir. There the protagonist makes a stirring speech that draws somewhat incongruously on Kant and hurls the switch panel out into the deep, charging it to rest in peace. Only a few pages later the protagonist raises the image of pinball and, in particular, a machine he was fond of during his college years known as “the Spaceship,” once again forming a link to the extraterrestrial stories told to him early in the work. Soon he is obsessed with finding this machine, and this forms the title quest of 1973-nen no pinbōru.

When the machine is finally located, through the cooperation of a college professor with an encyclopedic knowledge of pinball and the kindness of a philanthropist who collects old pinball machines, the protagonist must enter a pitch-black, ice-cold warehouse (quite literally his “black box”) to complete the journey. Entering the inky blackness, he flips the electricity on, bathing the place in blinding light, revealing row upon row of pinball machines coming to life, their flashing lights giving the reader the image of rows of electric tombstones. It is an eerie, magical, intensely spiritual journey into the “other world” of his inner mind, a world of death and memory, but it grows even more bizarre when, locating “the Spaceship,” he does not play it, but instead holds a conversation with it in the tones of lovers meeting again after a long separation. As with the dog, however, nothing is solved in this encounter with the unconscious Other, for the meeting is temporary and mitigated by the layers of symbolism through which Naoko must be expressed.

The strong contrast between light and darkness in this scene, a regular motif in Murakami literature, as noted previously, remains still in its early stages in 1973-nen no pinbōru. One notes that the protagonist is not permitted to see Naoko in her “true” (or at least more familiar) form for the blanket of darkness placed over the scene. Readers can only imagine what he would have found had he left the lights out. But this, again adhering to the final lines of Kaze no uta o kike, is the one unbreakable rule in Murakami’s literature: no protagonist is ever permitted to illuminate fully the interior of his mind and see his memories as they once appeared.

This becomes clearer in later works. In Hitsuji o meguru bōken, the sequel to 1973-nen no Pinbōru, the same protagonist actually does meet Rat as Rat, in the confines of his inner consciousness. The location, Rat’s secluded villa in the mountains of Hokkaido, remains cloaked in darkness, because Rat insists that it be dark. A similar admonition is given Okada Toru in Nejimakidori kuronikuru by the woman who inhabits the motel room at the center of his consciousness not to turn on his flashlight. What will Murakami’s hero find should he ever break this injunction? There can be no way of knowing, for the unconscious mind is as much defined by its darkness as the darkness is required by the unconscious. To illuminate the unconscious in the Murakami universe, then, would be merely to transform it.
into consciousness, the realm of the light, and so the exercise would be pointless.

Identity and the Japanese State

Murakami’s efforts at locating a sense of individual identity in his first two works might be regarded as largely apolitical. In both Kaze no uta o kike and 1973-nen no pinbôru, the protagonist deals with his sense of loss in the aftermath of the Zenkyôtô period but never really focuses the source of this loss on any particular entity, political or otherwise. With his third work, Hitsuji o meguru bôken, however, Murakami begins to portray the Japanese state as a sinister presence that seeks to promulgate a sense of collective identity, a dictatorship over the mind, among members of contemporary Japanese society. The implicit assumption here—probably a historically correct one—is that the disappearance of the student radicals after 1970 was due either to their mass-assimilation into the “system” of Japanese society or, alternatively, their destruction by that system, which is intolerant of the individual. This has become the theme in virtually all Murakami literature, fiction and nonfiction, since 1982. In every novel he writes, a world of perfect contentment is offered to the protagonist (or, in the first work, to Rat) in exchange for his individuality.

In Hitsuji o meguru bôken, for instance, the narrative is centered around the image of an all-empowering sheep which inhabits its host like a parasite, then uses the host to carry out its plans of domination. In the same gesture, however, it must gradually eliminate the contents of the host’s mind in order to replace them with itself. Thus, the host enjoys the contentment of luxury, and freedom from the tediousness of thinking, but no longer enjoys the personal fulfillment of an individual identity. Moreover, the sheep’s use of the host is by no means benevolent, though it may appear so at first. Neither “the Sheep Professor” nor “the Boss” survives his encounter with the sheep with his mind intact, nor, indeed, does Rat, whose suicide at the end of the novel is his final conscious act. Ultimately the utopian dream offered to each successive character is revealed to be a thinly disguised curse. At the end of Hitsuji o meguru bôken, Rat (now a memory/image) explains to the protagonist why he chose death over the utopian dream of the sheep. “‘It’s because I like my weaknesses. I like my pains and hardships. I like summer sunlight, the smell of the breeze, the songs of the cicadas. I can’t help liking them.’” 23 It is, however, uncertain what the destruction of the sheep will mean for Japanese society and culture, for the power structure created by the sheep remains in place at the end of the novel, while the protagonist is left with nothing.

A similar fate awaits the protagonist of Sekai no owari to hâdo-boirudo

wandārando. Because of electronic switches implanted in his brain—again, by an organ of the state—he faces perpetual imprisonment in an artificially constructed fragment of his core consciousness known as “the Town.” Like the empty utopia offered to Rat, the Town is perfectly peaceful but rigidly intolerant of even fragments of mind or volition. Indeed, the first thing done to the protagonist when he enters the Town is that his shadow is carved away by a sinister figure known as “the Gatekeeper,” who is careful to keep the shadow isolated from its owner. We soon realize that the shadow, the most ancient marker of time, is symbolic of the protagonist’s memories and identity, his past, and thus his mind. Not unnaturally, the longer the protagonist is without his shadow, the less inclined he is to give up the easy peace of this mindless utopia. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel he compromises, refusing either to reunite with his shadow or to let it die altogether. Instead he helps his shadow to escape (to where, we cannot know) and accepts life in the no man’s land outside of the Town.

