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MUDDYING THE TEA:  
THE LOCALITY OF HARUKI MURAKAMI AS REVEALED  
THROUGH THE ART OF TRANSLATION  
EXCERPTS OF HARUKI MURAKAMI'S *ASAHIDŌ* TRANSLATED BY BROOKE  
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## ABSTRACT

Haruki Murakami is arguably Japan's most popular writer, both within the country and across the globe. Critics and readers praise his fiction for its vivid depictions of characters that seem to exist in anonymous, universal landscapes...places that could be found anywhere, regardless of labels or names. Because of this, he is often considered a global writer, whose mission is to craft fiction, and sometimes nonfiction, on a global level. But has there ever been a moment when Haruki Murakami was *distinctly* Japanese – completely concerned with his personal locality, and his origins? If we are to truly grasp Murakami's identity as a writer – and if we are going to decide whether or not he is an inherently global writer - we need to find out if there was ever a time when he was writing more specifically about himself and his locality, and why he might turn away from that later in life. In 1987, a collection of several Murakami flash-fiction “opinion pieces,” originally published as short articles in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, was released in book-format – despite never having been translated into any other language other than Japanese, this small book, titled *Asahidō*, seems to be the only Murakami work that deals specifically, and in rich detail, with his own, personal locality within Japan, and his opinions and criticisms of that locality. What would happen, then, if some of the *Asahidō* stories were translated into English? What would this add to the overall discussion of Haruki Murakami as a global writer – would anything change? How does translation lead to a better understanding of a writer, and why is that important for the study of global literature?

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## Concerning Part-time Jobs

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 12-14)

At the time when I was a student, which was more than 10 years ago now, the hourly wage for a part-time job was about the same price as a cup of coffee. Basically, toward the end of the 60s, that ran about 150 yen. If I remember correctly, I think a highlighter was 80 yen, and a boy's comic magazine was only about 100 yen.

Because all I did with my pay back then was buy records, I'd think to myself while working, *If I work a day and a half I'll be able to buy one LP...*

Now, in the present day, coffee costs more, about 300 yen, but the hourly part-time job rate is about 500 yen, so it seems like the price market has started to improve a bit. Now if you work one day, you can buy about 2 LPS...

If you just look at the numbers, it seems like our lives have become easier over the last decade, but deep down we know that our lives actually haven't become any easier at all. For example, in the past, there weren't such things as housewives working part-time jobs or "loan hell" for businessmen. Numbers are complicated, and you can't really put any faith in the Bureau of Statistics. And the GNP? It's definitely fake.

I guess what I'm saying is, if you could plunk the thing called "the GNP" down in the plaza outside the west entrance of Shinjuku Station so anybody who wanted to could try and touch it, and if somebody actually DID touch it, *then* I'd believe in it – but otherwise, I just can't believe in something that doesn't exist in reality.

I mean, I think economists like Takemura Ken'ichi and Tanaka Kakue are really great. *They* know how fake the numbers really are, so they just make use of the numbers that are convenient for them and leave out the rest. If you go about it that way, you can get all the numbers you need in one little notepad.

I still remember those records from my student years clearly, and I always listen to each one with real feeling. You can pretty much say this about anything: the numbers shouldn't really matter; it's quality over quantity!

## I. How well do we know Haruki Murakami? (I)

“Interviewer: You have stated that classics from the Japanese canon such as (Yukio) Mishima bore you. Why is that?”

Murakami: In Japan, we eat squid and octopus. Do you eat them in Norway? I prefer squid to octopus. I have no reason about that.”

~From a 2010 *Asahi Shimbun* interview with Haruki Murakami

What do we know about Haruki Murakami?

We know that he was born on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1949 in Kyoto, but grew up in Ashiya (a part of Hyogo prefecture). His father was a Buddhist priest, and his mother was the daughter of an Osaka merchant – both were teachers of Japanese literature. He attended Waseda University in 1968, but did not have much of an interest in education – he worked at a record shop, and enjoyed listening to music and reading much more than he enjoyed completing schoolwork. He married a woman named Yoko, and together they opened a coffeehouse/evening jazz bar called “Peter Cat” in Kokubunji, Tokyo. Murakami began writing seriously when he was 29 years old; in April 1974 he became inspired by a baseball match to write his first complete novel: It was published in 1979 (*Hear the Wind Sing*). In 1985, his first international hit, *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* hit the market. In January 1992, after traveling around Europe (specifically in Rome and Greece), Murakami moved to America, taking up residency in Princeton, New Jersey, teaching as an associate professor at Princeton University. Only somewhat recently, in 2001, did he move back to Japan.

