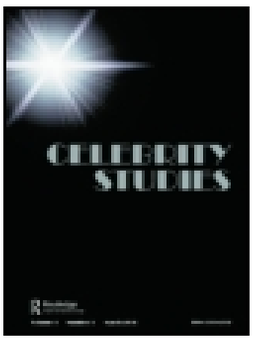

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The celebrity of Haruki Murakami and the 'empty' narrative: a new model for the age of global literature

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Introduction

Is Haruki Murakami truly a Japanese celebrity author? If so, how and why has this come about? These are profoundly difficult questions. It may be that literary 'celebrity' is a phenomenon not found in traditional Japanese literature. If literary celebrity is grounded in the fluid relationship between a given author, his or her readership, and the publishing and marketing industry (Eisner 2009, Glass 2016, Franssen 2017), as well as how an author understands and seeks to meet the expectations of his or her readership, then the long tradition of *junbungaku* ('pure literature', similar to *belles lettres* in French or 'serious literature' in English) in Japan since the Meiji era (1868–1912) has only partially supported such a phenomenon. One reason for this is the social position traditionally occupied by writers of *junbungaku* since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The serious Japanese writer is more than a literary artist; he or she is a cultural spokesman, an intellectual leader – in essence, a teacher – to the reading public. In addition to writing literature, she/he will be obliged to help identify new potential writers through the judging and awarding of literary prizes, one of the ways in which promising new writers are 'sorted' (winners of the Akutagawa Prize are marked as 'serious' writers, while those chosen for the Naoki Prize are cast into the 'popular' category).[1] Major writers frequently take part in televised or live 'round-table discussions' (*zadankai*), appear on news programmes, and offer opinions on important issues. After major events – natural disasters, notorious crimes, political scandals – literati are frequently sought out for comments and impressions, and these are published in literary journals or newspapers. In the era after the Second World War, numerous writers figured prominently in protest movements against the Vietnam War, the US–Japan Security Treaty, and nuclear weapons. Although the specific issues have changed (climate change, nuclear power, gender inequality), this trend continues to this day.

These activities point clearly towards the role of serious writers in Japan as intellectual guides and cultural spokespersons, and the intended beneficiary of their wisdom is the Japanese public. In the pages that follow, I shall argue two principal points. The first of these is that *junbungaku* represents a national literature, produced about, by, and for the Japanese; it should, moreover, be understood as having a strongly didactic element whose object is the formation and expression of a distinctly Japanese cultural subject. The second point is that Murakami deliberately rejects the methods and traditions of

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junbungaku (Murakami and McInerny 1992, Murakami 2010, Strecher 2014). His (indeed very untraditional) celebrity, now a global phenomenon, is one result of the storytelling method Murakami has developed to replace this traditional model. In order to grasp the importance of this rejection, it will be necessary to understand the process by which *junbungaku* has come to be what it is.

Brevity precludes a full rehearsal of the history of *junbungaku* in Japan, but we may broadly identify three distinct 'phases' in its development. The first occurred during the early years of Meiji (1868–1912), when Japan emerged from 250 years of feudal isolation and, facing potential invasion by more technologically advanced western nations (Russia, England, France, the United States), sought to construct a European-style, modern nation-state, political authority centred in the Meiji Emperor (Duus 1976, Gordon 2003). But individual Japanese 'identity' prior to Meiji, if it existed at all, was tied to local political units known as *han* (domains, fiefdoms), and lacked a sense of national subjectivity (Wilson 2010). As the new Meiji government took steps to educate their new national citizenry in its obligations to the State through a series of imperial edicts and rescripts (Gordon 2003), their efforts were aided by fiction writers, whose task was to develop more modern forms of literature that would equal those of the West (Guth 1997, Keene 1998), define and express the 'modern subject' (Walker 1997, Orbaugh 2003), and, ultimately, assist in 'the cause of building the nation' (Gordon 2003, p. 67). This involved experiments with European literary forms such as the novel (Keene 1998), and also with a more modern form of written Japanese through the *genbun itchi* ('concordance of written and spoken languages') movement in the late nineteenth century (Twine 1991, Orbaugh 2003).

