

## Haruki Murakami and the Ethics of Translation

Will Slocombe

*University of Wales Aberystwyth*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

## Recommended Citation

Slocombe, Will. "Haruki Murakami and the Ethics of Translation." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.2 (2004): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1232>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 7876 times as of 11/07/19. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**CLCWeb Volume 6 Issue 2 (June 2004) Article 6**  
**Will Slocombe,**

**"Haruki Murakami and the Ethics of Translation"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss2/6>>

---

**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 6.2 (2004)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss2/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his paper, "Haruki Murakami and the Ethics of Translation," Will Slocombe argues that despite the fact that Murakami has gained world-wide popularity recently, there has been little critical attention to his works outside of the comparatively narrow area of Japanese studies. Slocombe proposes that Murakami is too important an author to be limited in this way because of his definition of "translation." For Murakami, translation delineates an operative ethics between Self and Other, a dialogue that is not only between different languages and cultures, but also between the private and political spheres, and between different individuals. Slocombe discusses Murakami's works not as translations from the Japanese but presents an analysis of the theme of translation and its significance in terms of national and global identity in the context of comparative cultural studies. Translation is presented as Murakami's method of defending against hegemonic systems, whether global capitalism, political authoritarianism, or prevailing literary trends.

## Will SLOCOMBE

### Haruki Murakami and the Ethics of Translation

Japanese author Haruki Murakami has been writing since the 1980s, but has become only recently a popular figure in international fiction. Despite this growing popularity, he has yet to receive much critical attention, with only a small number of critics -- usually those specialising in Japanese literature and culture -- studying his writing (see, e.g., Steblyk <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss2/3/>>). Although the trope of translation is central to Murakami's works, this is not the same form of translation as that usually employed in translation studies. Here, "translation" is not a linguistic process, but a thematic issue: Murakami defines translation as a form of communication between two entities, exploring this in terms of *any* dialogue, even between individuals who speak the same language. This is an "ethics" of translation inasmuch as translation comes to stand for the act of communication between Self and Other, where the Other is evident in a number of different contexts. By emphasising the alterity implicit to the concept of translation, Murakami's works, even in translation, raise "important questions about translation, retranslation, commercialism and the effect of globalization on literature" (Rubin *Haruki Murakami*, 273). The delay in the reception of Murakami's works is due, in part, to the time taken by the translation process, although such statements veil the fact that "translation" is itself embedded within political discourse. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, uses the term "politics of translation" (179) to indicate that politics (whether gender, racial, or cultural) is implicit within the translated work: it is a process where a text shifts from the ideological frame of its author to the ideological frame of the translator. However, the "politics of translation" also indicates that *why* and *when* an author is translated has little to do with the actual availability of a translator. In relation to Japanese literature, such decisions are implicated within both a capitalist framework ("what will sell?") and a desire to police the traditional binary of Occidentalism versus Orientalism. Murakami's novels dissolve this opposition to explore both Japan's place in the global market and the place of Western culture within Japanese society. This "incidental Occidentalism" is vital to Murakami's fiction, showing how Murakami responds to the problems of translation, not only in cultural and linguistic terms, but also in textual and ethical terms. He thus proposes a "translation of politics" away from the realm of ideology towards a more intersubjective perception of cultural identity. Translation is, in strict terms, a mapping of an *exact replica* onto another space so that the translated image remains identical to the original. Obviously, this does not occur within literary translations, for to merely transcribe the text *verbatim* would lead to numerous blank spots. The process of literary translation takes the text as a whole and converts it into roughly equivalent terms for another language. This is a shift between "source language" (SL) and "target language" (TL), where the text is a cultural effect of the SL. The translator must not only deal with the linguistic shift, but also elements such as the genre of the text (for example, a technical or literary format), the cultural content of the text, and the author's own political views. The translator is the filter through which the original text is converted, a process that presents numerous problems when he or she is confronted with the "ethical" demands of the profession.

The model of translator as "filter" implies a channelled approach to translation, a shift from SL text to translator to TL text. This usually aims for a close correspondence between SL and TL. Linguistic shifts from noun-to-noun and verb-to-verb are dealt with in as direct a manner as possible, and structural elements, such as gendered nouns, must be as close to the SL structures as possible or suitable equivalents found. For example, two forms of the first-person pronoun "I" exist in Japanese: *boku* (informal) and *watashi* (formal). Murakami alternates between these in alternate chapters of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* and, as it would be impossible to translate this in English, his translator Alfred Birnbaum uses a continual present tense in the "End of the World" chapters to stay true to the stylistic intention of the author. The fact that no cultures are exactly equivalent compounds this problem because idiomatic language is difficult to meaningfully translate. For example, Matthew C. Strecher notes that the literal, and rather more charming, translation of *A Wild Sheep Chase* (*Hitsuji o meguru boken*), is "An Adventure Surrounding Sheep"

("Beyond 'Pure' Literature" 358). This does not translate the original text exactly but converts the original metaphor into culturally distinct terms ("A Wild Goose Chase" with sheep).

