

Glimpses of Contemporary Japanese Literature in the Global Village: A Translator's Perspective

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The following reflections combine the content of previously presented material, notably at the Nichibunken symposium “Observing Japan From Within” (25-27 September 2003), and subsequent exploration, especially into the work of Murakami Ryū. As the title suggests, these are but glimpses, necessarily partial and admittedly jaundiced. Fearing that the forest may be lost in the story-telling trees, I wish to state at the outset that while I tend to dwell on some of the less edifying aspects of contemporary Japanese fiction, my overall purpose is to offer not so much a lament for what has been lost as a call for rethinking the cultural significance of literature and reaffirming its value.

Sometime back at the beginning of the 1980s, Edward Seidensticker came to the national university where I was then teaching to deliver a lecture. A dozen years before, in January 1969, on my first visit to Japan, I had first read his translation of Kawabata Yasunari's *Yukiguni*, then prominently on display in Kinokuniya and Maruzen, for the author had just received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Somewhat to my surprise, I was much taken with the work, in no so small measure, I am sure, because of Prof. Seidensticker's introduction, enchanting English-speaking readers even before they have read the novel's famous opening sentence(s), about whose translation more pages may have been written than the novel itself contains.

I do not remember the title of the lecture but vaguely recall that while it was not on the subject of the *Tale of Genji*, the speaker nonetheless made

frequent references to it, as though to say: “Bear in mind that Japanese literature has never been the same since.”

There was a large, standing-room-only crowd, and at the end, there were also, from the usual suspects, the usual questions—fawning on the outside, goading on the inside. This was, after all, the era of *nihonjinron*, the endless scrutinizing of the supposedly inscrutable. One of the barbed inquiries concerned professors of English who were then publishing articles analyzing and critiquing (in Japanese, of course) Prof. Seidensticker’s translations. The would-be victim, however, was not taking the bait: Pausing for only a moment, he replied—or so I remember: “First of all, those engaged in such research would seem to me to have a great deal of time on their hands.”¹

Far in the back, I finally raised my hand and asked in Japanese, with a trepidation that might have been taken for truculence: “Do you see any value in translating literature other than belles-lettres [*jun bungaku*], i.e. popular literature [*taishū bungaku*].”

Even after all these years, the response still rings in my ears. It was in effect: “Well, first of all, you will find it difficult to find a publisher for such works. If, despite that formidable obstacle, you intend to persist, I wish you luck. As for myself, I have no interest in such endeavors. (*watakushi wa kyōmi ga gozaimasen* 私は、興味がございません).”

My question had been anything but academic, as I was at the time already involved in precisely “such endeavors,” having translated some short stories by the mystery writer and social critic, Matsumoto Seichō, a literary figure who himself did not fit the *jun-taishū* molds. The longest, a novelette—and the title of the collection—was *Kuroji no e* 黒地の絵, a story about African-American soldiers stationed in Kokura during the Korean War.

For all of Matsumoto’s leftwing (or at least anti-establishment) views, his story epitomizes Japanese racial stereotyping of blacks. At the time, I either saw myself strictly as a would-be medium for the work—or somehow rationalized that it had, malgré tout, what used to be called

¹ Seidensticker’s actual words were something like: “まず、そのようなご研究をされるのは、随分暇のある方だと思いますね。”

“redeeming social value.”

Not long thereafter came yen appreciation and with it a surge of interest in a wide variety of things Japanese, including popular culture. In the late 1980s, during a two-year stay at an American university, I found myself being earnestly asked how young Americans might learn to be as studious and disciplined as their Japanese counterparts and whether reading about Miyamoto Musashi to attain true samurai spirit would help. The experience of “umming” my way around that sort of question gave me ample reason to utter more than one rueful *naruhodo* about the matter of introducing *taishū bungaku* to non-Japanese. At the same time, perhaps not coincidentally, I acquired a renewed interest in Classical Japanese literature.

The Japan rage, as we all know, is long passé. There are, to be sure, more non-Japanese who reside or have resided here than ever before, with likewise ever more among them who can speak at least a modicum of Japanese. Yet the era of “internationalization” has proved to be decidedly one-sided. Americans in particular, for all the trendy, politically correct talk of “multiculturalism,” seem more self-absorbed than ever. McWorld has triumphed over Mitsubishi, and Japan, having lost its inscrutably “Oriental” aura, would now seem to be both vaguely familiar and fatally irrelevant.

At the same time, we see rather than the genuine “internationalization” of belles-lettres, the spread of “McLiterature.” In first-class railway carriages in Germany one sees elegantly dressed passengers reading Sidney Sheldon in translation.

In Japan too, of course, there is a thriving market for much the same. There may be proportionally far more Japanese who can render English into Japanese than English-speakers who can do the reverse, but my guess would be that the former, in contrast to the latter, have more than enough work to go around.

They too are interpreters of culture, and, for all the seeming familiarity of the Anglophone world, particularly America, their task is by no means easy. I was vividly reminded of this recently, when I met with a former colleague, a retired professor of American literature, who had called me ask to explain passages in a Ludlum-esque novel he had been asked to translate into Japanese. He had already sent me a sample of the many puzzling metaphors and esoteric references he had encountered, including

the following: "...but when the Christians in Action relented and strapped on their kneepads in the form of Susanne Sheridan, the FBI grudgingly forced Corwin over to do the weekly tap dance and teach the infant to crawl."

"'Christians in Action'," I said, "is a wry designation for the C.I.A.; the rest refers to Monica Lewinsky's alleged statement to an ex-boyfriend concerning the job for which she had just been hired as a White House intern: 'I'm going to Washington to earn my presidential kneepads.'"