Finally, in Dansu dansu dansu, the protagonist is simply wooed by those who have given themselves to the orgiastic economy of mindless consumption in contemporary Tokyo in exchange for their identities. The prominent appearance of high-priced prostitutes in this work is a constant reminder that all of the affluent characters in the novel have prostituted themselves to the system. As the protagonist learns, sex is not the only part of our humanity that can be purchased, as indicated by the persistent attempts of other characters to “buy” the protagonist’s friendship. In exchange simply for being a friend he is offered a Maseratti, an expensive apartment, high-priced prostitutes, and even an all-expenses-paid vacation to Hawaii. It is a situation the protagonist finally cannot solve; at the end of the book he flees to Hokkaido to sort things out in the quiet countryside, away from the fetish-consumerism of Tokyo.

Murakami’s central theme for most of his career has thus been that the concept of individual identity runs counter to the dominant social structure of post-1970 Japan, what he refers to as the “system,” in which contemporary Japanese live. In fact, this is even the subject of Murakami’s recent nonfiction works, Andاغuraundo (1997; Underground), and Yakusoku sareta basho de: Underground 2. The former is a collection of interviews with survivors (or surviving family members of victims) of the March 20, 1995, poison gas incident in the Tokyo subway system by the Aum Shinrikyō cult. The latter presents interviews with former members of the cult. Murakami’s self-avowed purpose in writing the work is consonant with his evident purpose in writing works of fiction as well.

The reality is that beneath the main system of Japanese society there exists no subsystem, no safety net, to catch those who slip through the cracks. This reality has not changed as a result of the incident. There is a basic gap in our
society, a kind of black hole, and no matter how thoroughly we stamp out the Aum Shinrikyō cult, similar groups are sure to form in the future to bring about the same kinds of disasters.24

When he speaks of “systems” and “subsystems,” Murakami is speaking precisely of identity drawn from one’s role in society. But today’s Japanese “social system” is one in which individuals are defined according to their role in the economic and industrial machine that runs Japan. There is very little room for deviation in this society, and the lack of a “subsystem”—a means of defining oneself outside the parameters of ordinary life as a sarariiman (white-collar worker), factory worker, or other predefined role—is highly problematic for those who wish to be different. It is not unnatural for Murakami to be interested in such types, as he himself has always resisted the conventional. But it also means that the choice presented to young Japanese who think about such things is a paltry one: either become part of the system, or become isolated, forbidden to participate in the affluent society that surrounds you. This comes up especially in Hitsuji o meguru bōken, in which the protagonist is intimidated by “the Man in Black,” a high-level character in the Japanese political-industrial-media system of the late 1970s, who tells him that he can either play along with the system, ensuring the success of his business, or he can resist and simply disappear without a trace. Examples of those who do not “play along” are to be found along the wayside. These include “the Sheep Professor,” who lives out his life in miserable solitude in a crumbling Hokkaido hotel, and “Rat,” who resists more fiercely and is given a choice between submission or suicide. He chooses the latter.

Identity in Murakami is therefore a matter of will. The question in Murakami, as for many writers before him, is often one of action versus passivity. Most Murakami characters are passive, and thus they are frustratingly devoid of real identity. Yet all of them seek that identity by rooting about in their internal minds, recognizing that the inner mind is the ultimate source of Self and identity.

Kokkyō no Minami, Taiyō no Nishi: Magical Realism, or Ghost Story?

Most Japanese critics have noted the paranormal in Murakami’s literature, but few seem to have grasped the essential structure of the internal and external minds that is supported by Murakami’s use of magical realism, or the critique of the society versus the Self that it presents. Expressions such as “the other world” persist, and even Yokoo Kazuhiro, who accurately describes a literary landscape that is primarily realistic, finally resorts to the conventional descriptive terminology of the “ghost story” to understand the

The various “ghosts” he points to are the Twins in 1973-nen no pinbōru, “the Girl with the Ears” in Hitsuji o meguru bōken, and “the Girl in Pink,” who is the granddaughter of the scientist responsible for the protagonist’s predicament in Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando. The main object of Yokoo’s inquiry, however, is Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi (1992; South of the border, west of the sun).25

Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi, regarded by a number of critics as a failure for its lack of truly new ideas, was evidently written in the same spirit as the bestselling Noruwei no mori, using the general structure of the popular romance. Unlike in previous Murakami literature, however, the protagonist of this work is happily married with two children and, more important, he is no longer a peripheral, isolated type, but a successful bar owner (reflecting, no doubt, Murakami’s own experience running a jazz café in the 1970s). As if reacting to the financial pressure under which the protagonists of his previous novels operate, Murakami takes pains to show that the hero of Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi is well-to-do and even enjoys a stable home life with his family.

But beneath this veneer of stability lurks a familiar emptiness: the protagonist soon reveals a lingering attachment to a girl named “Shimamoto” whom he knew as a child and who, he is convinced, is his “soul mate.” As the novel progresses it becomes clear that the easy comfort of the protagonist’s home is actually a facade for the sense of emptiness in his marriage. While hardly a loveless relationship, there is no real inner connection between the protagonist and his wife.

One notes in this novel, for the first time in Murakami literature, three distinct types of knowledge that combine into a true “connection” between two people: the first is emotional, a kind of innate understanding that apparently emerged between the protagonist and Shimamoto during their childhood; the second is sexual, represented in the relationship between the protagonist and his girlfriend in high school, “Izumi.” The third is knowledge of the historical past, “the mind,” which comes only through complete trust and total disclosure. The conflict in this story stems from the fact that the protagonist can never combine all three types of knowledge in any single person. The narrator’s desire, then, is to combine the emotional bond he once had with Shimamoto, the sexual desire that engulfed him with Izumi, and knowledge of the historical past he has with his wife now. The latter two aspects seem easily within reach, but the internal emotional bond he knew with Shimamoto is missing and must somehow be recreated.