As a model, "filtration" demonstrates the problems of preserving the SL text. The act of filtration *always* omits certain elements of the original text, and is thus an "appropriation" model of translation because the translator must convert elements of the SL into the TL. Lawrence Venuti, for example, argues: "A translated text is judged successful -- by most editors, publishers, reviewers, readers, by translators themselves -- when it reads fluently, when it gives the appearance that it is not translated, that it is the original, transparently reflecting the foreign author's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text" (4). The key terms here are "fluency" and "transparency," and the problems they raise recur throughout translation theory. As Venuti later observes, fluency "effaces the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text" (5) and transparency "evokes the individualistic illusion of [the SL] authorial presence" (4). Whilst fluency and transparency ensure sales in the TL culture because it is easier to read, they also erase those elements that make it a "foreign" text. For this reason, Fowler notes that "we should be reviewing translations as the heavily nuanced textual readings that they are" (19-20), rather than as transparent forms. Translations are *not* the original texts, and should not be confused as such, although for most readers (who will not be able to read the SL text) the translation will be the only version of the text open to them.

A second model of translation is that of "re-appropriation." Taking as its base the adage that "there are three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the truth," this model perceives the SL text as having already appropriated a tertiary, and invisible, meta-text. That is, the original author has already appropriated some pure concept through the cultural codes of the SL. In this model, the translator is not appropriating the SL text, but re-appropriating the original concept in the TL. For example, Walter Benjamin argued that "the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another" (80). Here, the original text is the "pure language" that the SL author has already appropriated. The translator's task is to re-appropriate those elements of the "pure language" for the TL, effectively disallowing any direct correspondence between the SL and TL texts. Newmark defines translation in this way inasmuch as he argues that a text is pulled in ten different directions by the translation process, which can be expressed in four rough directions: the "truth," the "translator," the SL, and the TL (4). This model does not place the translator in a direct relation with either the SL text or the translated text, but as one of a number of antagonists each contesting the meaning of the text.

In ethical terms, the "appropriation" model of translation signifies the removal the "voice" of the Other, the desire to "know" subverting the Other's right to be Other. This is roughly Levinasian in the sense that knowledge is *"the active affirming of that same being, as the strength and strain of being"* (78), rather than ethical respect for the Other. Although the parallel is incomplete (owing to Levinas' reliance on "the face" as the basis of the ethical relationship), it does imply that translation is automatically concerned with ontology (as knowledge of another culture) rather than ethics (as respect for another culture). Similarly, the "re-appropriation" model, whilst avoiding the trap of appropriating a culture, relies upon a humanist notion of identity in which there is a "true" humanity behind cultural differences. This requires the erasure of basic cultural differences to adequately function. Although this model of translation signifies "the central reciprocal relationship between languages," their "kinship" (Benjamin 73), it ignores their distance, the gap that the translator must bridge. Both the "appropriation" and "re-appropriation" models illustrate the problems of translation: to what extent can the SL text be changed for the demands of the TL audience? when is it acceptable to deviate from direct translation into a "reading" of the original? The answers to such questions often rely on the translator's own judgement and are often very different from the publisher's or reader's demands, as Douglas Robinson notes in the distinction between an "internal" and "external" ethics of translation. External ethics, those defined from outside the translation process, are very simple: "it is unethical for the translator to distort the meaning of the source text" (30). Internal ethics are more complex. The translator must not only attempt to remain ethical towards the text, but also towards his or her own moral biases. These frequently

conflict when dealing with texts that the translator deems "unethical." For example, should a feminist translator translate a misogynistic text and, if so, how?

These problems are in part answered by a poststructuralist ethic of translation. Venuti notes this is his criticism of "fluent" and "transparent" translations, which ignore "any textual effect, any play of the signifier, which calls attention to the materiality of language, to words as words, their opacity" (4). Here, translation is synonymous with the play of *différance*, as Derrida argues in the aptly titled "Letter to a Japanese Friend": "the question of deconstruction is also through and through *the* question of translation" (1). In relation to translation, *différance* indicates the substitution of certain terms for others (difference) and the successive authorial filters added to a text (deferral). The gap between SL and TL text is an *aporia* that the translator must ethically respect, a demand echoed by Spivak (herself a major translator of Derrida's works) in the term "politics of translation." This "politics of translation" indicates that the translator appropriates the original text, although this appropriation is limited by the translator's own absence. For Spivak, "The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay" (181). She emphasises the fact that "the task of the translator" is to accept the difference (*différance*) between original and shadow, to remain ambivalent to means and ends. Although this evokes the disappearance of the translator, it signifies an ethical respect for the Other because of a "love that permits fraying." A poststructuralist ethic of translation also suggests that translation is at work even within a particular language. If "translation" and "deconstruction" are synonymous, then "translation" itself is open to the play of signification. Rather than stand for solely a method of translating between SL and TL, "translation" indicates a communicative shift between two separate states. These states may be SL and TL, but translation is equally applicable to "states" themselves (hence comparative cultural studies), and the shift between "author" and "reader."