To my disappointment, I saw that the professor was still in the dark. "But why kneepads?" he insisted. Conversing as we were in the polite register of Japanese that is customary among academic colleagues, I felt suddenly tongue-tied. "Kneepads," I tried to explain, became thereafter something of a buzzword, famously used, for example, by White House TIME contributor, Nina Burleigh. Responding to my (very rough) paraphrase of her comment,² he leaned back, laughed uncomfortably, and then, as though fearing worse news to come, went on to "tap dance."

The sheer volume of words and images from America that inundate Japan includes the vulgarity that has come in recent years to characterize so much of public discourse, whether in cinematic fiction or the (allegedly) real world of Nina Burleigh—and not without some impact on Japanese culture. A case in point is the internationalization of four-letter English words, appearing in comic books, on T-shirts, and even occasionally in (ill-advised) advertisements. Moreover, even though Japanese is perfectly capable of passing muster where a non-metaphorical reference or description is called for, the clear preference seems to be for Anglo-Japanese, as though to say to the foreigners: "You may not have invented this unpleasantness, but you are the ones who insist on airing it all in public."³

² "I would be happy to give him [Bill Clinton] a blowjob just to thank him for keeping abortion legal. I think American women should be lining up with their presidential kneepads on to show their gratitude [to Clinton] for keeping the theocracy off our backs." (interview with Howard Kurtz, *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1998).

³ The vulgar and still semi-taboo phrase used by Burleigh has apparently made its

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In general, however, as any bilingual viewer of R-rated Hollywood films can observe by listening to the expletive-filled dialogue and comparing it to the (relatively) bland subtitles, there is nothing in Japanese verbal culture to parallel the opening of the floodgates that the English-speaking world saw in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of course, it is eminently arguable that in the realm of profanity and obscenity English was more far more richly endowed to begin with, but in any case, the Japanese language has shown little inclination to “adapt.”

I hasten to say that my purpose here is not to offer evidence for linguistic or cultural untranslatability, an all too easy exercise in defeatism. It is rather merely to point up the error of assuming that supposedly hegemonic cultures are always or necessarily more “scrutable” than those they overshadow.

Perceptions can, of course, trump reality. So can popularity, which blurs to the point of irrelevance the question of whether a work in one culture is truly “understood” in another.⁴

way into the fringes of Japanese parlance (*burōjobbu*), at least to judge from Japanese Internet servers, though not into any dictionaries. The katakana terms *ferachio* and *ōraru-sekkusu* appear for the first time in the latest edition of Kenkyūsha’s *New Japanese-English Dictionary* (2003), as does *kōin* (口淫), the general term for the latter. The entry for *shakuhachi* (“vertical bamboo flute”) likewise includes the relevant vulgar usage, appearing, for example, in Murakami Ryū’s *In the Miso Soup*, discussed below. Of monolingual Japanese dictionaries, neither the massive (27-volume) *Nihon kokugo daijiten* nor the *Kōjien* enters any of these terms. The *Daijirin* mentions the metaphorical sense of *shakuhachi*, giving *kōin* and *ferachio* as (presumably) explanatory synonyms, which, however, fail to appear as entries themselves.

⁴ To cite two admittedly non-literary examples, I long assumed that the popularity among Japanese of the American country song *Green, Green Grass of Home* reflected a common taste for the lugubrious, until I realized that it is apparently thought to be a simple, “back-to-the-roots” celebration of rural life. None of the Japanese I have asked who claimed a fondness for it seemed to know that it is, in fact, about a condemned prisoner waking up from a dream on the eve of his execution. Another song, popular in the late 1970s, is *YMCA*, exuberantly sung in Japanese with utterly none of the gleeful irony of the original, as performed by the

Related to this is, of course, the matter of demand, specifically, of the far greater interest of Japanese in the West (esp. America) than that of Westerners (esp. Americans) in Japan. Such in turn helps to account for the greater tolerance of Japanese readers for the oddities of translated foreign literature, as reflected in the well-established literary conventions that characterize it.⁵ The physical separation of Japanese and non-Japanese literary works in bookshops and libraries serves as a reminder that the stories that foreigners tell and the language that their characters speak are understood from the outset to be different.

The European-language-speaking world, by way of contrast, has taken an increasingly integrative and global view of literature, the result being, perhaps paradoxically, a greater intolerance of the (superfluously) exotic. In an article published in the *New York Times* on March 15, 2004 (“Now That Japan Is Cool, Its Fiction Seeks U.S. Fans”), Motoko Rich begins:

In his small office on Park Avenue South, Ioannis Mentzas is surrounded by more than 1,000 books, nearly all in Japanese. *Most, he said, aren't worth translating for an American audience. . . .* Mr. Mentzas said that as editorial director of Vertical Inc., a tiny publishing house dedicated to translating contemporary Japanese fiction into English, he tried to find novels that “*should appeal to readers who are not necessarily interested in Japan.*” [emphasis added]

While both the article’s title and other comments made by Mentzas would seem to contradict the last statement, the fact remains that the emphasis is on attracting the general North American reader. Even the name of the company, Vertical, founded by Sakai Hiroki, a former book editor

homosexual pop band Village People.

⁵ In translation classes, I have sometimes conducted an experiment using the (once-?) famous first paragraph of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, misleading students into thinking that the original is in Japanese and asking them to tell me to point to translation obstacles. Most take the bait and suggest, for example, that the description of nature and of the season is “too Japanese” for foreigners to understand. Invariably, however, there are those who smell a rat and eventually exclaim that the language somehow has the feel of Occidental prose.

and business journalist in Japan, reflects this strategy: "...[T]hey didn't want something that was too obviously Japanese. 'So no Cherry Blossom Press for us,' Mr. Mentzas said."