It should come as no surprise, then, that “Shimamoto” turns up suddenly in the novel to help the protagonist (partially) to satisfy his desire. But like “the Twins” or “the Spaceship,” one is aware that she can only be a

25. Yokoo, Murakami Haruki.
nostalgic image emerging to stand in for the original Shimamoto of his childhood. No major transformations from darkness to light are necessary in this case, since Murakami need only have her grow up into a woman. However, perhaps feeling the need for some differentiation between the original and the image, Murakami portrays the childhood Shimamoto as having a clubbed foot, which has since been cured in the grown character.

When Shimamoto turns up in the protagonist’s bar one night, he becomes instantly attracted to her, even before he knows who she is. After she has revealed her identity and given a plausible story about finding him by reading about his bar in a magazine, they begin an affair that goes on for a year before they finally consummate their relationship. Spending a weekend at the protagonist’s villa at Hakone, “Shimamoto” makes love to him, promising to reveal everything about her past to him the following morning.

With unfortunate predictability, however, “Shimamoto” disappears following their one night of intense physical passion without having revealed her story at all. So complete is her disappearance that the protagonist cannot even find her footprints in the gravel outside the villa. This is what leads Yokoo to conclude that Shimamoto is “without question an apparition from another world, rather than from the real world,” and to schematize the novel into two very distinct worlds: the “real” and the “other,” right down to the title: “south of the border” refers, he believes, to the “real” world, whereas “west of the sun” is the land of the dead.

To this point Yokoo’s argument is consistent with my analyses above; the unconscious Other is a place of death. One might even think of the memories of lost friends as the “ghosts” of the protagonist’s past, who live in the “other world” of his internal mind. But Yokoo assumes that these images are separate from the protagonist, that the impeccable timing of their convenient appearances and disappearances is attributable to their knowledge as spirits of both past and future. “The fact that ‘Shimamoto’ disappears immediately after the protagonist resolves to leave everything behind and go away with her can only be attributed to the fact that she has forecast his distant future.”

Such a schematization is not altogether insupportable, but in the end Yokoo’s reluctance to recognize the psychological underpinnings that go along with a magical realist setting, his inability to see that the source of these “ghosts” is the protagonist himself, leaves him with more mysteries than he can possibly solve. When, for instance, did the real Shimamoto actually die, he wonders, or was she perhaps a spirit even when the narrator knew her as a child? He concludes, with little textual support, that Shimamoto must have met with an unhappy death in her early twenties and has

26. Ibid., p. 23.
27. Ibid., p. 37.
now come back to haunt the narrator. “It is quite possible, in fact,” he argues, “that many of Murakami’s characters come into being after having previously met their own ends.”

Doubtless one may read Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi as a kind of romantic ghost story. To externalize Shimamoto as a ghost does at least acknowledge the presence of the paranormal in Murakami literature. But such a reading does little to shed light on Murakami’s raison d’être as a writer and fails completely to address the real identities of the other “ghosts” in his earlier works. Why would Murakami create “the Twins,” for instance, as the ghost or ghosts of people who are never to be mentioned otherwise?

Instead, it strikes one that to view these kinds of characters as nostalgic images originating as part of the unconscious Other, drawn out from within his mind, in a concentrated attempt to recover his past and thereby reconnect with the constitutive parts of his personal identity, provides a more effective and plausible reading of the author’s work. Such a reading would account for the amazing sense of timing noted by Yokoo above. Moreover, this scheme is demonstrably applicable to all but a few of Murakami’s major works. And, of course, it would go a considerable distance in providing answers to Yokoo’s most pressing questions about Shimamoto, specifically, who she is, why she has come, and to where she returns.

There is, in fact, very little in Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi that should strike us as mysterious when viewed in the context of previous Murakami literature. If anything, one might say that the work is too overtly structured around the predictable appearance and disappearance of Shimamoto. One sees it coming from the beginning. The novel’s weaknesses stem not, as Yokoo suggests, from its leaving too many questions unanswered, but rather from its inability to strike out further into new territory. Mukai Satoshi suggests that the work was written solely in order for the protagonist to express his sense of emptiness and his need for Shimamoto to fill that void. The work is, in his opinion, too fixated on its central theme of loss.

This is certainly true, but it would be an overstatement to suggest that Murakami breaks no ground in Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi. Rather, several important developments in Murakami’s exploration of identity occur here. First, the notion of the “black box,” the objectified core identity of the individual, reemerges for the first time since Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārandō. In this case, however, the “black box” is not a matter of science fiction, but a real, organic thing that represents the inner self. This is not to suggest that readers are given any new insights about the interior of

28. Ibid., p. 23.
that box, however; indeed, Murakami has discarded even the poetic descriptions of his “End of the World” in that previous novel, with its golden unicorns and medieval walls, in favor of the far less revealing expression nani ka, “something.” He tells Shimamoto that he has long been aware that “something” has been missing from inside of him, and that only she can restore this. He seeks a similar “something” from his girlfriend Izumi in high school and feels almost as if he can reach inside of her and touch it.

The only important thing was that we were violently engulfed by something, and that inside of that something there had to lurk some hidden thing that was important to me. I wanted to know what that thing was. I had to know. Had it been possible I would have plunged my hand into the core of her flesh to touch that something directly.\(^{30}\)

In the context of previous Murakami literature, there can be no doubt but that this “something” is the same missing “core identity” that leads the protagonists on their various quests in previous books. Throughout Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi, and later in Nejimakidori kuronikuru, we encounter this term, one which, despite its abstract nature, seems to stir in the protagonist a greater passion than ever before.

The second major development seen in Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi, more important than the first, is the protagonist’s newly developed determination to reach out and understand the core identities of those around him. This is an extraordinary thing for Murakami, whose characters have always been so absorbed in themselves and their own problems that critics are united in dubbing them jiheiteki, a medical term meaning “autistic” but in this case perhaps better expressed with the idiom “self-centered.” Even apologists for Murakami’s work, such as Katō Norihiro, Aoki Tamotsu, and Kawamoto Saburō, agree that Murakami’s characters are too out of touch with their society, though this is generally understood to be a symptom of the times.\(^{31}\) Kuroko Kazuo, who terms the 1980s the “Walkman Era,” similarly uses the term jiheiteki, lamenting that “contemporary man is now capable only of relationships with passive objects.”\(^{32}\) Murakami is not unaware of this characteristic in his hero, of course, as is clear in Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando when his unconscious protagonist is told by a fellow character, “I wonder if there isn’t something else you need? . . . I feel that if you had that something, it would help you to open


up, just a little, the hardened shell of winter that surrounds you.” 33 The conscious protagonist is told essentially the same thing, that he has surrounded himself with a protective barrier, one that finds concrete representation in the impenetrable walls that surround the town as well.