The second phase of *junbungaku* occurred in the early part of the twentieth century, ending shortly before the Second World War. In this phase, with the project of 'building the nation' now largely completed, major writers participated in a 12-year (1923–1935) debate, in literary journals, concerning the function and parameters of *junbungaku*. The debate ended with a definition that carefully stripped 'pure' literature of any political or social function, while retaining a strong demand for realism and personal introspection on the part of the author (Hirano 1961, 1972, Strecher 1996). One of the most significant and lasting results of this debate was the elevation of the I-novel (*watakushi-shōsetsu* or *shi-shōsetsu*) as the 'most typical expression' of *junbungaku* (Strecher 1996, p. 364; cf. Itō 1961, Takami 1962, Hirano 1972, Kume 1976). The I-novel is confessional, semi-autobiographical fiction that examines in detail the author's (or his protagonist's) emotional and intellectual reactions to the minutiae of daily life.[2]

Junbungaku transformed yet again after 1945, the third phase, as writers were forced to reflect on the fact that their earlier refusal to engage in social and political problems prior to the Second World War had deprived them of a crucial opportunity to help guide public opinion during the rise of militarism in the late 1930s. 'Intellectuals were contrite because virtually all felt in one way or another that they had failed to resist the war' (Koschmann 1993, pp. 396–397; cf. Bix 1992, Shimazu 2003). Postwar writers, as a result, took a more proactive, vocal stance towards politics. The question of the 'subject', however, remained key, as writers and philosophers alike debated the true meaning of 'subjectivity' in postwar Japan vis-à-vis the West (cf. Miyoshi 1998, esp. Ch. 4). In other words, while *junbungaku* and its authors became more overtly political post war, the writer's task was not significantly different from that of the prewar writer: to construct a

detailed portrait of the Japanese subject within its current social and historical moment. As Kenzaburō Ōe expresses it, '[t]he role of literature – insofar as man is obviously a historical being – is to create a model of a contemporary age which envelops past and future and a human model that lives in that age' (Ōe 1989, p. 193).

The point I seek to make here is that *junbungaku* began, developed, and has continued as a means of constructing the Japanese 'subject' – the very models of which Ōe writes – within a specifically Japanese cultural and linguistic setting. From Meiji to present, those models have provided a means for Japan's literati to educate their readers with regard to what it means to 'be Japanese'.

This pattern, however, began to change with the advent of Murakami, who occupies a liminal, even paradoxical, position in this structure: Murakami is a serious Japanese writer who does not write *junbungaku*. An exploration of this apparent paradox exposes a structural anomaly in Murakami's writing, the construction of what will be called the 'empty narrative', a concept that will be explained in the following. Herein lies the key to Murakami's success as a writer, in and out of Japan, and a crucial aspect of his work as a global writer in the contemporary age. It is also, I argue, the source of his literary celebrity.

Beyond 'pure' literature

Ōe goes on to say in the essay cited earlier that:

> [Murakami], a writer born after the war, is said to be attracting new readers to *junbungaku*. It is clear, however, that Murakami's target lies outside the sphere of *junbungaku*, and that is exactly where he is trying to establish his place. (Ōe 1989, p. 200)

This is quite true; Murakami, from the very start of his career, has been at pains to distance himself from *junbungaku*, to present a very different sort of 'model' for his readers (Murakami 2010). At the heart of Murakami's celebrity stands his close dialogic relationship with readers of all types, a relationship grounded in Murakami's new 'model' for the contemporary subject, as well as the 'empty narrative' structure into which he places that model. If literary celebrity is, in part, about negotiating a dialogue between reader and author, I would argue that Murakami is the first Japanese writer in Japan's modern era to achieve a close dialogic connection with an extraordinarily diverse, global readership. Rubin (2016, p. 30), Murakami's most prolific translator and a self-professed fan, agrees, noting that Murakami 'grasps the emotional phenomena – the universal phenomena – that readers experience, regardless of national borders or race or religion'. Even Ōe (2007, p. 280) acknowledges that such a global following was 'something neither Kōbō Abe nor Yukio Mishima, nor I myself was ever able to achieve'.[3]

I would propose that the global fervour for Murakami – his celebrity status – is grounded in a readerly perception that this author understands his readers, recognises their concerns, and is capable of communing with them on their terms. This may explain why, in the 22 years I have been teaching Murakami's fiction, the single most recurring comment my students make is that the author has written the work about them. Nor is this limited to students; writing of his initial encounter, Rubin (2016, p. 15; emphasis added) recalls that 'I was totally fascinated by Murakami's works. *It was as though he had written them expressly for me*'. This knack for enabling the reader to see himself or herself

in the text has not diminished as Murakami's career continues. Discussing the author's most recent novel, *Kishidanchō-goroshi* (*Killing Commendatore*; Murakami 2017), critic Yutaka Kōno describes the work as a mirror:

> Staring fixedly with both eyes at the text, what the reader sees there is not the tale of 'killing the Commendatore', but the image of the reader himself. Thus, the more I try to speak concretely about the story itself, the more my words depart from the narrative and become about the reader. (Kōno 2017, p. 12)