Such is the somewhat modified chronicle of Haruki Murakami's life – what begins as, for the most part, a very *Japanese* life. However, despite starting out in what appears to be a fairly traditional Japanese family, as he grew up Murakami began to become much more interested in the West, rather than anything Japanese. He read American writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, and had an ear for Western music. Later on, he chose to live in America for five years – what he referred to, later in his life, as “an escape” from Japanese culture and society. Murakami's novels have been translated into over 40 languages, but it is often forgotten that, since the publication of his first book in 1979, Murakami himself has translated several classic American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Irving, Tim O'Brien, and J.D. Salinger from English to Japanese. In perhaps Murakami's most famous novel, *Noruei no Mori (Norwegian Wood)*, the “I” character (Watanabe) explains his own love for two famous American writers, directly referencing Murakami's own interest and love for them:

At eighteen my favorite book was John Updike's *The Centaur*, but after I had read it any number of times, it began to lose some of its initial luster and yielded first place to *The Great Gatsby*. *Gatsby* stayed in first place for a long time after that. I would pull it off the shelf when the mood hit me and read a section at random. It never once disappointed me. There wasn't a boring page in the whole book (30).

What can be determined from the above information, then, is that there are two sides to Haruki Murakami, as a writer, that continue to cause critics, students, readers, and even Murakami himself, difficulty. Racially and ethnically, Murakami is a Japanese writer, but on a deeper, more complex level, Murakami also appears to be a writer invested and interested in a global landscape, and a global audience. This is revealed not only through Murakami's biographical history and his love for popular American writers,

such as those mentioned above, but also through his own novels – stories that critics, and even Murakami himself, have claimed could happen anywhere. Tim Hornyak, for example, writes in a 2007 article for the *Japan Times*, that Murakami’s anonymous characters have become so famous *for* their anonymity that their personalities alone have come to define Murakami’s overall narrative style:

An anonymous narrator, whose knowledge of jazz and classical music approaches that of the idiot savant, chronicles the minutiae of his daily routine of brewing coffee, drinking beer and making pasta while mulling his alienated state. Then he gets a strange message or urge and embarks on a bizarre quest, involving mysterious characters, for some trifle like a pinball machine or an odd sheep. When the adventure is over, there is no grand resolution. In the end, his musings tend to hang together like a line of laundry drying in the wind. And that's that (“The Murakami Addiction,” 1).

Hornyak’s observations are important because they speak to one of the core aspects of Murakami’s fiction that makes him appeal to so many different people all over the world: First person narration, and the ability it has to put anyone in the narrator’s shoes. Yet, the narrator is not always the author; it is important to understand this distinction. However, that is not to say that an autobiographical work cannot be written in the first person perspective, in fact, many are. The purpose of anonymous fiction, though, is to depict both everyone and no-one all at once, and the illusion of coupling that with first person narration is that it can make an “I” appear to speak as the voice of the author, when really, it is, like many third person narratives, merely the voice of just another character. Yet, there is a detached-ness, and a bizarre-ness, to Murakami’s protagonists that Hornyak touches on, that do not seem to reveal anything about Murakami *as the author* – the narration is too separate, and *too* anonymous. The illusion is not there.



If Murakami is an outsider to his own work, then what does *that* tell us about his purpose or identity as a writer? Writer Rebecca Suter comments on this in her collection titled *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki Between Japan and the United States*:

Murakami's position across cultures is one of the main inspirations for his literature. As he explains in the interview with Jay McInerney, he moved first to Europe and then to America because he believed that this would allow him to "write about Japanese society from the outside," and this is what defines his "identity as a writer." When the interviewer notes that most of his books could be set in America without any significant change, he replies that he wanted to depict Japanese society through those aspects that could just as well occur in New York or San Francisco, and explains that "you might call it the Japanese nature that remains only after you have thrown out, one after another, all those parts that are altogether 'too Japanese' (60)."

For Suter, Murakami's writing about Japan from other countries makes him just as much an outsider to his nation as he seems to be to his anonymous fictions. She feels that this makes Murakami a literary ambassador between nations, and cultures, because he does not write for, or about, any one place – instead, he brings places together in their similarities, such as metropolitan lifestyles, music, and even other novels. For both Hornyak *and* Suter, Murakami is undeniably a writer attempting to craft fiction on a global level. According to Hornyak, Murakami masterfully produces bestseller after bestseller due to his ability to create anonymous protagonists who just happen to have Japanese names; Suter, on the other hand, delves deeper into the issue, showing how, in her essay, Murakami's "anonymous" landscapes and settings help him to move beyond simply a bestselling author and become a functional and vital ambassador between Japan and America. Yet, how can one work on a global level without first *leaving* a local one?