It is, then, a sign of change that the protagonist of Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi is passionately concerned with making contact with another. Kuroko sees evidence of this impending change even earlier, in the 1989 short story “TV piipuru” (TV people), in which the protagonist learns, too late, that the secret of existence, of life itself, is to communicate with others. 34 In this story, as in the later Nejikidori kuronikuru, his wife is an enigma to be solved, but by the time he understands this it is too late, and she is gone forever. It is with Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi, however, that the protagonist becomes truly militant in his desire to make contact with others.

And yet, while one is tempted to see something altruistic in this shift in the protagonist’s attention, from himself to another, the fact remains that seeking connectivity with the identities of others is still, finally, an expedient for the protagonist to discover himself, for in seeking out “Shimamoto” or, in Nejikidori kuronikuru, his wife Kumiko, the hero still seeks an Other who will reaffirm his existence as well. This is clear from the very first chapters of Nejikidori kuronikuru, a work that, despite its considerable length (more than 1,200 pages) and complexity (at least three major narratives are given), is still simply about recognizing and acknowledging another (an Other) person.

Nejikidori Kuronikuru: The Other Strikes Back

One might say that Murakami spent the first 15 years of his career preparing to write Nejikidori kuronikuru, in which every major motif and theme from previous literature is present. The inner mind is presented as a gloomy, maze-like structure, a hotel, as it turns out, at the center of which is a dark, vaguely sinister room in which a woman awaits the protagonist, Okada Toru, and repeatedly demands that he learn her name. This is the object of his desire, Kumiko herself, the key to the main conflict in the novel, for Kumiko emerges early in the text as an enigma that Tōru feels compelled to solve lest his relationship with her disintegrate.

But what makes the work exceptional among Murakami literature is the complexly interwoven threads of textuality that mark a new departure for the author. I have noted above that Murakami showed a tendency to-

ward textualization (of image, memory, history) from his earliest literature; in *Nejimakidori kuronikuru* he reaches a new level of intertextuality, weaving a tapestry of narrative that encompasses two distinct historical periods (present-day Tokyo and Manchuria during the Second World War), and three disparate stories connected by shared magical experiences, violence, and a persistent struggle for control over the core identities of the characters involved.

Brevity precludes a detailed synopsis of *Nejimakidori kuronikuru*, but the principal plots may be broadly sketched. In the main story line, Okada Tōru expresses concern that he does not understand his wife, Kumiko, and fears he will lose her. This is what actually happens in the second volume of the novel, where it is revealed that her brother, Wataya Noboru, a sinister politician of some note, has spirited her away. The quest of the novel is thus the retrieval of Kumiko and the restoration of Tōru’s relationship with her; the conflict, obviously, is between himself and Noboru, who goes from merely sinister in the early parts of the novel to purely evil by the end of the third and final volume, where we learn that he makes a practice of doing precisely what the protagonist of *Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi* wanted to do to Izumi: he reaches into the bodies of women and physically removes their “core identities,” leaving them bereft of an individual self. To counter this, Tōru’s occupation in the third volume is to restore the “internal balance,” or core identity, in women who have lost it. All the while he continues his search for Kumiko.

The second narrative, told to Tōru for purposes not clear until the third volume, concerns a veteran of the Japanese campaign in Manchuria named “Lieutenant Mamiya” who, while on reconnaissance with an intelligence unit in Outer Mongolia, is captured by a troop of Mongolian cavalry led by a Soviet officer whom we come to know as “Boris the Skinner.” The nickname comes from his penchant for torturing prisoners by skinning them alive. Readers are given a graphic description of this as a member of Mamiya’s unit is interrogated. Finally, Mamiya is flung into a deep well in the Mongolian desert and left to die. He is eventually rescued, however, and reencounters “Boris the Skinner” at a gulag in Soviet Asia, where he tries to kill his enemy but fails in his task. The significance of the narrative is to foreshadow a similar relationship between Noboru and Tōru, with the expectation that Tōru will also be called upon to destroy his enemy. The reader must wait in suspense to know whether he will succeed where Mamiya failed.

Finally, the third narrative concerns a woman calling herself “Akasaka Nutmeg” and her son, “Akasaka Cinnamon.” This mother/son team operates an exclusive clinic specializing in restoring equilibrium to internally unbalanced women and eventually employs Tōru to do the actual work of healing. Mingled with this text is the story of Nutmeg’s father, a cavalry
veterinarian who witnessed several massacres in Manchuria during the war, and her husband, who was murdered in 1975, his body found lacking all of its internal organs. These subnarratives are told to Tôru by Cinnamon via computer, for Cinnamon has been mute since his childhood.

What permeates the entire novel is the sense of magical connections between various distinct “worlds”: the internal and external “worlds” of Tôru, the historical “worlds” of 1930s Manchuria and 1980s Tokyo, the physical and spiritual “worlds” of the inner body, assaulted by Wataya Noboru and restored by Okada Tôru. And, of course, there is the “wind-up bird” of the novel’s title, a creature never seen but heard to be winding the springs that keep the earth turning—and thus keep time/history moving. The significance of the bird is, of course, this movement of time, and its appearance signifies a temporary stoppage in time, a moment when characters with special mystical abilities have visions of past, present, and future, all at once.

