

# The Influence of American Literature on Haruki Murakami: A Reconsideration

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## Introduction

On the May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 issue of *The New Yorker*, titled as “Japan’s Crisis,” appears a short story by Haruki Murakami, “UFO in Kushiro.” The date of the publication tells that the issue was to console Japan right after the Great East Japan Earthquake. The story, originally written as a silent epitaph for the victims in the Great Hanshin Earthquake, was one of the features of the issue.

It was, however, not just an American consolation to Japan. It was also a “return consolation,” so to speak, from the US to Japan. Back in 2001, only four months after the publication of the English translation of *Underground* by Murakami, the US experienced the 9/11. This is a pure coincidence, but the readers of Murakami in the US must have learned many precious lessons from the translation. In addition, the next year, a collection of short stories more or less concerned with the Great Hanshin Earthquake titled as *After the Quake*, was translated into English and published in the US, which naturally brought consolation to the US right after the shock of the terrorists’ attack.

In short, the US readers of Murakami in early 21st century learned much from his writings on terrorism and a national disaster. In this very sense, the issue of *The New Yorker* mentioned above can be read as “a return consolation.”

In my view, works of Murakami has been informed by this type of reciprocity or interdependence between the US and Japan. Indeed, why did the issue of *The New Yorker* choose the story of Murakami? The magazine could have chosen a story from American writers. If the issue was to console Japan from the American side, it could be even strange that an English translation of a Japanese short story appeared on it.

It is, however, natural for eager readers of Murakami either in Japan or in the US to see his story on that very issue. Curiously enough, there is a silent agreement among the readers of Murakami about the American-ness

of Murakami, that is, the notion that he is a highly-Americanized author with Japanese background. And this is what he has been like since he started his career as a professional writer.

What is, after all, the dynamics working here, the dynamics supporting and conditioning our notion of Murakami as a highly Americanized Japanese writer? To answer this question, we should confirm his strategy to construct himself as an author under the strong influence of American literature and culture. And this strategy not only characterizes the nature of Murakami's works, but also reflects the desire for the things American in post WWII Japan.

Hereafter, we are going to examine the nature of the strategy from two points of view: (1) Murakami's shaping the truth about the starting point as a novelist; (2) Murakami's mode of the translation.

(1)

Since his debut as a professional, Murakami always puts himself, perhaps consciously, near the things American. Here is the famous anecdote about his starting point as a novelist:

I can pinpoint the exact moment when I first thought I could write a novel. It was around one thirty in the afternoon of April 1, 1978. I was at Jingu Stadium that day, alone in the outfield drinking beer and watching the game. [...] I remember that Yasuda was pitching for the Swallows. [...] He easily retired the side in the top of the inning, and in the bottom of the inning the lead off batter for the Swallows was Dave Hilton, a young American player new to the team. Hilton got a hit down the left field line. The crack of bat meeting ball right on the sweet spot echoed through the stadium. Hilton easily rounded first and pulled up to second. And it was at that moment that a thought struck me: *You know what? I could try writing a novel.* ( Murakami [2009] 27)

The passage is worth examining. Even though we are not sure whether what he is saying here is "fact" or not, we can safely say that this is a "truth" according to his definition of the word in *Underground*. In *Underground*, Murakami makes a clear distinction between "truth" and "fact." For him, the "truth" is just what someone talked about regardless of "fact," while the

“fact” can be measured and quantified based on some clear standard (Murakami [1999] 755-56).

When we take the above quotation as this type of “truth,” we can easily find that the situation represented here can be a clue to understand the nature of his strategy.

First of all, the location itself is symbolic. Jingu Stadium. Not Korakuen stadium or Koshien stadium. This reminds us of the historical fact that there was a housing complex of the US Air Force, which was called Washington Heights, near the Jingu-Gaien area right after the WWII. As the detailed study of the Washington Heights by Akio reveals, the fashionable atmosphere around the area owes itself much to Washington Heights, which made the neighborhood most American in Tokyo, or even in Japan. Jingu stadium, therefore, is a proper place for Murakami to start his career as a professional writer who is under the strong influence of the US.

Second, the batter referred to in the quotation is suggestive: Dave Hilton, an American. We don't know exactly why Hilton's two-base hit inspired Murakami, but the important thing is that it is an American, a former major leaguer, who triggered Murakami's desire to become a novelist.

Thus, from the very beginning, there were many things American around Murakami as a would-be novelist. Or, more correctly, Murakami *claims* there were many things American around himself. As he states early in the same chapter in the same book, when he decided to become a professional writer, he was running a Jazz club near the Sendagaya-station. Baseball and jazz club in the Jingu-Gaien area. Here completes the things most American in Japan, and Murakami makes effective use of the significance they could carry for the consciousness of Japanese people. And if this is his strategy, it is successful because his American-ness has been one of the big sources of Murakami's attraction since his debut, whether people like it or not.