One of the works mentioned in the article is *In the Miso Soup*, a popular thriller by Murakami Ryū. First serialized in the *Yomiuri Shimbum* in 1997, it received the Yomiuri Prize the following year and has now appeared in an English translation by Ralph McCarthy. The story, set in the netherworld of Shinjuku's notorious Kabuki-chō, is anything but cherry blossoms. The young Japanese narrator, Kenji, tells of Frank, a balding, overweight, and (seemingly) oversexed American, for whom he agrees to play Sybil during the last three days of the year. Frank claims that he is in the business of buying Toyota automobile parts, but Kenji, almost from the beginning, fears that his foreign client is a psychopathic killer, a dissector of people rather than cars.

The Anglo-Japanese title (*In za miso-sūpu*) by itself suggests a blending of languages and cultures. At the end of the novel, Frank tells Kenji on their final parting that he had wanted to have *miso* soup with him and then relates how once in a sushi restaurant in the United States he had declined it. When Kenji says that miso soup can be had anywhere in Japan, Frank replies that he no longer feels the need, that he is now himself right in the middle of it (*miso-sūpu no do-mannaka ni iru*). To the English-speaking reader, this immediately suggests a negative idiom, but apparently that is not what is meant. Perhaps the implication for Japanese readers, who see Frank disappear in the early New Year's Day crowd, is that it is they who are now stuck with him.

Frank speaks no Japanese, and Kenji, by his own admission, has no extraordinary skills in English, but the dialogue between them in the original offers few challenges to willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader, perhaps particularly as it is presumably through Kenji that it is all being filtered. None of this, however, makes it easier for the translator to preserve plausibility, as can be seen in the opening words of the novel:

おれの名はケンジ。わたしの名はケンジと申します。ぼくはケンジ。
あたしケンジっていうのよ。日本語にはいろいろ言い方はあるがそ
れは何のためなんだろうな、と思いながら、おれはそのアメリカ人に、
マイネーム イズ ケンジ といった。

In his commentary (*kaisetsu*), Kawai Hayao asks how this can be translated into English and goes so far as to suggest it is intended to raise a fundamental question of intercultural communication:

状況によって一人称がいろいろに変化する文化と「アイ」というのは常に「アイ」という文化と。日本人がアメリカ人に会って、お互いがほんとうに理解して合うのが困難であるかを、この事実が示している。⁶

McCarthy is clearly undaunted:

My name is Kenji.

As I pronounced these words in English I wondered why we have so many ways of saying the same thing in Japanese. Hard-boiled: *Ore no na wa Kenji da*. Polite: *Watashi wa Kenji to moshimasu*. Casual: *Boku wa Kenji*. Gay: *Atashi Kenji 'te iu no yo!*

In general, the appearance of bilingualism or multilingualism in literature is, as Kawai rightly intuits, a challenge for translators, calling into question their fundamental operating assumption that the relationship between linguistic form and meaning is, in Saussurean terms, arbitrary. “Language about language,” including plays on words and consciously accentuated variants in phonology, grammar, dialect, and register, are usually untranslatable. They are not, of course, necessarily unexplainable, but while this provides footnote-addicted academics an opportunity to shine, such also have the undesirable effect of drawing the readers out of the story instead of into it by reminding them that their fantasy is being filtered through a second language.

Here, however, Kenji’s musings serve to set the tone for the translation, providing the illusion to non-Japanese readers that he is speaking directly to them and not only to his compatriots. In fact, they seem to set a precedent for the rest of the work, in which language-switching,

⁶ “The [confrontation of a] culture in which the first-person singular pronoun varies according to circumstances and a culture in which ‘I’ is invariably ‘I.’ This fact points to the difficulty of true mutual understanding when Japanese and Americans meet.”

already implicit in the original, is made explicit in the English version.⁷

On the first night, Kenji takes Frank to a lingerie bar, where they meet a hostess named Reika, whom Kenji describes as having a “midde-school level” command of English. In the original, she speaks a Japanese that is quite appropriate to her age, sex, and situation. In the translation, she demonstrates a slightly greater proficiency in English than any resident teacher of the language or sociolinguist would find realistic, and yet somehow still with just the right amount of charmingly mangled syntax. When she tells Frank that she wants to go to America, he asks her whether she intends to go to school there:

学校だめ、私は頭が悪いから、そうじゃなくて、ナイキタウンに行きたいの。...

...どうしてそんなナイキが好きなの。

どうしてってことはないの、ただすきな、ナイキタウンにいったことがある。...わたしも行ってたくさんの買い物するのが夢だ。

“No school! I am stupid! No, I want to go Niketown...”

“...But why do you like Nike so much?”

“No why! I just like. Do you go Niketown?... It’s my dream, go to shopping Niketown.”

The (necessarily) bland Japanese that Frank is made to speak in the original is turned into colloquial American in the translation, sometimes with a colorfulness that may strike hypercritical readers (i.e. again those with long experience in Japan) as somewhat implausible. McCarthy, however, clearly has a larger audience in mind. In explaining to Kenji why he does not want to go immediately to a sex club, Frank is made to remark in English:

“I just wanted to start off by wetting the old whistle.”⁸

⁷ Cf. “Noriko was a tout for what they call an ‘*omiai* pub.’ ‘*Omiai*’ means ‘*matchmaking*,’ [emphasis added] and an *omiai* pub is a place where women are approached on the street and invited to come to drink and sing karaoke for free.” In the original, needless to say, “*omiai*” requires no definition.

⁸ 今日は、まず飲みたい気分だったんでね。

Kenji's language register shifts when he speaks to his fellow Japanese, particularly with his sixteen-year-old girlfriend, though without argot or vulgarisms:

あいつ、どこにいるかわからないよ、きっと名前もフランクなんかじゃないし、全部うそなんだ、警察に情報をいれたって、さがせないよ、...フランクのことが怖いんだ、正直に言って怖い...

In the translation, he speaks a young man's American, complete with the ubiquitous filler "like" and a casual coarseness that few English-speaking readers of his age will find odd.