Questions such as this one have given some critics a harder time defining Murakami as “fully global.” Academic Celeste Loughman, for example, acknowledges Murakami as a writer who approaches Japan more closely, but from an “outside,” or non-traditional perspective. In her essay “No Place I Was Meant to Be: Contemporary Japan in the Short Fiction of Haruki Murakami,” she opens by discussing two other acclaimed Japanese writers, Natsume Soseki and Junichirō Tanizaki, and the prevalent theme in their novels *Kokoro* and *Tade Kū Mushi (Some Prefer Nettles)* of an inherent conflict – one of both obsession *and* dislike – that has existed between Japan and the West ever since Commodore Perry docked his black ships at Tokyo Bay in 1853. In Tanizaki’s novel especially, characters are depicted in ways that appear to be both Western *and* Eastern – women who wear traditional *kimono* but also Western sunscreen – and how this dual existence presents fundamental identity problems for these characters: The West has come, so therefore things must change, right? Or is it somehow more natural to choose tradition over change? Is there even a choice? However, no such conflicts or questions exist, or has ever existed, in the works of Haruki Murakami, who, Loughman writes, is arguably Japan’s most popular modern novelist:

Whereas the characters in early-twentieth-century Japanese fiction could and usually did choose traditional Japanese ways, Murakami knows that no such choice is possible now. Japan has come too far. If a conflict still exists, his characters are not engaged in or even aware of it. So enmeshed are they in the forms of the Western, and particularly American, culture that they accept these forms as integral to contemporary Japanese life. Nevertheless, their essential Japanese-ness is never truly lost in spite of what the works appear to say (*World Literature Today*, pg. 87-88).

If the secret to Murakami’s identity as a writer is one of a more dual nature (both Western *and* Japanese), as Loughman seems to suggest, then where does his “other side”

– the side that is not globally fixated, but rather, focused on a more local setting, and a more local audience – come into play? Murakami himself never felt like a typical Japanese man, or like he fit in with the majority of Japanese society, especially the literary society. He explains this in a 1997 interview with Salon Books; when asked about his novels’ heroes, and why they don’t conform to the “hard-working Japanese ethos,” staying at home and remaining unemployed instead, Murakami commented:

I myself have been on my own and utterly independent since I graduated. I haven’t belonged to any company or any system. It isn’t easy to live like this in Japan. You are estimated by which company or which system you belong to. That is very important to us. In that sense, I’ve been an outsider all the time (Murakami, 1997).

In Japan, becoming part of a big corporation or business is the most generally accepted and common path for high school and college graduates. The Japanese have a history of favoring business professions over jobs of the more liberal arts variety. This has much to do with the basic fact that the Japanese way of thinking is much more group-oriented than, say, a Western one. For example, Americans preach individualism – that any one person can work hard on his/her own and accomplish the American Dream. In Japan, it’s more about supporting the society itself, or one’s family – the way the Japanese write their names in *Kanji*, the traditional Chinese characters, proves this: last name *always* comes first. When a person decides that he/she wants to work on his/her own – privately, or separate from a company or business – this is looked down upon in Japan, and considered strange or not of the norm. A more Western mindset might not think anything of it, but in Japan, outsiders are those who do not belong to some sort of group, especially a working group. Which *particular* group a person takes up with matters as well; in

Japan, the company a person works for is as much a part of identity as gender or religion.

Murakami's choice to work on his own, especially as a writer, places him outside of this integral Japanese company/group-affiliation system. When asked how hard it is to be a writer in Japan because of such a position, Murakami continued to explain:

It's not that hard. I'm the exception. Even the writers in Japan have made a society, but not me. That's one reason why I keep escaping from Japan. That's my privilege. I can go anywhere. In Japan the writers have made up a literary community, a circle, a society. I think 90 percent of Japan's writers live in Tokyo. Naturally, they make a community. There are groups and customs, and so they are tied up in a way. It's ridiculous, I guess. If you're a writer, an author, you're free to do anything, go anywhere, and that's the most important thing to me. So, naturally, they mostly don't like me. I don't like elitism. I am not missed when I'm gone (Murakami, 1997).