But the novel begins and ends with Tôru, Kumiko, and Noboru. We do not meet Noboru initially; he is represented in the couple’s cat, currently missing, whom they call by the same name. Even so, the cat becomes a source of tension between Tôru and Kumiko, who accuses her husband of not caring enough about their pet, just as the real Wataya Noboru eventually becomes a source of almost lethal antipathy between them. He is, we finally realize, the cause of Kumiko’s loss of “internal balance,” rendering her incomprehensible, even unrecognizable, to Tôru. Her pleas for help come from the very first chapter of the book, when she calls Tôru on the telephone from his internal mind and insists that if he can give her just ten minutes, “we can understand each other.”35 Her talk then turns seductive, finally overtly sexual, and Tôru hangs up on her without giving her the ten minutes she so earnestly desires.

Yokoo, writing even as this novel was being serialized in Shinchô, wonders who this woman can be and suggests that her use of the telephone symbolizes an age in which direct human communication is no longer possible.36 This is true, of course, but there is more to the image of the telephone than merely the fact that Tôru cannot see who he is talking to; rather, it is merely one more version of the “tunnel” that always separates the internal and external minds of the Murakami protagonist. As to the identity of the “telephone woman,” as she is called in the novel, few regular readers of Murakami will fail to have grasped that she is Kumiko by the end of the novel’s second chapter, in which we are given clues that a gap exists between Tôru and his wife.

In a perfectly everyday scene, Kumiko comes home from work, exhausted, to find that Tōru has cooked her a meal of stir-fried beef and green peppers, forgetting that she cannot tolerate this combination. Kumiko also scolds him for having bought blue tissue paper and patterned toilet paper, which she also cannot abide. Not unnaturally, while recognizing that these are “completely trivial things, hardly the sort to cause so much commotion,” Toru begins to wonder how much he really knows about his wife. He wonders—rightly!—if this might not be the start of something much more serious, if he is not perhaps merely standing poised at the entrance of something much more deadly.

This could just be the entrance. Inside there might be a world stretching out that was just Kumiko’s. It made me think of an enormous room, pitch dark. I was in that room with nothing but a tiny cigarette lighter. By the light of that flame I could see only the barest fraction of the room.

In the context of previous Murakami novels, Tōru’s inability to recognize the voice of the “telephone woman,” despite the fact that she knows everything about him, fits a regular pattern; his admission in the passage above cements our suspicions that the quest in this novel will be for Tōru to bring himself into direct contact with her hidden, unrecognizable “core consciousness.”

It will not be easy, however, for almost immediately following this incident Kumiko goes to work, never to return. She is, we eventually learn, imprisoned by her brother, who eliminates her ability to act on her own volition by stripping her of her core identity. We do not actually see this operation performed on her, but we learn of it from the narrative of another character, Kano Creta, a former prostitute whose last customer was Wataya Noboru. She describes how Noboru literally reached into her body and pulled out something utterly unknown to her, again reminiscent of the “black box” metaphor from previous Murakami literature. The operation, however, is unquestionably erotic.

“Then he plunged something into me from behind... It was as though I had been split in two, right down the middle. But the pain wasn’t normal, because even though I was in agony, I was tormented by pleasure. Pain and pleasure became one.”

“Then, from within my opened flesh, I felt something pulled out of me that I had neither seen nor touched before. I couldn’t tell how large it was, but it was dripping wet, like a newborn baby. I had no idea what it was. It had been inside me only a moment earlier, and yet I had no knowledge of it. Yet this man had taken it from inside of me. “I wanted to know what it was. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. It

38. Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 57.
was, after all, a part of me. I had a right to see it. But I couldn’t. I was too caught up in the torrent of pain and pleasure.”

In the third volume Tōru learns that something similar has happened to Kumiko, when a seedy character named “Ushikawa” tells him that “something has been missing from inside of Kumiko all this time. Something that had been supporting her like a pillar until that point finally broke.” The reader can well imagine that Kumiko has suffered the same fate as Kanō Creta.

Various other narratives in the work suggest that Kumiko and Kanō Creta are not the only victims of this form of assault. Kumiko tells of how her elder sister, evidently Noboru’s first victim, committed suicide after “something” concerned with their brother happened to her. One thinks back also to the death of Akasaka Nutmeg’s husband, whose body was discovered with its internal organs removed; did this foreshadow a similar operation on the bodies of the three women mentioned above? Akasaka Cinnamon’s narrative about his grandfather in Manchuria also includes a scene in which Chinese prisoners are bayoneted to death, special care being taken to destroy the internal organs in the process. Even the skinning of Lt. Mamiya’s commander in Mongolia might be seen as a process of penetrating the outer body in an attempt to gain whatever may lurk inside—in this case, information.

As the examples above suggest, there is a link between the “core identity,” sexuality, and violence, one which is perhaps inevitable given the fact that coitus itself involves a penetration and is thus innately a violation, a literal invasion of the body. Murakami’s use of images related to bladed weapons—the knife used to skin Lt. Mamiya’s commander, the bayonet used to kill the Chinese prisoners, or the knife Wataya Noboru wields in the final confrontation with Tōru—suggests no more or less of a penetration than Noboru’s invasion of Kanō Creta’s body.

Perhaps it is inevitable, then, that the means to restoring the core identities that have been lost is also sexual, and that Tōru, an essentially passive being up until the end of the novel when he bludgeons Noboru to death with a baseball bat, is the key to this. Much of his function as a mystical healer is foreshadowed in his relationship with Kanō Creta, the former prostitute who, through magical means, now visits Tōru in his dreams. Significantly, her character overlaps with that of the “telephone woman”/Kumiko, for when they meet it is in the unconscious motel room, and Kanō Creta writhes atop him wearing a blue dress he recognizes as his wife’s.

Unlike the encounter between Kanō Creta and Wataya Noboru, in which

Noboru clearly occupied the position of dominance while Kanō Creta was helpless, the sexual roles between herself and Tōru are reversed in his dreamscape, where he lies on his back and she sits astride him, or, at the end, brings him to climax orally. This not only helps Kanō Creta to restore her own inner balance, severely damaged by Noboru, but also suggests through the superimposition of her character on Kumiko’s that the secret to reversing the effects of Noboru’s mutilation is for the victim to take an active role.