"I don't know where the bastard is, and I'm sure his name isn't Frank, either—it's all lies. The cops couldn't find him if they wanted to...I'm afraid of him, Jun, that's the honest truth, okay? I'm scared shitless of Frank."⁹

Thus, thanks in large measure to McCarthy's mastery of register, *In the Miso Soup* succeeds in translation as a new variety of "international fiction"—at least at the linguistic level. It is nonetheless a very "Japanese" novel in its replaying of familiar themes: the absurdities of contemporary Japanese society and the intrusive and deleterious influence of the outside world. Whatever Kenji's own moral failings, he is keenly aware of the beam in the eye of others, both neighbors and aliens. Through him, we distinctly hear the editorializing voice of the author.

In the lingerie bar, Frank takes out the *Tokyo Pink Guide*¹⁰ and reads aloud (situationally) useful phrases in Japanese, rendered in the original, following a well-established convention of "foreigner-speak," in katakana. Kenji comments to the reader: 外国人が日本語を一生懸命話すのは可愛いものだ。As if to underscore Kenji's attitude of condescension, McCarthy

⁹ Kenji, it must be admitted, is also capable of the more elevated vocabulary of his literary creator, which at least in one instance is allowed to slip out as he is talking to his girlfriend. Again in describing Frank, he speaks of "the ultimate in malevolence," a phrase that in the original is scarcely less grandiose: *akui no kyokuchi* 悪意の極致.

¹⁰ A book from "real life," co-authored by Steven Langhorne Clemens, whose name (a nom de plume) is also mentioned.

includes an adjective in his translation: “It’s endearing when foreigners try their best to communicate in *broken* Japanese.” [emphasis added]

Earlier in the story Kenji has commented:

What’s good about Americans, if I can generalize a little, is that that they have a kind of openhearted innocence. And what’s not so good is that they can’t imagine any world outside the States, or any value system different from their own. The Japanese have a similar defect, but Americans are even worse about trying to force others to do whatever they themselves believe to be right.

On the second night, in a scene described in horrific detail, Frank murders six people in the omiai bar, including four women. Kenji’s only resistance is his refusal to have postmortem sex with one of them. On his hands and knees before Frank, with a knife in his face, he thinks to himself:

Before Frank had turned up, this pub was like a symbol of Japan [*kono kuni no shōchō* この国の象徴], self-contained, unwilling to interact with the world outside, just communing with itself in every breath—mmm, ahhh. People who’ve spent their lives living in that kind of bubble tend to panic in emergencies, to lose their ability to communicate, and to end up getting killed.

“No?”

Frank made a big production of acting as if he couldn’t believe his ears. He looked up at the ceiling, spread his arms wide, and shook his head. I don’t know why this particular thought occurred to me at a time like this, but I thought, yeah, he’s an American all right. [*koitsu wa Amerika-jin da na* こいつは、アメリカ人だな]. The Americans, like the Spanish, massacred millions [*tairyō ni gyakusatsu shita* 大量に虐殺した] of Indians, but I don’t think it was out of malevolence so much as plain old ignorance. And sometimes ignorance is even harder to deal with than deliberate evil.

In all the various reviews I have read of the novel in the English-language press, the story is, pace Ionannis Metzias, clearly understood to be indeed quite Japan-related, with emphasis on how

Murakami points to the “dark side” of Japanese society.¹¹ It is interesting that few note that Frank points to an even more negative America: ugly, crude, violent, and homicidal. It may be argued, of course, that it is the attention that matters, whether flattering or disparaging, and that, in any case, anti-Americanism is a sign of intellectual seriousness.

Murakami, who in 1976 received the Akutagawa Prize for *Kagiri naku tōmei ni chikai burū*, translated into English as *Almost Transparent Blue* by Nancy Andrews in 1977 and into French as *Bleu presque transparent* by Guy Morel and Georges Belmont in 1978, eminently illustrates the blurring of the distinction, mentioned above, between *jun bungaku* and *taishū bungaku*. While the writer clearly intends *In the Miso Soup*, published a full generation later, to be taken seriously, it is surely unlikely that it will occur to many of his readers, particularly of the younger generation, to classify it according to the traditional categories. In praising the 2004 recipients of the Akutagawa Prize, nineteen-year-old Wataya Risa and twenty-year-old Kanehara Hitomi, Murakami alludes to other changes in the place and role of literature: “On the path to modernization, there was once an ‘antithetical literature’ that stood in resistance to it, but with the decline of political and economic strength, it has dissolved. The works [of Wataya and Kanehara] suggest a feeling of being at sixes and sevens... Without their writings, we would not know the thoughts and aspirations of the younger generations.”¹²

Though not appreciably younger than Murakami, born in 1952, Yamada Eimi marked a dramatic literary transition of her own, when in 1985, at the age of 26, she was awarded the Noma Bungei Literary Prize for *Beddotaimu aizū* [Bedtime Eyes], the story of a love affair between Kim, a Japanese bar chanteuse, and a black U.S. military deserter nicknamed Spoon. The novelette begins:

スプーンは私をかわいがるのがとてもうまい。ただし、それはわたし

¹¹ See, for example, Wood 2003.

¹² 「近代化の途上では、それに抵抗する”アンチテーゼの文学”があった。政治、経済が弱体化し、そうした文学が成立しなくなった今、自分が何をしたいのか分からないという心情を作品に感じた...この世代が何を考え、何をしたいがっているのか、彼女たちが書かないと分からない」(Foreign Press Center Japan, 3/2/2004)

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の体を、であって、心では決して、ない。

Spoon was good at giving me love – but to my body, not my heart.