In Japan, the word *bundan* refers to a group of writers such as the one Murakami references above, meaning, in English, "the literary world." Murakami takes his outsider status one step further by refusing to join even *that* group – the only group, perhaps, for his chosen profession. His commentary on the matter reveals that he is a complicated, multi-dimensional writer, who both identifies himself as Japanese, yet does not feel like he fully belongs in Japan, especially within the community of writers that exists there - the *literary world* that exists there. And he's not necessarily upset about it.

Despite being an outsider, Murakami did write more than his famous "anonymous fictions;" non-fiction-based short story collections such as *Kami no Kodomotachi wa Mina Odoru* (*All God's Children Can Dance*, or more commonly in English, *After the Quake*) and *Underground* prove that, at least for a couple of fleeting moments throughout his writing career, he was concerned with a *type* of locality. In those stories, his setting is

undeniably Japan, and his characters are more than simply Japanese names, they are sometimes real Japanese people. Yet, they are still *characters*, or *other* Japanese people – not Murakami himself; they do not represent the locality that Murakami was, and still is, familiar with. Where is the Murakami that felt separated from the “elite Tokyo writing community?” Where is the Murakami who felt like an outsider in Japanese society? Where is the Murakami who existed within the “anywhere” of his fictions? Except this time, that “anywhere” is *his* world – that of a Kyoto childhood, of the Kansai region of Japan, of the metropolitan, of the record stores, of the coffee houses, of the critic who looked at Japan and saw it so richly, so vividly, that he couldn’t even begin to comprehend it until he had, many years later, escaped.

Until we can find *this* side of Haruki Murakami, how well do we really know him?

## The Issue with Movie Subtitles

### From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 261-263)

When I asked a movie subtitler once, I found out that there's actually very little information that finds its way into subtitles. When they do a certain amount of original dialogue, let's value it at "1," what actually gets subtitled is only about 1/3 or 1/4. The thing is, voice-over dubbing just adds a whole bunch of content that wasn't there to begin with. So, which is really better? 'Cos if they dub it, then the whole feel of the movie gets distorted, and I'm not able to enjoy that, so, there's no choice: I have to rely on subtitles.

Just the other day, I saw *Star Wars: The Japanese Edition* but I couldn't follow the dubbed Japanese being spoken, so I became really bored. Was it because the voice actors themselves were bad, or was it because the rhythm of the dialogue and the rhythm of the movie didn't match up? Either way, I just couldn't understand *anything* being said at all!

And that's what really sucks about this.

This is ancient history, but when *The Nuremberg Trials* was released in Japan, the director, Stanley Kramer, requested: "Because this piece is a delicately composed courtroom drama, subtitles won't work." Because of that, they made a dubbed version of *The Nuremberg Trials* in Japanese. But, movie fans in Japan *really* disliked it because

they thought it was like normal Japanese dubbed television, so it was a total flop. In order to get out of that sticky situation, the theaters would screen the dubbed version once a day, first thing in the morning, and then just show the subtitled one for the rest of the day.

At that time, without really knowing any of this, I got up early to go to the movie theater and, basically, whether I liked it or not, I had to see *The Nuremberg Trials* dubbed in Japanese.

Compared to the subtitled version, I thought the dubbed version had its good and bad points. I understand Stanley Kramer's intention, but because the language of law and politics used in *The Nuremberg Trials* is so different from legal and political language in Japan, the dialogue just went on forever and viewers like me weren't able to keep pace with what was being said.

In the end, when measuring the verbal information and the written information on a screen, it's not just the amount that's different, but the quality of the information as well.

## II. What is (and how did we forget about) *Asahidō*?

“By listening to his language of his locality the poet begins to learn his craft. It is his function to lift, by use of imagination and the language he hears, the material conditions and appearances of his environment to the sphere of the intelligence where they will have new currency.”