In fact, one can find Murakami's somewhat arbitral handling of the “fact” to shape the “truth” about the starting point as a novelist. In the other place, Murakami is talking about the same day, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1978:

僕は 29 歳になったばかりで、その春から小説（のようなもの）を書き始めていた。小説（のようなもの）を書くのは生まれて初めてのことだ。ヤクルトスワローズは球団創設以来、優勝経験のないまま 29 回目のシーズ

ンを迎えようとしていた。言うまでもないことだが、そのふたつの事実のあいだには何の関連性もない。たまたまそうだったということだ。[...] 78年の4月1日に戻ろう。快晴。神宮球場のオープニングゲーム、プレーボールの午後1時、僕は芝生の上に寝そべりながらビールのかぶりめを飲んでた。[ヒルトンは] バッターボックスの中で、まるでしゃがみこむように不器用に身を折り曲げ、[...] 投手のグラブを睨み付けていた。ここは本当に闘牛場なのかもしれないな、と僕は考えたほどだった。(Murakami [2011] 327-28)

While describing the same situation in Jingu Stadium, Murakami confesses that he had already started writing “something like a novel” in the spring of 1978. However, here he does not pinpoint his starting point. Instead, Murakami says he was thinking that the stadium was like a bullring at that time. At least, the readers are not sure about when he decided to start writing a novel. They can even get the impression that Murakami had already begun writing a novel before April 1st.

In any case, the fact does not matter here. What matters is that there are two different ways of talking about his feeling at Jingu Stadium on April 1st, 1978. It looks the situation is re-told, told twice, to spot his starting point as a novelist. Spring 1978 is clear, but the exact time, day, and place are not clear in the last quotation, while, in the first quotation written almost twenty years later, everything gets clear. Though the setting is not related to his start of writing a novel in the last one, in the first one the relationship is slightly, but certainly, implied.

In this way, the “truth” in Murakami’s sense is constructed, and this innocent managing of the fact can be defined as his strategy for self-fashioning, that is, shaping himself as an “American” Japanese writer. Behind the strategy, of course, there is Murakami’s increasingly strong and manifested desire for being American.

## (2)

In an interview with Motoyuki Shibata, Murakami asserts that he was really happy when he finally became a professional novelist in 1979, a year after the “starting point.” Murakami explains this is because he thought he could work exclusively on the translation (Murakami and Shibata [2006] 150).

Here, what we must pay attention to is his motivation for translating Fitzgerald. In another interview with Shibata, Murakami insists that he was trying to get the key to beautiful mode of writing by translating Fitzgerald, by taking his language apart (Shibata [2000] 57-8).

There Murakami argues that he can “participate” in the beauty of the language through the act of translation, which is precisely his motivation for translation. In the interview he repeats that the language of Fitzgerald or Capote was so beautiful and wonderful that he wanted to “participate” in them. And this concept of “participation” reminds us of the translation theory of Walter Benjamin. In his famous essay “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin argues that a real translation is not the mere reproduction in meaning of the original. Rather, a real one is like a fragment of a vessel, which “are to be glued together” with the original to bring a perfection to a vessel. The real translation for Benjamin is transparent, not covering the original and not blocking its light (Benjamin 78-9).

Seen in this light, Murakami’s notion of participation is quite similar to Benjamin’s theory on translation. In fact, Murakami’s translation is “transparent” in the sense that it makes the readers become aware of the original English text. Compare, for example, the two different texts of the Japanese translation of the same passage from “Winter Dreams,” a short story by Fitzgerald:

**Original Text by Fitzgerald:**

Suddenly, involuntarily, he laughed, a short abrupt laugh---then, startled by himself, he turned and began to walk quickly away. (384)

**Translation by Nozaki:**

不意に彼は思わず笑い出してしまった。藪から棒の短い笑いであったーそれから自分でもびっくりしてくびすを返し、急いでその場を立ち去りかけた。(104)

**Translation by Murakami:**

出し抜けに、自分でも意識しないままに、デクスターは声を上げて笑ってしまった。短い、唐突な笑いだった。そして自分でもそれに驚いてしまった。彼は振り向いて、そこを足早に去ろうとした。(56-7)

One can easily see the difference. The style of Nozaki is more Japanese, while the word by word translation style of Murakami sounds more foreign, more English. In short, Murakami, participating through the translation in the beautiful style of Fitzgerald, retains the resonance of English behind Japanese.

In this very sense his mode of translation is “transparent,” and through this transparency we can feel the original, American literature. Of course the language Murakami uses in translation is Japanese, but at the same time we can sense the American-ness in his Japanese. Here completes language of Murakami, that is, Japanese language heavily tinted with American English.

Almost the same can be said concerning Murakami’s starting point as a novelist. It is in Japan, of course, where he decided to become a novelist. But the venue was most American in Japan. Here completes Murakami as a Japanese author heavily tinted with things American.

### Conclusion

As we can see above, the so-called Haruki world informs, and is informed by, American-ness in Japanese context. After all, Murakami is shaping himself in between the US and Japan and is participating in “a greater language” in Benjamin’s sense, a language comprising both Japanese and American English. This dynamics working between the US and Japan is supporting and conditioning our consciousness on Murakami as a highly Americanized Japanese writer. And it is Murakami himself who shaped this dynamics. It is not by chance but by his intention.

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