Seized by passion on their initial meeting at a Yokosuka base club, they rush, without so much as an exchange of words, to the boiler room. As Kim recalls the moment, “I could not wait to get to know the odor of this man.” (早くこの男の体の匂いを知りたい。) It is the smell, she happily reports, of rancid cocoa butter. Also given a positive evaluation is his sexual organ, incomparably superior, she tells us, “to the ruddy and repulsive members of Caucasians, to say nothing of the puerile and pitiful appendages” of her male compatriots. (In the original, she manages to pack into the relevant sentence no fewer than three taboo anatomical terms – in Anglo-Japanese katakana.) Spoon’s penis reminds her of sweet chocolate bars, a favorite of hers, and indeed throughout the story, Kim speaks of her desire to devour him.

Kim is also in love with Spoon’s “four-letter words.” She tells us that it was “music to my ears. The sort of teacher’s-pet English that has no part of such language is now for me strictly ersatz, like the flat beer drunk by impotent men. When he called me a ‘bitch,’ I felt that he was looking on me as his best buddy.”¹³

Her lover, whose name derives from the silver coke spoon he carries in his pocket, also teaches her about drugs. Still, though she has by her own admission chosen the path of martyrdom by taking Spoon in, Kim is not always compliant, and when on returning from work she finds him drunk and abusive, she explodes in tears and rage:

あんたって最低の男だ！アル中でジャンキーで、あたしだってみつともなし(アグリー)の日本人なんだ。だけどあんたよりましだわ！黒人て汚い。だから生まれつき、不幸なんだ！

“You’re a real louse of a man! A drunk, a junkie! Fine, I’m just one of those ‘ugly’ Japanese. But I’m still better than you! Blacks are

¹³ 彼の四文字言葉(フォーレターワーズ)は極めて音楽的に聞こえる。それの入っていない優等生英語は今の私にとっては不能の男の飲む気の抜けたビールのような代物だった。彼が私を bitch(あばずれ)と呼ぶ時、私は親愛なる同志を見るように感じる。

dirty. That's why you're born losers.”

When at last the authorities, including two Americans, come knocking on Kim's door in pursuit of Spoon, she tearfully prepares for him a last supper. Whether this is conscious or unconscious religious parody or simply an example of the symbolic cannibalism motif noted above is unclear:

スプーンはタバスコソースが好きだった。タバスコをたっぷり振りかけたダークミートのフライドチキン。そして豚の臓物を煮込んだ。極めつけのチットリンズ。日本人には食べられない、そういった料理を私は彼と一緒に食べた。それらの食べ物がスプーンの体一部になると思うと、私は食べてる気がして嬉しかった。

こういう時に食べ物の事を思い出すなん不謹慎なのだろうと私は言った。スプーンは何も言わず私を見ていた。彼は悲しい目をしていたが口元は微笑んでいた。

「今日は、まだ言っていないね、スプーン。」

「.....何が？」

「四文字言葉？」

「ふん、そうだったかなあ」

「あんたらしくない。」

「.....」

「FUCK」

「して」

...

「もうできないの？ 私たち愛し合えないの」

私は瞬きをして目の前の邪魔な涙を払い落とした。涙はスプーンの手を伝ってどこかに行った。

「オレたちが愛して来たことって、いつも欲望だったね。」

私は思わずスプーンの顔を見詰めた。私は欲望という知的な言葉が彼の口から出たことにひどく驚いた。私はあせった。私、この男のことを知りたい。切実にそう思うことが私の心の中で始まっていた。

「時間がない！ 時間がないわ！」

「落ち着きなよ。ベイビー」

Spoon liked Tabasco sauce. Fried chicken dark meat drenched in Tabasco. I stewed some pork intestines, real chitlins. That is what I

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had with him, food that Japanese cannot eat. The thought that I was somehow ingesting a part of his body filled me with happiness.

I remarked to Spoon that it seemed out quite of place to be thinking about food at a time like this. He had that same sad look in his eyes but a smile on his lips.

“You haven’t used any today, Spoon.”

“Huh?”

“Any four-letter words”

“Uh, guess not.”

“It’s not like you.”

“...”

“Come on, say it.”

“FUCK”

“Do it.”

....

“Can’t we do it? Can’t we make love?”

I blinked and shed the tears blocking my eyes. They fell on Spoon’s hand and rolled away.

“The love we’ve had was always based on lust, you know.”

Quite involuntarily I stared into Spoon’s face in amazement. I had never heard him utter such an intellectual word. I was frantic. I wanted to know this man. For the first time, my heart was filled with that longing.

“There’s no time! There’s no time!”

“Calm down, Baby.”

Spoon, Kim subsequently learns, is not just a deserter; he has also attempted to peddle stolen military documents. Though surprised to realize that he may have been clever enough to have held a job offering access to such materials, she is otherwise indifferent. (そんな重要な書類を扱う仕事をしてたなんて、スプーンはあれで案外、頭はよかったかもしれない。全てが私にはどうでもよかった。) Her obsession now is to retain the memory – and, above all, the smell – of her beloved.

Like Yamada, Murakami is supremely indifferent to any moral questions raised by the behavior of their American anti-heroes. In an

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interview with the writer in the *Asia Times* (February 7, 2004), Gary LaMoshi asks him:

“Why did you make the psycho-killer of *In the Miso Soup* an American?...Your award-winning first book, *Almost Transparent Blue*, suggests Americans also bring out the worst in Japanese: Do you think the relationship between these two nations and its [sic] peoples is mutually destructive?”

The response, perhaps because of Murakami’s limited English, is somewhat unclear:

“Frank is not just a psycho-killer. He is a man of ‘liberty’ who has ‘a primitive force of the [sic] mankind’. If you read this connotation, you see Frank is less described if he isn’t an American.”

With his seemingly superhuman strength and hypnotic powers, Frank, a lobotomized veteran of mental institutions, sometime vampire, and professed necrophiliac, is described by the publisher of the English translation as “this great white whale of an American.” Yet Frank, unlike Moby Dick, is surely less a symbol of inscrutable Nature than a variation on a now all too familiar pattern of made-in-Hollywood psychopaths.