By interpreting translation as *any* shift between Self and Other, the ethical nature of translation applies within one language as much as it does between a SL and a TL. An "ethics of translation" is therefore deeply embedded in all dialogue, an idea that is central to understanding Murakami's use of the term. This ethic highlights the differences between "literature in translation," "foreign literature," and "foreign literature in translation." The definitions of "literature in translation" and "foreign literature" are often synonymous, as native English speakers rarely attempt to deal with foreign texts in a foreign language: in Murakami's terms, a difference between "I understand" and *wakarimashita* [I understand]. However, in the case of those who can read and speak a foreign language, understanding the mechanics of a foreign language and the rudiments of a foreign culture does not mean that such literature is any less "foreign." Rather, "foreignness" extends to all those experiences that "Other" to the "Self." This creates a distinction between "foreign literature in translation" and "foreign literature," one invoking the principle of absolute Otherness and the other a *familiarity* with the culture and language.

Although monolingual Western readers can deal with Murakami's fiction through translation only, even bilingual readers able to read Anglicised Japanese or *kanji* still face a gap between their understanding of the text and a Japanese reader's understanding of it: a difference between a Japanese *wakarimashita* and a Western *wakarimashita*. Furthermore, there is even a difference between a Japanese reader's *wakarimashita* and Murakami's: at the root of this is the fact that, as Derrida realises, "We are all mediators, translators" (Derrida, "An Interview with Derrida" 71), even if we speak the same language. This may not seem important in this "death of the author" world, but there are vital implications for contemporary academia: only postmodern pluralism, the acceptance of heterogeneity within the global community, can strive against the globalising, homogenising trend of postmodernism as "late-capitalism." Such distinctions raise a number of questions about the validity of reading what might be termed "other" literatures, a term that normally relates to post-colonialism. However, it is equally applicable to Japanese literature because Japan, although not a colony, was "occupied" by American forces. In this respect, perhaps a more just assessment of post-colonial theory is its use in theorising a "post-occupied" nation. Although the importance of the American occupation of Japan can be over-emphasised, it nevertheless indicates

a point of rupture in Japanese culture and society, a point at which Japanese literature became occupied by (and with) Western culture.

Japanese literature is difficult for a Western reader because of the constructed dichotomy between West and East. When reading Japanese fiction, a Western reader is often looking for an exotic Other at the heart of the text, its "delicacy, taciturnity, elusiveness, and languishing melancholy" (qtd. in Fowler 10; Miura 162). Murakami was possibly omitted from many translation lists because of the resistance of academia and publishers to acknowledge a wider context to Japanese fiction (or was perhaps eventually translated because of those very elements of "delicacy, taciturnity, elusiveness, and languishing melancholy" in his works). For the majority of the late twentieth century, the cultural exchange of fiction between the United States and Japan was not concerned with introducing new writers, but with retaining the market-value of those already established in the English-speaking world. For example, Fowler, when discussing old CULCON lists (a body set up for cultural exchange between America and Japan), notes that the "organizing principle" was "that broad category of intellectual and philosophical concern which the Japanese call *shiso*." This "gesture toward high culture" is, for Fowler, "an insufficient rationale for a series intended for a wide audience in translation" (25) because it artificially reinforces a stereotypical view of Japanese culture. Murakami is not part of this Japanese canon. As Jay Rubin notes, one of the most important factors in Murakami's development as a novelist was his inability to write in Japanese: "When Murakami first turned to fiction, he could not seem to find his voice until he tried writing in English and then translating himself into Japanese" ("The Other World of Haruki Murakami" 491). Furthermore, Murakami has stated, "Not once, throughout my formative years, did I have the experience of being deeply moved by a Japanese novel" (qtd. in Rubin, *Haruki Murakami* 15; Murakami, *Wakai dokusha* 10). Murakami's literary predecessors are not Japanese, but American "hard-boiled" writers such as Ed McBain and Raymond Carver (on hard-boiled fiction and Murakami, see Matsuoka; Rubin, *Haruki Murakami* 16; Steblyk <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss2/3/>>). Murakami, rather than being a "Japanese" writer, may be a Western writer who writes in Japanese.