~William Carlos Williams

The *Asahi Shimbun* is the second most circulated of the five national newspapers in Japan; its headquarters are located in Tsukiji, a working-class section of Tokyo, and its name translates roughly, in English, to “Morning Sun News.” From June 1984 to November 1986, the *Asahi Shimbun* published several flash fiction pieces by Haruki Murakami in its “Classy” section, or “fashionable columns.” Each story was a quirky, opinionated response to some aspect of Japanese society or culture, with an accompanying illustration by the artist Anzai Mizumaru. The topics were quite random – ranging anywhere from getting a part time job to the best way to eat tofu to critiques of various movies. These short pieces were well received – it was considered “trendy” for a popular writer like Murakami to be featured in the *Asahi Shimbun*’s “Classy” section, after all. In 1987, the various Murakami columns and illustrations were gathered together by a publishing company called Heibonsha and re-printed in a collection titled *Asahidō*. The title, in English, translates rather strangely: *Asahi* refers to the *Asahi Shimbun*’s “Morning/Sun” name meaning, but *dō* usually signifies a “hall” or “public gathering



place,” such as a cafeteria (A direct translation might be, then: “Morning Sun Hall”). In a way, despite the bizarre-sounding meaning, *Asahidō* was Murakami’s personal “public gathering hall,” a place where he could address the Japanese people with a public voice, as both a representative of Japanese culture and society, as well as a critic of it.

*Asahidō* has never been officially translated into English – or any other foreign language, for that matter. This has a great deal to do with why, up until now, at least, this work has never been considered with the rest of Murakami’s more internationally known publications as critical to the ongoing literary discussion of Murakami’s identity as a writer. However, it would be a mistake to assume that *Asahidō* does not play into the discussion. In fact, *Asahidō* is perhaps the only definitive evidence we have that Murakami was, at one point in his life, extremely invested in locality – in *his* personal locality, to be exact. *Asahidō* is highly stylized, but in a way that is raw, honest, and intimate. Murakami gets away with a lot in this collection – he both praises various odd aspects of Japanese culture (such as Japan’s giant monster, Godzilla-esque movies), yet criticizes many normal, every-day aspects (such as Japan’s tendency to dub movies and television shows). *Asahidō* often brings to light the many “elephants in the room” within Japanese society, as well – things that nobody seems to talk about, but everybody assumes to be true. His two stories, “Concerning Ants (I)” and “Concerning Ants (II),” discuss this very closely: they deal with how a group of ants works as a group and lives as a group, but sometimes an ant or two won’t follow what the rest of the group is doing, and are therefore labeled as delinquents. Furthermore, Murakami explains, ants are, upon closer inspection, extremely creepy due to their practice of living all together in a group

but “never saying anything (135).” It should be noted that Murakami’s ant stories begin with him waiting for a bus to come...one might wonder if the entire sequence isn’t a metaphor for Japanese public transportation, and the creepiness of how everybody sits together but never says anything. After all, it is considered taboo to talk on a bus or subway train in Japan. To do so – much like choosing to work on one’s own, and not join any sort of group – would make one an outsider in Japanese society.

In addition, Murakami takes on a particular “voice” in *Asahidō* that relates directly to the rejection of the elitist community of writers in Tokyo that he speaks of in the 1997 Salon interview – a big indication that this is truly him speaking, at last, and not some fictional “I” character. *Asahidō* is Murakami’s “snobbish Kansai critic” voice, a voice that reveals him as just as much of an elitist as his contemporaries, but one that works in opposition to the more serious, sophisticated, and formal “Kanto style” of expression. Kansai and Kanto refer to two very distinct regions of Japan, Kansai covering the cities of Kobe, Nara, Osaka, and Kyoto, and Kanto covering the area dominated primarily by Tokyo and Yokohama. While these are not the only two regions of Japan, they are particularly well known for their drastically different “personalities.” Catherine Maxwell, an editor for the newsletter *Omusubi*, writes in her article “Japan’s Regional Diversity: Kansai vs. Kanto:”

Kansai residents are seen as being pragmatic, entrepreneurial, down-to-earth and possessing a strong sense of humour. Kanto people on the other hand are perceived as more sophisticated, reserved and formal, in keeping with Tokyo’s history and modern status as the nation’s capital and largest metropolis. A degree of rivalry exists between the two, as each usually finds the other’s manners not to their liking (16)!

Maxwell goes on to explain that the majority of famous comedians in Japan come from

the Kansai region, using their “funny-sounding” Kansai-*ben* (dialect) to crack jokes and deconstruct the common stereotype throughout the world that the Japanese are a serious, and homogenous, people. Murakami, a native of the Kansai region, appears fully aware of his origins in *Asahidō* – the collection itself is sarcastic, ironic, harsh, and hilarious all at once. Murakami plays critic here, but he also, in many ways, plays comedian, all in hopes of sending some deeper messages about his relationship with his home, and about the Japanese people – not to celebrate or reinforce traditional actions or beliefs, but undermine them, and call attention to many of their faults.