Reviewing an earlier French translation in *l’Express*, Michel Grisiola (March 13, 1999), compares Murakami’s novel to Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. Common to both is indeed the not-so-subtle suggestion that the victims of a “Frankie le Yankee” or a Patrick Bateman are contemptible people in a repressive society and thus deserve what they get. As Grisiola puts it:

“Sous le thriller glauque, à l’écriture terriblement objective et douce, la fable est limpide: si l’univers n’est plus qu’une cage de laboratoire, faut-il recourir au crime pour exprimer révolte et besoin de liberté?”¹⁴

¹⁴ Beneath the cloudy surface of the thriller, written in a terribly mild and objective style, the point of the tale is clear: If the universe is nothing but a laboratory cage, is one then obliged to resort to crime to express revolt and the need for freedom?”

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In a review appearing in the *New York Times* (11 January 2004), Curtis Sittenfeld comments:

“[N] either Kenji nor the reader is prepared for the gruesome turn of events on the two men’s second evening together. Yet it is a testament to the strengths of Ryu Murakami’s novel that it is ultimately defined not by its explicit depictions of violence and sex but instead by its misfit characters. In this skillful translation by Ralph McCarthy, Kenji is an appealing narrator, observant without being judgmental and nervous without being melodramatic; even the intensely creepy Frank is not entirely unsympathetic.”

Kenji is not quite as enlightened as Sittenfeld would have us believe; after all, though he is not so old-fashioned as to turn Frank over to the police for murdering five innocent people, he does go to some lengths to assure that his high-school girlfriend does not wind up suffering a similar fate. Perhaps, however, by being *selectively* “judgmental,” he may still qualify as a politically correct postmodernist.

Again, Kenji shows no sympathy towards Japanese women so greedy or so lonely as to sell their bodies. For foreign prostitutes, however, driven by economic necessity, there is room for understanding and even admiration. Frank shares his view. From a Peruvian streetwalker he learns of the *joya no kane* (除夜の鐘), the 108 tolls of the temple bells over New Year’s Eve, said to purge those who hear them of worldly desires (*bonnō* 煩惱). Though she is a Catholic, as he tells Kenji, she has come to think that the Christian deity has no power in Japan and so has sought divine help elsewhere. Frank, serial killer turned philosopher and social critic, comments approvingly: “She thinks the Japanese need to do some deep thinking about their own gods, and she’s right.”

Spoon’s expression of his thoughts on matters metaphysical is confined to graffiti he has sprayed in Kim’s bathroom: “PUSSY IS GOD!!!” Until his brief display of intellectualism just before his arrest, he appears to be, like Camus’ Meursault, a purely sensual being. In this, he strongly resembles the black Americans depicted in Murakami’s *Almost*

Transparent Blue,¹⁵ in which the narrator is asked whether living near a U.S. military base is entertaining:

「...最近はどこでもこんなもんだぜ、この前なんかジュリーとかショーケンが出てさ、俺石投げてやったよ、お前横田基地にいるんだって？あっちはどうだい面白いかな？」

「まあな、黒人がいるからな、黒人といると面白いよ、あいつらすごいからな、グラス喫ってウォッカがぶ飲みしてふらふらしながら抜群のサックスふくからなあ、すごいよ」

Here, though the French translator omits the reference to Julie (Sawada Kenji) and Shōken (Hagiwara Ken'ichi), two members of “Group Sounds,”¹⁶ he amply compensates for this in his rendition of colloquial, all-purpose intensifier *sugoi*:

–La dernière fois, il y avait des chanteurs pédales, t’sais, j’oublie le nom. Je leur ai balancés des pierres. Dis, c’est bien toi qui habites du côté de la base de Yokoda?¹⁷ C’est comment, là-bas? Ça rigole?

–Ouais, si on veut. Il y a des Noirs, et en general, quand il y a des Noirs, c’est relax et on se marre, parce qu’ils ne sont pas vraiment comme les autres. Ils fument de l’herbe, ils s’envoient de la vodka au litre, et, une fois qu’ils sont défoncés, ils jouent du saxo comme personne au monde, tu sais. Non, ils ne sont vraiment pas comme les autres. [emphasis added]

For Murakami and Yamada, writing in the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of blacks as *すごい*, i.e. “vraiment pas comme les autres” is distinctly

¹⁵ Murakami’s novel has, in fact, been compared to *l’Étranger*

¹⁶ Sawada Kenji, who, though heterosexual, had, as a singer, a somewhat androgynous persona, as reflected in his alternative feminine name, and was therefore hardly a dull, “establishment” entertainer. For the speaker in the novel, however, he is apparently still much too tame. Ironically, Hagiwara Ken’ichi’s might have rehabilitated himself in the eyes of the character through his subsequent arrest for possession of marijuana.

¹⁷ This should be Yokota. The French translator makes several other errors, notably in misunderstanding references to Seventies Era American pop culture.

positive—or at least interestingly exotic. For Matsumoto Seichō (1909-92), whose *Kuroji no e* was first published in 1965, the image is more complex, but there is nonetheless an ongoing consistency in their portrayal.

In Matsumoto's story, supposedly based on a real incident, there is an influx of black soldiers at the U.S. military camp in Kita Kyūshū, men about to be sent into battle in Korea—where, as they well know themselves, almost certain death awaits them. The MP commander goes to the local authorities to ask that the summer festival drums should not be played—but without giving a clear reason. His request is ignored. Matsumoto explains what the white officer clearly knew but did not want to say, that is, that the monotonous, mesmerizing sound of the drums will inevitably awake in the men ancestral memories of Africa, stirring their blood, and driving them to an uncontrollable frenzy.