Murakami's "incidental Occidentalism" is evident in the use of *gairai-go* [foreign words] within his Japanese novels. The original *A Wild Sheep Chase* illustrates this: "Sorewa dorodarake no *tennis shoes* to yasumono no *beach sandal* ni hasamarete, kisetzu hazure no *Christmas present* mitai ni mieta" (qtd. in Matsuoka 435, my emphasis), which translates as "Parked in between my mud-caked tennis shoes and a pair of cheap beach sandals, like some out-of-season Christmas present" (Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase* 14). Instead of using *tenisu shuzu* [tennis shoes], *bichi sandaru* [beach sandal] and *kurimasu purezento* [Christmas present], Murakami uses English terminology. Such *gairai-go* are controversial in Japan, mourned by traditionalists as the death of Japanese language. Murakami also "Americanises" Japanese, using phrases such as *Sore wa warukunai* [Not bad!], and *yareyare* [Just great!] (see Matsuoka 434; Rubin *Haruki Murakami* 37). This partially indicates an Anglophone "occupation" of Japanese culture and language, a shift also evident in Murakami's frequent allusions to Western culture. The structures of his novels evoke Western facsimiles (or "translations"): *A Wild Sheep Chase* is based on Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* and *Norwegian Wood* is based on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (see Matsuoka 424-25). Even the titles of Murakami's novels evoke Western popular culture, such as *Norwegian Wood* (a song by The Beatles), *Dance Dance Dance* (a song by The Dells), and *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (based on a song by Nat King Cole song).

This Western mode of writing is evident throughout Murakami's works and suggests an annihilation, not "translation," of culture. For example, in *Dance Dance Dance*, Yuki puts a tape into a car stereo: "David Bowie was singing. Followed by Phil Collins, Jefferson Starship, Thomas Dolby, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers, Hall & Oates, Thompson Twins, Iggy Pop, Bananarama. Typical teenage girl's stuff" (111). This is "Typical teenage girl's stuff" because the world is growing smaller. Throughout *Dance Dance Dance*, Murakami notes the primacy of "Latter-day capitalism": "Like pulling on a Missoni sweater over Trussardi slacks and Pollini shoes, you can now enjoy hybrid styles of morality" (55). This is obviously Fredric Jameson's "logic of late capitalism" (45), the usurpation of cultural ideals by the global marketplace. All teenage girls with access to the market

become equivalent, their individuality and cultural identity usurped by the totalising force of capitalism. In this sense, Murakami's characters are no longer "Japanese," but consumers, as Celeste Loughman notes: "So enmeshed are they in the forms of Western, and particularly American, culture that they accept those forms as integral to contemporary Japanese life" (87). Although Loughman argues that "their essential Japanese-ness is never truly lost" (87), this is only because Japan is now partly Westernised -- their *essential* "Japanese-ness," should there even be such a thing, has already interpellated them as consumers of Western culture. This form of postmodernism is not the continued difference of cultures indicative of pluralism, but a cultural convergence under one dominant market brand. In this scenario, postmodernism itself has become a market brand and Murakami himself a global commodity. Translating Murakami responds to the need for "readable" Japanese cultural artefacts, although his taste for Western literature destabilises the idea that he produces "Japanese" texts. That is, when we read Murakami, perhaps we do not see Japan, but an already Americanised Japan. The question of whether this is the "real" contemporary Japan, or even if there is a "real" Japan, becomes subsumed by market forces: cultural identity is determined by the economics of consumption rather than by history and geography.

Given the influence of the West upon Murakami it is perhaps obvious that some Japanese critics, such as Kenzaburo Oe and Masao Miyoshi, dislike Murakami's writing. Oe argues that Murakami fails to "appeal to intellectuals in the broad sense with models for Japan's present and future" (qtd. in Rubin, "The Other World of Haruki Murakami" 499), and Masao Miyoshi agrees, writing that "only a very few would be silly enough to get interested in deep reading" (234). This is a reflection of their perception of "pop culture" novels generally and is directly related to Murakami's use of Western culture (at least in the case of Oe). Miyoshi reveals something more telling in his reading of Murakami, when he writes that both Murakami and Yukio Mishima "custom-tailor their goods to their clients abroad," Mishima's work displaying Japan's "nationalistic" side whereas Murakami's displays "an exotic Japan, its international version" (234). Oe's and Miyoshi's criticisms of Murakami are rooted deeply in the conflict between *junbungaku* ["pure" literature] and *taishubungaku* ["mass" literature]. These divisions are similar to Western "high" and "low" literature, although only loosely: *junbungaku* is literature that has a role to play in the social model of Japanese culture, whereas *taishubungaku* is the equivalent of "pop culture" fiction, or literature that "would be of interest to less sophisticated readers" (Strecher, "Purely Mass or Massively Pure" 369). Oe's criticism of Murakami is rooted in the fact that Japanese "high culture" is slowly being eroded by the global market, leaving nothing actually "Japanese" left. Although Oe places Murakami on the side of *taishubungaku* and Strecher argues that Murakami "is gradually gaining acceptance as 'pure' literature" ("Purely Mass or Massively Pure?" 358, n. 2), Murakami seems engaged in a postmodern project of merging these two divisions together. On one level, Murakami writes Americanised "pop culture" fiction; on another, he writes literature that highlights the problems of a postmodern world, what Strecher calls "Japan's greatest social crisis since the end of the post-war era: the hypercommodification that marks the nation's entry into the so-called postmodern moment" ("Purely Mass or Massively Pure?" 368). Murakami's literary technique draws from American sources and utilises postmodern devices, but it is still fundamentally concerned with Japan and Japan's role in the postmodern global society. Thus, the debate around *junbungaku* and *taishubungaku* is firmly rooted in the postmodern dichotomy of pluralism versus late-capitalist economic practice. Murakami writes about a new Japan, in which the tenets of national identity are in stark contrast to a global identity, and seeks to create a new Japanese identity in relation to the global community as a whole.