The 'empty narrative' model

In contrast with traditional *junbungaku* texts, which tend to favour highly detailed and introspective narratives (more often than not directly reflecting the attitudes of the author), Murakami permits his readers greater latitude in responding to both his text and his protagonist. Where a work of *junbungaku* 'instructs' the reader, presents a model of the contemporary moment, and analyses it exhaustively for the reader's edification, the Murakami text offers a sketch, an outline, inviting the reader to participate in its completion through the act of reading. It is the difference, to use a teaching metaphor, between a 'lecture' class and a 'discussion' seminar. 'Pure' literature (in imitation of the typical Japanese teaching technique) lectures its readers on every detail, every interesting or relevant point, and leaves little space for the reader's own input. We react, but we do not rewrite. Murakami's fiction, by contrast, is more like a series of open-ended questions, any of which could lead to multiple answers. Without our active input – our participation in the discussion – the narrative does not fully come to life.

The Murakami text subverts the tropes of *junbungaku* by eliminating much of the specificity of its setting and its hero, developing its plot through what I call the 'empty narrative', and an equally 'empty' protagonist, whose Everyman status is marked by Murakami's assignment of an unusual name, or no name. The 'empty narrative' results from the juxtapositioning of two distinct, yet parallel, narratives, from between which a third narrative 'space' emerges, a latticework containing the structure of the two narratives, but not their details. In the Murakami text we see juxtaposed narratives representing 'the fantastic' and 'the mundane'. The 'fantastic' is a magical realist dreamscape of pure imagination, a world of magical sheep, talking pinball machines, birds that wind the springs of time, Little People, and labyrinthine forests at whose centre may very well lurk an actual Minotaur. This narrative is both fascinating and unsettling; like most magical realist narratives, it leads us at intervals to question the protagonist's sanity.[4]

The 'mundane' narrative, by contrast, is so commonplace that it might go unnoticed, yet is immediately comprehensible to most readers. Here the protagonist reminisces about lost loves and missing friends, the passage of his youth, or the search for purpose in life. These matters are familiar and comprehensible to all of us, not on an intellectual level but an experiential one. But Murakami (2015, p. 123) is not out to solve these fundamental questions for us; quite the reverse, from the very beginning 'I took special pains, first and foremost, "not to explain things"'. Accordingly, the protagonist's ruminations seldom go beyond the level of idle thinking. He does not offer deep philosophical insights, he makes no effort to go into detail. He is sad, nostalgic, confused, and occasionally angry; he cannot or will not say why. This is left for the reader to figure out. Psychologist Yael Harel likens

Murakami to a 'good-enough parent', one who deliberately holds something back from their child in order to force the child to discover their own solutions:

> The Murakami text places the real world and the strange world of illusion together in one place, and the reasons for the bizarre things that occur are not made clear. This may not be particularly kind to the reader, but as the reader imagines and interprets the work on his own, he establishes a 'potential space', and his heart is stimulated. (Harel 2016, n.p.)

Kōno describes something similar operating on the metaphorical level, arguing that 'metaphor deliberately establishes a space between expression and essence. The reader seeks to fill in this space. As the reader uses his own internal contents to fill in the space, a part of him is melted into the narrative' (Kōno 2017, p. 13).

Take, as one simple example, *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (*A Wild Sheep Chase*; Murakami 1990), in which a fantastic narrative concerning the quest for a mythical, all-empowering sheep runs parallel to a thoroughly ordinary narrative in which a nameless, 30-something man seeks a missing friend. In the 'empty narrative' space that develops between these two parallel structures, the reader is invited – or perhaps compelled – to construct a third narrative that conforms loosely to the quest structure, but in which the object of that quest may be something more personal, and the hero of the quest becomes the reader himself or herself. In this 'empty narrative' space, the reader rewrites the Murakami story, and in the process Murakami and his reader connect, briefly but meaningfully.

This, then, is how Murakami undermines the essential structure of *junbungaku*: by stripping away its all-important cultural specificities and its author-centred approach, while at the same time successfully bridging the gap between author and reader. The 'empty narrative space' is an opportunity to write the story ad infinitum, to insert something more meaningful to the individual reader. It is an opportunity to engage Murakami in a dialogic reading strategy that permits endless play with his text. For those who wish to go deeper, there are plenty of symbol-like entities available for constructing interpretive, critical readings; for those who do not, the surface-level fantasy narrative itself makes for an entertaining read.