As predicted, the soldiers break out of the camp and go on a rampage. Matsumoto focuses on a half dozen of them, who enter the house of one Maeno Tomekichi. Described by the author as “talking like barking dogs” and “though reeking of alcohol, exuding at the same time a pungent animal-like odor,” they demand to be served drink and then proceed, one by one, to rape his wife Yoshiko. Tomekichi is beaten into submission, though one of the men, a handsome mulatto with a high-bridged nose, gives him a fleeting look of sympathy.

The U.S. military authorities round up the mutineers but do not punish them. The various Japanese victims of their mayhem, including Tomekichi and Yoshiko, report no sexual assaults.

Tomekichi, now separated from Yoshiko, finds a job as a mortuary assistant at the camp in Kokura and waits for take his revenge, as bodies from the Korean front arrive in the camp. Identifying the dismembered torso of the rapists' ring-leader by two self-made tattoos, one of the American eagle, the other of a woman's lower body and genitals, Tomekichi flails away with his scalpel.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, Matsumoto's novelette is included on various blacklists, as it were, of works in Japanese literature and popular culture said to promote demeaning racial stereotypes. Such might have come as a

¹⁸ Hence the title of the story, referring to pictures drawn on a black surface.

surprise to the author (1909-92), whose overall message appears to be that both the victimizers and the victims are, in fact, in the same boat. A Japanese dentist who works with Tomekichi remarks to him that whites, as represented by the devious and sadistic U.S. military command, despise “colored people” in general: 白人は有色人種を軽蔑しているからね. Blacks (*kokujin* 黒人) have been sent as cannon fodder and have been killed in grossly disproportionate numbers. Tomekichi does not tell the dentist of his motive in seeking out tattooed black torsos and remains undeterred in his plan, but he mutters as he leaves him: 黒んぼもかわいそうだな。かわいそうだが... (The darkies deserve some pity too, all right, and yet. . . .”)

Though Matsumoto’s works are found in virtually any Japanese bookshop, *Kuroji no e* seems to have all but disappeared. I hasten to say that I very much doubt that changing attitudes and concerns have been a causative factor. Much more likely is the possibility that it is primarily Matsumoto’s pure detective fiction that has remained popular.

I should nonetheless like to suggest that what would make the story particularly unpublishable in English translation is not its implicit (if perhaps unintended) racism but rather what, on its own terms, is its relentless realism and moral seriousness. As I have suggested above, Matsumoto obviously views white American imperialism as the true villain of the tale.

Murakami’s description of African-Americans is, of course, more up-to-date. *In the Miso Soup* has a scene in which Frank, on his first trip to Kabuki-chō, encounters black touts who, fluent in Japanese, seem to pass him over in favor of would-be Japanese customers, obviously more affluent than the white American in a cheap suit.

At the same time, however, Murakami seems to adopt a curiously old-fashioned view of foreigners in general and a mythical view à la *nihonjinron* of Japanese history. In a strikingly absurd passage, Frank quotes what the Peruvian woman has allegedly heard from a Lebanese journalist:

And he said she was absolutely right, that the Japanese had never experienced having their land taken over by another ethnic group or being slaughtered or driven out as refugees—because even in World

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War II the battlefields were mostly in China and Southeast Asia and the islands of the Pacific, and then Okinawa of course, but on the mainland there were only air raids and the big bombs—so the people at home never came face to face with an enemy who killed and raped their relatives and forced them all to speak a new language. A history of being invaded and assimilated is the one thing most countries in Europe and the New World have in common, so it's like a basis for international understanding. But people in this country don't know how to relate to outsiders because they haven't had any real contact with them. That's why they're so insular.

Matsumoto, himself a native of Kokura, was already well into adulthood when the American military established its presence there, while Murakami, a fellow native of Kyūshū, grew up in the shadow of the Sasebo Naval Base in Nagasaki. *Almost Transparent Blue*, set near the Yokota airbase in greater Tokyo, describes in graphic detail drug and sado-masochistic sex orgies with black GIs. As in Matsumoto's work, they are depicted as primitive and animal-like, but this time without any sense that such is to borrow a term used by a recent American president, "inappropriate." In fact, the obvious attraction of Murakami's oeuvre is, despite recent lapses into moralistic and pseudo-intellectual posturing as seen above, the frisson of nihilism it consistently provides.

* * *

The state of contemporary Japanese literature and its readership depends, of course, on who is looking at the proverbial water glass—and with what expectations. My own perspective is that of a late middle-aged, non-Japanese academic, whose literary interests have naturally been formed by decidedly non-postmodernist views of what literature is, the only excuse I can offer for my own subjective observations is that I have spent some twenty-five years and more with Japanese students, and have seen how, in regard to any sort of literary canon or reading list, "have read a bit of..." has yielded to "have not read any of..." and further to "have barely heard of—and don't particularly care..."

In the spring of 2003, I had the pleasure of spending several hours talking with Japan's second recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature, Ōe

Kenzaburō, who mixing self-effacing humor and cultural-political pessimism, freely admitted that his own works are not selling well. When I asked him about the general state of the literary arts in Japan today, he emphasized what he has written and said elsewhere about the ever more marginalized role of the intellectual, the *chishikijin*, in contemporary Japanese society.

The German Japanologist Lisette Gebhardt, who has published extensively on Japan's literary and intellectual scene, including Ōe, offers her own insightful analysis, which, as I have translated it, reads:

In Japan too, literature has lost its position as part of the leading culture of education [*Bildungsleitkultur*]. We see this most clearly attested in the fact that in recent Japanese school textbooks, works by authors of classical modernity, e.g. Mori Ōgai have been replaced by those of contemporary women writers. The only still popular classical writers to have 'survived' the educational reform and to have entered today's 'young standard' (Shūeisha!) are those such as Dazai and Akutagawa, who, typically enough, had had quite enough of life by the time they were in their 30s and so committed suicide. The younger generations in Japan have likewise been cut off from the Sino-Japanese cultural tradition of pre-Meiji times and now from Meiji culture as well. In this respect, the German Japanologist is very much a fossil, the Meiji Era having in any case belonged until recently to an absolute standard of education.¹⁹

The collapse of the "*jun bungaku/taishū bungaku*" dichotomy has not meant the end of categorization; instead we find a new category, which is also the overall subject of Gebhardt's paper: J-Bungaku, i.e. "Japanese literature" as distinguished from "Nihon-bungaku" or "Kokubungaku."