Rather than solely be part of a Japanese literary debate about *junbungaku* and *taishubungaku*, another aspect of Murakami's writing emerges from the generic conventions of Japanese literature: the differences between the "I-novel" (*watakushi shosetsu*) and the "orthodox novel" (*honkaku shosetsu*). Divided into two forms, the state-of-mind novel (*shinkyō shosetsu*) and the confessional novel, the "I-novel" is an expression of the self, either in its understanding of the world ("state-of-mind"), or in its understanding of itself ("confessional"). Through the form of a formal first-person narrator (*watakushi* or *watashi*), this form of writing was "a unique product of Japanese writers' efforts for 'modernization,' efforts pursued in the context of their vital exposure to

Western ideas and basic isolation from Japanese society" (Lippit 3). In contrast, the orthodox novel followed the lead of Western realism, proposing the need for literature to have a "social scope" (Lippit 18). Seen in this context, Murakami's use of *boku*, or informal narrator, is a post-modern appropriation of the "I-novel," because it incorporates Western narrative models and is yet fundamentally about Japanese society. Murakami therefore not only blurs the boundaries between West and East, but also between the individualistic "I-novel" and the social "orthodox novel." These debates reveal one of the central preoccupations of both Japanese society and Murakami's fiction: the "group" (although this essentialises Japanese culture, most Western readers have no concept of the complexities of Japanese culture and the search for a "real" Japan in literature is all about *essence*, as is the search for any "real" nationality in literature). The relation to the post-modern debate of global homogenisation versus pluralism is in the translation between the individual and the group. Japan is an "individual" nation amongst the global "group" and Murakami's works explore the way in which Japanese identity is mired in this notion of "group." Although Murakami himself makes frequent reference to the "group," it is in terms of ostracism, rather than social inclusion: his protagonists are usually isolated men, bereft of family (through death or ambivalence), without work (normally through choice), and often in the process of losing their girlfriends/wives. They are losing what little human contact they possess, normally because of their own inability to think in another's terms. In global terms, Murakami offers an analogy for Japan's role in a contemporary society and dissolves the boundary between Occidentalism and Orientalism to such an extent that it is uncomfortable for Japanese critics to conceive of Murakami's novels as "Japanese." Although the "group" as component of Japanese life is much exaggerated, Murakami's "incidental Occidentalism" suggests a radical divide within Japanese culture about its ability to remain "Japanese" within a predominantly Western marketplace. The translation between the terms "Occidental" and "Oriental" is thus subordinated by a larger concern of understanding global politics at the level of individuality and heterogeneity, rather than ideology and homogeneity.

Within Murakami's fiction, there is a postmodern paranoia about the control that "big business" has over his protagonists' lives. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, a mysterious organisation run by "The Boss" exists behind a number of government and commercial interests. The narrator is co-opted into the search for the sheep by threats against his firm that rely upon an immense control over the world of business by an intermediary who has access to detailed information of both the narrator's personal and business life. In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, the narrator is caught in a shadowy information war between the Calcutecs and Semiotecs. Both corporations run an information courier service (perhaps "translation" again), each trying to outmanoeuvre the other with tighter control on information. The narrator, as the only surviving test-subject of an experiment of downloading information directly into the courier's brain, is wanted by both corporations to give them a competitive edge. In this way, the narrator is interpreted as an "outsider" by these shadowy corporations because he does not fit in with their "group." And this is indicative of the xenophobic paranoia found in most contemporary cyberpunk fiction that Japanese businesses are "taking over the world." As Strecher argues, the Japanese state is portrayed by Murakami as "a sinister presence that seeks to promulgate a sense of collective identity, a dictatorship over the mind" ("Magical Realism" 279). If, as Strecher continues, "individual identity runs counter to the dominant social structure" ("Magical Realism" 280), then this is true not only in a *local* sense, within Murakami's fiction, but also in a *global* sense, where Japan itself is threatened with the loss of its own cultural identity as a result of global consumer capitalism. Just as the narrator is under attack by social forces outside his control, so too is Japan besieged in a wider environment of global post-modernity.