The opposition of action/passivity represented in the behavior of Noboru and Tōru, respectively, is cemented in the third volume of the novel, in which Tōru works as a healer for Akasaka Nutmeg, who is attracted by a purple mark on his face, a mark that appeared after a narrow escape from his unconscious hotel room just as Noboru entered, bent on killing him. The mark is a sign of his mystical power, but also a living presence, an external emblem of the “black box” that lurks inside his mind. Like that “something” that was drawn out of Kanō Creta, it is warm and alive, pulsating with energy. Like a sacred relic, it contains the secret to the magic healing powers Tōru possesses: his “patients” are healed through direct contact with the mark. Here, too, total passivity and sexuality combine to recreate the earlier scenes with Kanō Creta/Kumiko in his dreamscape. As he sits alone on a sofa, his eyes covered with dark goggles (the darkness signaling the approach of an “unconscious” experience), a woman enters the room (he can tell from the scent of perfume that it is a woman) and begins to stroke the mark on his face with her fingers, “as if she were trying to discern in it some secret buried there in ancient times.”

What follows is purely sexual:

Then she stopped stroking me, got up from the sofa, and, coming from behind me, used her tongue... Her tongue was cunning in the way it nuzzled my skin. Varying the pressure, the angles, the movements, it tasted the mark, sucked at it, stimulated it. I began to feel a warm, wet ache down below. I didn't want to get hard. It would have been too meaningless. But I couldn't stop it.

After the woman leaves, Tōru discovers, just as he does after his dreams involving Kanō Creta, that he has ejaculated.

Thus the sexuality related to identity helps us to place into greater relief the true import of the suggestive telephone calls Tōru receives, but flees from, at the start of the novel. Kumiko’s attempts to reach out to Tōru are, long before he can possibly realize it, aimed both at revealing herself completely (as she does in describing her body over the telephone) and at re-

41. Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 64.
42. Ibid.
ceiving the same kind of healing that Tōru offers to his anonymous clients. Tōru’s inability to recognize her voice merely perpetuates the injunction against any image from the darkness of the unconscious appearing (or, apparently, even sounding) the same in the light of the conscious world. At the same time, Noboru’s removal of Kumiko’s core identity, literally erasing her Self, makes it inevitable, perhaps, that she will not be recognizable as the same person to Tōru in any case.

The Act of Naming

As noted above, names are a point of some interest in Murakami literature. In the early works they are used as a means of identifying the images that emerge from the protagonists’ minds, sometimes for creating metonymical links between those images and the original object of desire. In other cases the names, usually absurd ones, are offered simply as a source of humor in the work.

As the above analysis of Nejimakidori kuronikuru offers numerous examples, Murakami has not given up on the use of unusual names for his characters. But in this work he also adds a new facet, one more closely related to the critique of identity I have been describing, for part of Tōru’s quest, as I noted above, is to discover the name of the woman in the hotel room, to identify her, and thus to free her from her unconscious prison.43 This is, of course, merely a recreation of themes seen from the beginning, of the need for acknowledgment of the Self by an Other in order to establish identity. The only difference is that in this case the task is performed by an external Other.

It is also the central theme of Nejimakidori kuronikuru. When Okada Tōru meets the woman in the unconscious hotel room in the second volume of this work, she tells him sadly, “You want to know who I am. Unfortunately, I can’t help you with that. I know all about you, and you know everything about me. Unfortunately, I know nothing about myself.”44 Immediately after this, the woman announces Tōru’s quest in the novel:

“Find out my name, Okada Tōru. No, you needn’t even look for it; you already know it! You need only remember it. If you could just find my name, I could get out of here. Then I think I can help you find your wife—Okada Kumiko, right? If you want to find your wife, then you must find

43. Murakami reinvigorates a theme made popular by Takahashi Gen’ichirō’s novel Sayō-nara, gyungutachi (1982; Farewell to the gang), in which bestowed names (hence bestowed identity) are rejected in favor of names selected by the principals themselves, but eventually bestowed names come back into fashion as a sign of affection between lovers, a means of showing one’s love. However, the narrator notes, names are useless in the normal sense, because they are used exclusively between the lovers, who do not disclose one another’s names to others.

my name first. That will be your leverage. You have no time to lose. Every
day that you delay finding my name, Okada Kumiko recedes a little farther
from you." 45

The woman is, of course, Kumiko herself, but without her core identity,
now stolen by Wataya Noboru, she cannot find her way back. However, the
mere name, "Okada Kumiko," as the above passage suggests, has no power
to connect with her in the absence of that identity. Near the end of the final
volume, in fact, when Tōru has finally understood the truth, he tells her that
she is Kumiko, but this has little effect on her, so long has she been drifting
in this unconscious world without her identity. Like the unconscious pro-
tagionist of Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārandō, the longer she is
separated from her "black box," the less likely she is to understand the
means to reconnect with it or, for that matter, to care about doing so.

At the moment that Okada Tōru “names” Kumiko, thereby attempting
to restore her identity, Wataya Noboru enters the room, wielding his knife.
The two men struggle, and Tōru beats Noboru to death with his baseball
bat. At the same moment, the “real” Noboru in the conscious world col-
lapses of a brain hemorrhage and teeters on the point of death.

One might imagine, now that Toru has solved the mystery of Kumiko’s
whereabouts and dispatched his enemy, that the novel might end with the
return of Kumiko as Kumiko and that Nejimakidori kuronikuru might be
the first novel in which the hero gains his heart’s desire. Indeed, this might
actually be the end result, but the reader never witnesses it. Instead, Toru
must content himself with corresponding with Kumiko while she recovers,
rebuilding her identity. We might well imagine that Tōru’s power as a mys-
tical healer would save her, but, unfortunately, with the destruction of Wa-
taya Noboru, Tōru’s connection with the “other world” of the unconscious
disappears, and with it his ability to heal. He can now only wait for his wife
to rediscover her individual identity, now that he has helped her to redis-
cover her name.