The Murakami Phenomenon

Murakami's skilful manipulation of these narrative structures has led to what is now being called the 'Murakami Phenomenon' (*genshō*), another way of expressing the author's 'celebrity'. The 'empty narrative' structure, coupled with a style of writing that is unusually simple and direct for Japanese literary prose,[5] results in a story that translates well into other linguistic and cultural systems, and provides Murakami with a potentially endless, global readership. It has also led to some interesting developments in how literature is being read – and written – in Japan in the contemporary moment.

Consider, for instance, Murakami's work as a translator of western fiction. Despite criticism that his translations bear the unmistakable markings of his own personal style (Koishikawa *et al*. 2003, Kazamaru 2006, Strecher 2014), there is no denying that the appearance of Murakami's name on a translation attracts new readers to texts they would otherwise probably not have discovered. No doubt readers discover these works more easily because they are placed in the 'Murakami' section of bookstores

alongside his own works, and frequently even have his own name written in larger letters than the original author's (Koishikawa *et al*. 2003, p. 304, Franssen 2017, p. 226).

A more important aspect of Murakami's celebrity status, particularly in the context of East Asian literature, is that he has facilitated a cultural 'thawing' of relations between Japan and neighbouring countries still haunted by dark memories of the Second World War. He has begun, for instance, to reverse a long period of disinterest in Japanese literature in Taiwan following Japan's formal recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972 (Chang 2009). He has also gained a wide readership in South Korea, which in other respects remains a hotbed of anti-Japanese sentiment due to a half-century of colonial rule (Chang 2009). Critic Kim (2009, pp. 27–28) credits Murakami with having facilitated, intentionally or not, the growth of 'a cultural autonomous zone in which the weight of nationalism is eliminated … where [writers] will be able to interact freely'.

Consider also the new generation of young writers known as 'Murakami's children' (Fujii *et al*. 2006, p. 6), who have taken up a 'Murakami-esque' style and structure and attempted to recast it in their own cultural settings. British novelist David Mitchell, South Korea's Yun Dae-yon, and Wei Hui and Annie Baobei of China all openly acknowledge their avid interest in Murakami (Strecher 2002b, 2011, Fujii *et al*. 2006). What these writers have in common is their focus on 'cool', disaffected 'Everyman' characters whose stories, like Murakami's own, trend away from nationalistic or cultural specificities, opting instead for a cosmopolitan, 'nationality-less' urban fantasyland.

But these are the effects of the 'Murakami Phenomenon', not the cause of Murakami 'celebrity'. That cause, as I have argued, lies in Murakami's willingness and ability to go beyond *belles lettres*, to abandon the tropes of *junbungaku*, manipulating the fantastic and the mundane so as to establish a working discursive narrative space in which readers may place themselves at the centre of an enjoyable narrative, discover themselves in the process of rewriting that narrative, and interpret freely. Murakami writes and speaks for the Everyman reader, in a language she/he can understand, with a narrative that may either be read superficially in its own right or read/written to virtually any interpretive depth, and thus transformed into a naturalised, localised, individualised text that suits the needs and realities of each reader.[6] As the Murakami hero searches for what he has lost, he ventures into the Underworld, but really he is only remembering, calling to mind long-forgotten images that bring back, temporarily, what he has lost. It is something we all can do, and we all do it. We do not need to be Japanese, or well educated, or even particularly 'deep' to gain something from the Murakami text.

Is this, then, the death of *junbungaku*? Yes and no. The success and 'celebrity' of Murakami as a writer may well harbinger the end of traditional, localised, national literature in Japan. The global age may, in fact, require that such literature comes to a close sooner or later. Murakami's version of literature may also represent, however, a new configuration of global *junbungaku*, whose goal remains to connect authors and readers through, as Ōe says, models of a contemporary age, but whose models will also have to be global.

Notes

1. For an introduction to the relationship between literary prizes and the literary establishment, see Mack (2010).
2. For a detailed history and analysis of the I-novel, see Fowler (1992).
3. All translations from sources referenced in the Japanese originals are the author's.
4. For detailed discussions of Murakami's magical realist technique, see Strecher (2002a, 2014).
5. Murakami's written Japanese, with its heavy use of pronouns and clearly marked subjects, has alternately been called *mukokuseki* ('nationality-less') and *hon'yakuchō* ('translationese'). For the former, see Tōyama (2000), Chang (2009), and Strecher (2014); for the latter, see Kazamaru (2006).
6. This is a talent Murakami shares with J.K. Rowling, whose *Harry Potter* series places an Everyman hero (Harry) into a narrative structure that is both fantastic (the magical world) and mundane (growing up, attending school, etc.). For a comparison of Murakami and Rowling, see Strecher (2016); for more on Harry Potter as Everyman, see Grimes (2002).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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