Murakami may demonstrate the importance of the "individual," but it never descends into egoism. As Strecher realises, "Murakami's use of magic realism, while closely linked with the *quest* for identity, is not the least bit involved with the *assertion* of an identity" ("Magical Realism" 269). Murakami's antagonist of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Noboru Wataya, is described by Toru Okada, the protagonist, as "a despicable human being, an egoist with nothing inside him" (79), precisely because he asserts his identity at the expense of the Other. Indeed, Noboru ? who is, coincidentally, a "politician" -- does not communicate his feelings, but plays games with language:

"You knew his words lacked consistency. They reflected no single worldview based on profound conviction. His was a world that he had fabricated by combining several one-dimensional systems of thought. He could rearrange the combination in an instant, as needed. These were ingenious -- even artistic -- intellectual permutations and combinations. But to me they amounted to nothing more than a game" (75). Because of these *un*-ethical postmodern/poststructuralist linguistic games, Noboru leeches individuality from the world, as Toru later describes: "Every single object in the room begins to look as if it has no substance to it. Everything appears hollow" (204). Noboru saps the force of communication and his portrayal in the text indicts the system that rewards such manipulation. There are thus two sides to individuality: the desire to be an individual and the desire to shape the world in your image. Whereas Murakami's narrators exhibit the former individuality, Noboru emphasises the way in which individuality can become egoism if not reigned in by considerations of "other" individuals.

Murakami proposes the idea of groups as a collection of individuals, rather than individuals being elements of a group, inverting the hierarchy. This "individual" is not isolated, but must communicate and interact with others: "Existence is communication, and communication, existence" (*A Wild Sheep Chase* 120). When communication breaks down, and all that remains is the individual, we are left with blankness: "Gripping the receiver I raised my head and turned to see what lay beyond the phone box. Where was I now? I had no idea. No idea at all. Where was this place? All that flashed into my eyes were the countless shapes of people walking by to nowhere. Again and again I called out for Midori from the dead centre of this place that was no place" (*Norwegian Wood* 386). To avoid being in "the dead centre of this place that was no place," effectively being "lost in translation," Murakami's characters attempt to make a connection between themselves and another person. They abnegate responsibility from the group in order to present themselves, as individuals, to another individual. This is pluralism inasmuch as individuals, and their mutually exclusive truths, co-exist, and have an ethical obligation towards each other. Murakami suggests this translation between individuals by using *boku*, the informal first-person narrator, and epistolary. As Matsuoka argues: "the letters in Murakami's works develop the plot, reveal the protagonists' alter ego, and enable the characters to express internal dialogues as first-person narratives" (429). This strategy allows Murakami to present the reader with a discrete series of consciousnesses within the continuous structure of the text, whilst also showing that each character's individuality rarely intersects with anyone else's. In *Norwegian Wood*, for example, letters are a significant method of communication between Watanabe and Naoko (his girlfriend), and Watanabe and Midori (another girlfriend): Naoko is in self-imposed isolation from society and Midori feels, although she is sat next to Watanabe, that "it's the only way I can get through to you" (332). In both cases, the letters are a result of the impossibility of communication and the desire to re-initiate discourse.

Despite this, letters are not privileged communication and still encounter the problems of "translation," as Murakami reveals in a discussion of Euripides: "What marks his plays is the way things get so mixed up the characters are trapped. Do you see what I mean? Lots of different people appear, and they all have their own situations and reasons and excuses, and each one is pursuing his or her idea of justice or happiness. As a result, nobody can do anything. Obviously. I mean, it's basically impossible for *everybody's* justice to prevail or *everybody's* happiness to triumph, so chaos takes over. And then what do you think happens? Simple -- a god appears at the end and starts directing the traffic" (*Norwegian Wood* 250). This is a direct analogy to Murakami's fiction with one vital exception: there is no god to direct the traffic at the end of his works (unless "consumer capitalism" fills this role). Each of his characters is involved solely with his or her ego and has problems connecting to anybody else. The bleakness and isolation within Murakami's works stems from the very inability of characters to ever truly converse with each other. The problem for Murakami's characters, as in the real world, is that they cannot escape from their selves enough to understand another person completely. The recurrent theme of marital break-ups in Murakami's works is a direct example of one individual's ignorance of another's feelings. In *South of the Border*, Hajime's wife asks him, "You actually believe you know what I'm thinking?" (169), implying that he is unable to do so, even if he had tried. She asks: "You have never seriously

given it any thought, have you? What I was feeling, what I was thinking, what I might do?" (183-84). Hajime did not try to understand her -- there was no desire for communication -- but even if there was "Two people can sleep in the same bed and still be alone when they close their eyes" (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland* 388). This problem of selfhood is such that we can never really "know" somebody else: "We can invest enormous time and energy in serious efforts to know another person, but in the end, how close can we come to that person's essence? We convince ourselves that we know another person well, but do we really know anything important about anyone?" (*The Wind-Up Bird* 24).