Murakami's Significance: History and Identity in Contemporary Japan

As the above analyses of Nejimakidori kuronikuru suggest, there is a
vital connection between identity and history, and between identity and the
past. As the scientist in Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārandō says
above, identity literally is our collection of memories of past events. More-
over, this identity has become jeopardized by a determined attempt on the
one hand to assimilate all contemporary Japanese into a system of consum-
erism and on the other to eliminate, or at least gloss over, the events of
history that make the Japanese who they are.

This is not an issue specific to Japan, of course. Jean Baudrillard writes

in *The Illusion of the End* of a worldwide trend, at least among the industrialized nations, to reverse the trajectory of history until time actually moves backward, giving us both the opportunity to redress the errors of the twentieth century and also to avoid the reckoning that the *fin de siècle* must inevitably bring.

Are we condemned, in the vain hope of not abiding in our present destruction . . . to the retrospective melancholia of living everything through again in order to correct it all, in order to elucidate it all . . . do we have to summon all past events to appear before us, to reinvestigate it all as though we were conducting a trial? A mania for trials has taken hold of us in recent times, together with a mania for responsibility, precisely at the point when this latter is becoming increasingly hard to pin down. We are looking to remake a clean history, to whitewash all the abominations: the obscure (resentful) feeling behind the proliferation of scandals is that history itself is a scandal.46

Baudrillard expresses the same caution as Rat in *Hitsuji o meguru bōken*, that even in its imperfections, the past should be preserved as accurately as possible, because that is who we are, and to give up the “glory, character, meaning and singularity”47 of our historical past is to give up ourselves and whatever sense of identity remains to us. Interestingly, Baudrillard too makes reference to the past as a “shadow,” arguing that we seek to reverse history in order “to leapfrog our own shadows, leapfrog the shadow of the century.”48

Murakami’s literature confronts such attempts to whitewash history, which are acutely visible especially in how the “official” Japanese history (sanctioned by Monbushō, the Ministry of Education) has dealt with Japanese activities during the Second World War. Murakami’s rehearsal of the lesser-known events of that war, the fighting in Manchuria, reminds us of the tendency since the postwar years to rewrite the history of this period in more desirable language. Implicit in his retrieval of the virtually forgotten Battle of Nomonhan, or in his description of Chinese students being slaughtered, are narratives containing the ignored or forgotten sentiments of the soldiers who took part in the massacres, whose personal beliefs ran counter to the orders they followed. The army lieutenant in charge of executing the Chinese students expresses this tension succinctly when he notes to Akasaka Nutmeg’s father, “We’ve already killed enough Chinese, and I just don’t see the point of adding to the body count.”49 Nevertheless, “good”

47. Ibid., p. 12.
48. Ibid.
soldier that he is, the lieutenant ignores his personal scruples and carries out his orders to the letter. Murakami’s interest in the war is based on this tension, for, as he told interviewer Ian Buruma several years ago, he is interested in how war “stretches the tension between individuals and the state to the very limit.”

It would be accurate to say that Murakami’s focus on the peripheral battles in Manchuria in Nejimakidori kuronikuru, events that few have heard of and even fewer care much about, is a challenge to “official” history, just as his literature has consistently proved a challenge to the sense of identity the system has “officially” bestowed upon the Japanese. His work offers an opportunity to reevaluate the hypocrisy of a national history that annually commemorates the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but still refers to the massacre of Chinese civilians at Nanjing as an “incident.” It speaks to the self-delusion of a nation that, in Kuroko Kazuo’s estimation, dedicates itself to peace and prosperity but supports its affluence by tacitly participating in the destruction of the environment in the Third World.

Kuroko’s view of contemporary Japan as a “Walkman Society,” one in which people are “self-centered” (jiheteki), is essentially accurate and describes the Murakami protagonist well. His viewpoint largely agrees with that which has emerged from this discussion of Murakami’s literature, but it is important to remind ourselves that the result of this is not a greater individuality; the otaku-zoku (introvert) in Japan does not possess a more highly developed sense of self than the so-called group-oriented Japanese of 20 years ago. Rather, the lack of everyday human interaction that Kuroko (along with Katō, Kawamoto, and Yokoo) laments in contemporary Japanese society is precisely what Murakami highlights in his literature. The dilemma, of course, is not new, but really a rather dated existentialist problem: how can the Self proclaim its existence in the absence of meaningful interaction with an Other? Murakami’s protagonists try to solve this dilemma first by seeking the Other within themselves, with predictably unsatisfactory results, and more recently seek a similar solution through their efforts to reach out to others. All the while such attempts are hindered by a social system that encourages people to accept an identity bestowed through participation in the consumerist economic utopia of late twentieth-century Japan, rather than by seeking something unique within themselves.

There is no question that the utopia offered to the protagonists in Murakami’s literature since Hitsuji o meguru bōken is attractive and tempting. Murakami challenges his readers: who among us has not envisioned, even if only for a moment, the chance to forget all of our problems, ignore our responsibilities, let someone do our thinking for a while? Rat declares this

51. Kuroko, Murakami Haruki to dōjidai no bungaku, p. 15.
idea quite early in *Kaze no uta o kike*: “thinking your way through 50 years is a hell of a lot more tiring than spending 5,000 years not thinking about anything.”