"The term," she explains,

was not thought up by literary critics. It signifies rather a life-style formula, an advertising slogan for today's Japanese literature consumer. And such is no accident. For some years, Japan's

¹⁹ Gebhardt 2003.

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publishing world has found itself in a crisis. Sales have fallen, and so new concepts must be brought to bear to win over readers, especially those of the younger generation, who have grown up with the visual and electronic media.

Despite my own involvement with “the younger generation,” as well as a (not entirely unrelated) inclination towards curmudgeonliness, I have been slow to realize the profundity of the change. One penny did fall when some years ago in a linguistics/translation course I used an excerpt from Kawabata’s *Senbazuru* (“A Thousand Cranes”) to illustrate cross-linguistic contrasts in speech level. It dawned on me that even for my female Japanese students, many themselves members of the *ojōsan* class, the postwar world of Kamakura, Ōta-fujin, and the tea ceremony must seem as “exotically distant” as it did to me when I first read the work.

Nonetheless, Mr. Ōe is surely right in suggesting that there is something more here than time and social circumstances. Though he himself is no stranger to the exotic, his own works could hardly be more unlike those of Kawabata, and in at least one important respect, they are as “up-to-date” as the sort of “J-bungaku” he obviously reviles. That is, they include—and indeed simply take for granted—the world beyond Japan. By way of contrast, the marginal handful of foreigners one encounters in Kawabata’s works are vaguely menacing or at least unpleasant intruders. In Ōe Kenzaburō’s *Jinsei no shinseki*, translated by Margaret Mitsutani as *An Echo of Heaven*, the setting itself is almost dizzyingly “international.”

Yet I have no reason to doubt that Mr. Ōe is again correct in saying that he has few younger readers. Several times I have heard him protest smilingly that his works are not inaccessible—“*muzukashiku wa nai n desu yo.*” Well, perhaps, but at the very least his concerns are clearly not those of my students. In *An Echo of Heaven*, much of one chapter is devoted to W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” as interpreted by the main character, a Japanese woman living in Mexico, who remarks that Yeats is so important to her that she keeps his collected poems next to her Bible.

My students of British and American literature at St. Paul’s University, where I am a part-time teacher, have, for the most part, heard of the Bible—but certainly not of Yeats. And while I remember “The Second Coming” as a poem that virtually all English-speaking students read back in

the 1960s, I would wager that many a student of literature in Europe and North America would now be ignorant of it.

A second penny fell for me back in 1985, when I was asked to do a translation for the P.E.N. Club Japan publication *Japanese Literature Today*. Prominent among the featured works was Yamada Eimi's *Beddotaimu aizu*. I had not read the work, but the initial description was not encouraging. While I could see that the critical reception was mixed, I was more interested in those who extolled the novel and was particularly struck by the reviewer who compared it (favorably) to Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. Having dutifully done the translation of the critical summary, I purchased the book, read it, and in a fit of righteous indignation wrote my own review, one which I thought was quite devastating, stating, among other things, that the acclaim the novel had received was simply a measure of the depths to which contemporary popular Japanese literature had fallen and that the book's racist presuppositions alone would make it impossible for anyone to publish a translation in any Western language.

Here I proved myself to be a decidedly false prophet. While it is true that the English translation has, to my knowledge, yet to appear, it is included on the list of *opera desiderata*. Moreover, there are both French and Italian translations: *Amère Volupté* by Jacques Lévy, now teaching at Meiji Gakuin University, and *Occhi nella notte* by Giuliana Carli, a graduate in Japanese language and literature from the University of Rome, "La Sapienza."

The rapidly and radically changing world of literature in Japan has obvious and far-reaching effects on its transmission into foreign languages, in terms of not only what is translated and published but also just who the translators are. Until at least very recently, one could take it for granted that, for the most part, translators of Japanese—at least into Western European languages—were, while native speakers of the target language, deeply immersed in the Japanese literary tradition. Moreover, they have typically had at least strong ties to the world of scholarship; that is, they are, in Gebhardt's words, Japanologists.

In the case of Yamada Eimi's *Beddotaimu aizu*, I must say I find it deliciously ironic that her original title, in garbled Anglo-Japanese, has been rendered by Lévy into elegant and, under the circumstances, ironic

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French as “amère volupté” (‘bitter desire’)—a phrase that suggests Baudelaire and, in fact, appears in a poem by Charles-Marie Leconte de L’Isle.²⁰

Now the argument can be made that such scholar-translators as Lévy are, indeed, “fossils” and that the time has come or soon *will* come for their replacement by those more attuned to the commercial world represented by the new media, including J-Bungaku. I would contend quite the opposite, but with a caveat that will make me sound like the worst sort of politically incorrect crank.

Literary culture has been thrown into turmoil not only by the usual “greedy capitalist” barbarians beyond the gates—but also by various ideologues within, including those who, as I have heard it remarked, really *hate* literature and wish to make sure that no one *else* enjoys it either. Translators cannot, of course, by themselves change the social-cultural climate, but they can at least strive to maintain what should be their primary motive in carrying on their work: an honest commitment to the cause of literary art.

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²⁰ *Hypathie*: Vierge Pallas, toujours majestueuse et belle,/préserve-moi d’éros! à ton culte fidèle,/dans la maison d’Hélène et dans la chasteté,/je fuirai du plaisir l’amère volupté.

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