However familiar other people are, they are always in some way Other to the Self. Even if we manage to communicate briefly with the Other, it will soon change because "Body cells replace themselves every month. Even at this moment ... Most everything you think you know about me is only memories" (*A Wild Sheep Chase* 167). As time moves on, so do people, and understanding them at one point does not mean it will always remain so: we must always try to understand, because as soon as we stop, the world keeps on spinning us apart. Such difficulties in communication/translation are amplified when considering that sometimes people cannot bring forth the words that they mean because their feelings cannot be translated into "mere" language. Even if we allow that language dictates thought patterns, that consciousness without language is impossible, there are still moments when feelings cannot even be translated into consciousness. In *Norwegian Wood*, the protagonist says: "I wondered if she was trying to convey something to me, something she could not put into words ... something prior to words that she could not grasp within herself and which therefore has no hope of ever turning into words" (36). If the act of writing or speaking is about translating what is in the consciousness of an individual into language that another will understand, there will be occasions that the addressor cannot even phrase their feelings, and thus communication breaks down.

Although Murakami's works are concerned with translation and identity, it may seem that there is no point to reading him, as the reader is too distant from the author to justify making the effort. However, the distance is not so important as the desire to communicate/translate between Japanese and English, between the (individual) reader and the (individual) author. We need to *try* to connect because "no matter how advanced the system, no matter how precise, unless we have the will to communicate, there's no connection" (*Dance Dance Dance* 126). Ultimately, this is a process of translation between the Self and the Other: "All you can do is keep telling yourself there is something to be learned from everything and measuring the distance between yourself and the things and people in the world around you. There is a deep cynicism here, but also a willingness to go on measuring and testing, a positive desire to define the relationship between the self and the world, to examine the nature of communication between the two" (Rubin, *Haruki Murakami* 46). The real reason to read Murakami, like reading any author, is to open a dialogue, but in Murakami's case it is both more complex (due to the additional translated step in between) and more rewarding (due to his layered approach to Japanese identity). However much it is "better" to read books in the SL, thinking about the Other is the important first step in reading. Although Murakami realises that we cannot abandon our egos, there is an ethical responsibility toward both ourselves and the Other. For example, in "A Slow Boat to China," Murakami explores the relationship between Japan and China. "China" is the absence in the consciousness of the narrator, becoming a symbol for everything he cannot quite reach, everything Other to his Japanese Self. The Chinese teacher, who initiates the dialogue, reveals Murakami's attitude towards the Self-Other relationship: "Some things we understand about each other and some things we do not. But isn't that the same with you and your friends? Even if they are your friends, some things they cannot understand. But if you make the effort, you can still become close. That is what I believe. But in order to do that, we must begin with respect for each other... That is the first step" (*The Elephant Vanishes* 224).

Although you can never completely know another person, or fully understand a text, we begin to understand similarities and differences only through dialogue. We begin the process of *translation*, incorporating aspects of that Other into our Self, and even if it is not the true Other, it is at least a bridge between two disparate entities. If the act of translating brings people together, then

Murakami's ultimate aim is the union of Self and Other, as the story "The 1963/1982 Girl from Ipanema" reveals: "Subject is object and object is subject. All gaps gone. A perfect union. There must be a strange place like this somewhere in the world" (qtd. in Rubin, *Haruki Murakami* 12). Although such a union may be ultimately impossible, we still have a responsibility to try to connect, even if, as Murakami says in "The Window," "the reality of things is not something that you convey to people but something that you make" (*The Elephant Vanishes* 191). We cannot help creating our own narratives and should not attempt to stop doing so, because it brings us to our obligation to the Other: "I have responsibilities ... I cannot forsake the people and places and things I have created" (*The Elephant Vanishes* 399). Our mental worlds must have input from a variety of sources, else we become egoistic like Noboru Wataya. If we accept this variety into our mental worlds, this responsibility towards the Other does not make us omnipotent because we do not control, but *translate*. For example, Rubin notes that Murakami's symbolism in *A Wild Sheep Chase* is for the reader's "personal use" because Murakami himself "does not understand what the sheep means," and prefers "to leave it alone and let it do its work, undefined, in the mind of each reader" (Rubin, "The Other World of Haruki Murakami" 493). We are brought to our ethical obligation because whilst we have absolute power over our mental constructions, we have no right to negate the Other. The house-wife in "The Little Green Monster" is relevant here because of her torture of an intruder -- the eponymous "Little Green Monster": "You unlocked my door without permission. You came inside my house. I never asked you here. I have the right to do anything I want to. And I continued to do exactly that -- thinking at the creature increasingly terrible thoughts. I cut and tormented its flesh with every tool and machine I could think of, overlooking no method that might exist to torture a living being a make it writhe in pain? You can't do a thing. Your existence is over, finished, done. Soon the eyes dissolved into emptiness, and the room filled with the darkness of night" (*The Elephant Vanishes* 156). The "Little Green Monster," the Other to the housewife, encroaches upon the territory of her conscious "house" and so she destroys him (and therefore she is the jealous "Little Green Monster"). To torture this being into non-existence is identical to Noboru Wataya's egoism in that its leads us to the "darkness of night," a warning that we must negotiate with symbols, not negate them.