**Conclusion: The Crisis of Identity in Contemporary Japan**

I noted at the beginning of this essay that Murakami Haruki’s appearance on the Japanese literary scene in 1979 was no accident, that the historical moment was exceptionally conducive to the emergence of such a writer. It is also probably true that his first intended audience was his own generation, those who were between 17 and 20 years of age in 1969, in other words those most in a position to use the doomed Zenkyōtō movement as a vehicle to establish their sense of subjectivity. This would explain two things: first, why a novel as vaguely written as *Kaze no uta o kike* would prove so popular, and second, why the Gunzō Prize committee found it so difficult to explain its preference for the work. The members of this committee were not insensitive in their reading; rather, separated from Murakami by a generation of experience, they simply found it difficult to grasp the vacuum of post-Zenkyōtō disillusionment in which Murakami’s protagonist seeks his identity. Whereas Japanese of the prewar and war years were given a sense of purpose and identity by their government (whether they liked it or not), and those who participated in Japan’s recovery after the war had the clear purpose of rebuilding the physical and economic basis of the nation, the aftermath of the Zenkyōtō movement left a void of disillusionment that was enhanced by the apparent success (symbolized in the conspicuous affluence of the 1980s) of the establishment.

Murakami’s concern for identity, his desire to recuperate the past in order to rediscover the sense of identity lost in 1970, is echoed in the works of other writers of his generation. Murakami Ryū (b. 1952), as noted above, attempts to recover the violent, angry atmosphere of counterculture in his first work, *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū*, but achieves a more sensitive nostalgia in *Shikkusuti nain* (1987; 69), a work that recalls Ryū’s activities as a 17-year-old high school student in 1969, his gang’s attempts to create a “miniature Zenkyōtō” movement of their own on the high school campus. Similarly, Nakagami Kenji’s (1946–92) short story “Jūhassai” (1980; 52) short story “Jūhassai” (1980;


53. Among the five-member panel, only Maruya Saichi felt that the work, representing significant understanding of the style of American popular literature, pointed to the new direction Japanese literature was taking. Of the others, Sasaki Kiichi and Sata Ineko liked the work but found it difficult to articulate their reasons; Yoshiyuki Junsokuske ranked it “somewhere between 60 and 85” out of 100 on his first reading, and after rereading it decided it was “a good work,” and Shimao Toshio selected *Kaze no uta o kike* as the least objectionable of the choices. See “Gunzō shinjin bungakushō senbyō,” in Murakami, ed., *Murakami Haruki*, pp. 36–40.
18), which the author claims to have begun writing at around that age, presents the self-assurance of teenagers on the verge of graduating from high school in the mid-1960s.

But the writer who most closely resembles Murakami’s approach to the past via magical realism is probably Shimizu Yoshinori (b. 1947). Like Murakami, Shimizu’s characters live in a world that is realistic but tinged with the magical and look to their past experiences to rediscover themselves. One sees this especially clearly in Shimizu’s “Guroingu daun” (1989; Growing down), in which time is suddenly reversed. No one can say why, but as time goes backward the dead rise and grow younger, while the living gradually make their way toward infancy and birth, the end of the line. Yet the experience is not frightening to the narrator/protagonist; rather, it is a pleasant one, for there is a sense of anticipation as he draws steadily nearer to the magical era of the 1960s and gradually regains his childhood innocence. And why did time suddenly reverse? The protagonist’s speculation echoes the concern of Baudrillard above:

“There were those who saw the Year 2000 as a kind of wall. It seems that people were afraid of going beyond the Year 2000.”

It suddenly occurred to me that it was the uneasiness of our time that had made this happen. We used to think that all the time. I had completely forgotten.

That time had been awful. It was widely believed that humans were rapidly approaching their destruction.54

Time, then, reverses because people sense their doom in the fin de siècle, for in a sense, the “project of modernity,” as Jürgen Habermas would have it, will at the end of the century be proved a failure.

Yet, in its reversal of time, the work also contains a caveat: after the sophistication of the 1980s, can one really return to the comparative simplicity of the 1960s and 1950s? Shimizu’s protagonist notes that at one time there had been intellectuals who studied the problem, but as time went onward (backward) they grew younger and more ignorant, and eventually there was no one left with sophistication enough to think the problems through. Technology, he also notes, especially computers, has gone steadily backward, making the task of studying the fin de siècle increasingly difficult. With symbolism that is perhaps a little too clear, Shimizu’s protagonist reads Flowers for Algernon, suggesting that his characters, too, are stepping away from knowledge, from the savoir-faire of contemporary urban Japa-

nese and the cool savvy of Tanaka Yasuo’s *Nantonaku, kurisutaru*, to rediscover their innocence.

One must not permit terms such as “innocence” or “simplicity” to give the sense that the nostalgia in Murakami (or even Shimizu) is naive, however, that it simply “misses” the past. Particularly in reading Murakami one recalls that the author, like his protagonists, has generally denied any fondness for the 1950s and 1960s, for Zenkyōtō or the issues it represented. What he seeks through his nostalgia is not to “whitewash” the past, as Baudrillard suggests, but to use it as a means to seek the identity that he and his contemporaries lost between 1969 and 1970. One hardly need add that the realities of the 1980s and 1990s have as yet given little evidence that those in the 20–30 crowd in today’s Japan have much more on which to build their sense of identity than did Murakami’s generation, which helps to explain why his readership remains chiefly in that age group.

There is no real solution to the serious dilemma Murakami presents in his literature. Despite the persistent recession that slows Japanese economic expansion outward, Japan, like other industrialized states, remains largely without direction or cause. The quest for economic domination abroad and affluence at home has been largely achieved, perhaps more evenly in Japan, where 97 per cent of the population considers itself “middle class,” than anywhere else in the world. What is left? Murakami implicitly questions whether this goal of affluence is sufficient, whether it can adequately replace a true sense of self, and what will happen to those who find it unsatisfactory.

Perhaps these questions are too philosophical for some, too prosaic for others, but the author’s strong readership, one that cuts across the boundaries that normally divide popular writers from the more serious sort, suggests that he is not alone in his sense of foreboding toward Japan’s economic obsession and its consequences for the individual. As Murakami suggests in *Underground* and *Underground 2*, anyone who doubts the existence of a serious philosophical and spiritual gap in contemporary Japan has not yet considered the real significance of the events of March 20, 1995.

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