By reading "foreign literature," we force our minds to accept new paradigms. By reading Murakami, by inviting all the "little green monsters" into our own world, we bring ourselves towards our ethical obligation to an Other. This obligation means that we must try to communicate, even if, indeed *because*, it may be doomed to failure: *that* is why we must read Murakami, even if it can only ever be "in translation."

Note: I thank Taku Tamaki for his help with Japanese language and culture.

#### Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: Fontana, 1992.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Letter to a Japanese Friend." *Derrida and Différance*. Ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. 1-5.
- Derrida, Jacques. "An Interview with Derrida." *Derrida and Différance*. Ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. 71-82.
- Fowler, Edward. "Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 18.1 (1992): 1-44.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." Trans. Seán Hand and Michael Temple. *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. 75-87.
- Lippit, Noriko Mizuta. *Reality and Fiction in Modern Japanese Literature*. New York: Macmillan, 1980.
- Loughman, Celeste. "No Place I Was Meant to Be: Contemporary Japan in the Short Fiction of Haruki Murakami." *World Literature Today* 71.1 (1997): 87-94.
- Matsuoka, Naomi. "Murakami Haruki and Raymond Carver: The American Scene." *Comparative Literature Studies* 30.4 (1993): 423-38.
- Miura Masashi. "Nihon no shosetsu no tokucho." *Shincho* 86 (1989): [n.pag.].
- Miyoshi Masao. *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Murakami Haruki. *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- Murakami Haruki. "1963/1982-nen no Ipanema-musume." *Murakami Haruki zensakuhin* 1979-89. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1990-91. 81-88.

- Murakami Haruki. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Murakami Haruki. *The Elephant Vanishes*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin. London: Harvill P, 1993.
- Murakami Haruki. *Wakai dokusha no tame no tanpen shosetsu annai*. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjusha, 1997.
- Murakami Haruki. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Trans. Jay Rubin. London: Harvill P, 1999.
- Murakami Haruki. *South of the Border, West of the Sun*. Trans. Philip Gabriel. London: Harvill P, 2000.
- Murakami Haruki. *Norwegian Wood*. Trans. Jay Rubin. London: Harvill P, 2001.
- Murakami Haruki. *Dance Dance Dance*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. London: Harvill P, 2002.
- Newmark, Peter. *A Textbook of Translation*. London: Prentice Hall, 1988.
- Oe Kenzaburo. "A Novelist's Lament." *Japan Times* 23 November 1986. [n.pag].
- Robinson, Douglas. *Becoming a Translator*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Rubin, Jay. "The Other World of Haruki Murakami." *Japan Quarterly* 39.4 (1992): 490-500.
- Rubin, Jay. *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*. London: Harvill P, 2002.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Steblyk, Cathy. "Corpi, Murakami, and Contemporary Hardboiled Fiction." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.2 (2003): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss2/3/>>.
- Strecher, Matthew C. "Purely Mass or Massively Pure? The Division Between 'Pure' and 'Mass' Literature." *Monumenta Nipponica* 51.3 (1996): 357-74.
- Strecher, Matthew C. "Beyond 'Pure' Literature: Mimesis, Formula, and the Postmodern in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki." *Journal of Asian Studies* 57.2 (1998): 354-78.
- Strecher, Matthew C. "Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 25.2 (1999): 263-98.
- Venuti, Lawrence, ed. *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Author's profile: Will Slocombe received his Ph.D. English from the University of Wales Aberystwyth in 2003 with a dissertation entitled *Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature* and teaches in the Department of English at the same university. Slocombe is working currently on Beckett and absurdity, Baudrillard and ecocriticism, and Levi and Celan. His interests in scholarship include nihilism, postmodernism, the Holocaust, and the sublime. E-mail: <[wws@aber.ac.uk](mailto:wws@aber.ac.uk)>.