Take a four-part section of the collection that covers the topic of tofu: how to eat it, how to enjoy it best, etc. Murakami claims that writing about tofu is essential because it is the only subject he thinks the artist for his column – a man named Anzai Mizumaru – will have difficulty portraying. Though this appears to be extremely arrogant of him – he claims that “it’s just something in my nature” that makes him desire his artist to “suffer” (144) – on a deeper level he seems to be sending a message about the world of writers and literary critics in Japan: a message about the triviality of it. Later on in the four-part piece, however, Murakami admits that, really, he just loves tofu, implying that he simply needed an excuse to write about it – and that “making Mizumaru suffer” (144) was the perfect excuse. *This* seems to suggest that he is making a claim about the Japanese people, as a whole, and one of their many quirks: how they constantly feel as if they need excuses in order to talk about the things that they love. The Japanese people have a history of modesty, of never talking about their personal lives in a public situation, yet, *Asahidō* is Murakami’s way of poking fun at that – after all, he rambles on for twelve

pages about *his* favorite food. When discussing the collection in November 2010 with a student, Nanzan University Professor Nanako Machida (a native of the Kansai region, as well) commented that she often thinks about tofu or favorite foods too...and that Murakami's writing made her smile, as Japanese people don't often admit to things like that.

When considering *Asahidō*'s charm, and its nature as a piece of writing that reveals Murakami's local interests and "hometown" identity, the importance of humor is critical. In order to understand Murakami as a "Kansai critic," and as someone acutely in-tune with Japan's quirks and oddities, one must first understand how such a personality is expressed: which is, primarily, through humor. This brings us to an issue that is unavoidable, enormously complicated, but fully impossible to overlook if we, as readers native to languages other than Japanese, are to fully grasp the humor of the *Asahidō* situation. I am speaking, of course, about the issue of translation.

## Concerning Tofu (I)

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 144-146)

For this column, I always ask a man named Mr. Anzai Mizumaru to draw pictures for me, and I always try to get him to draw pictures with very difficult themes. When I see the pictures he finishes, though, I'm never able to catch sight of any suffering or difficulty. No matter how much people say that a professional wouldn't show any signs of difficulty, it just enhances my natural desire to enjoy making him suffer and feel like he is in trouble – it's just something in my nature!

So, I wrote a sentence once with a theme like, "On the dining train car there is General Rommel eating a beef cutlet" – but then I received the picture of it, and there Rommel was, eating a beef cutlet, just like I'd written! Because of that incident, even if I think of a difficult theme, it seems I won't ever be able to make Mr. Anzai suffer for all of eternity!

I *could* crank out stories with phrases like "octopus and giant centipede scrapple" or "a warmly watching over you, shaving, Carl Marx Engels," but then the artist Anzai would, without a doubt, just go right ahead and make such themes completely and perfectly clear.

So what should I do? How can I make Mr. Anzai's life difficult?

There's really only one answer: it's in simplicity.

Something like...tofu.

There is a really delicious tofu shop in Shinjuku, and at the time when I was brought there, the tofu was so good I ended up eating 4 blocks of it, one after the other, without stopping. There was soy sauce and other condiments, but I didn't use any of them. I just devoured the smooth, white tofu. If it's a really good tofu, you don't need any seasonings.

I wonder if in English you say: "simple as it must be...?"

The tofu I'm talking about is tofu made by the tofu-maker Mr. Nakano, for use in restaurants. Recently, though, truly delicious tofu restaurants have been reducing in number.

Exporting cars is fine, but there is something essentially wrong about the structure of a nation that reduces its number of good tofu restaurants!

## Concerning Tofu (II)

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 147-149)

Well, I'm going to continue to talk about tofu to make Mr. Anzai's life as an illustrator difficult.

Really, if I'm honest about it, I'm just totally nuts about tofu.

If you have beer with tofu, lightly grilled with tomatoes and *edamame* (maybe even with some sea eel, if you're in the Kansai area), a summer night becomes paradise. In winter, it's good to have boiled tofu, *agedashi* tofu, and *oden yakitofu* – anyway, spring, summer, winter or fall, I eat about 2 boxes of tofu per day. Because I don't really eat that much in the way of an actual meal, tofu generally becomes my main dish.

When my friends come over to eat, they're at a loss for words. "Wow, what a meal!" they might say, when they see my paltry offering of beer, salad, tofu, white fish and miso soup. Eating habits are such a personal thing, though, that once you make a habit of something like this you get used to it and start to think it's just normal. Now, when I eat a regular "meal" my stomach feels all bloated – it's just too much.

In my neighborhood there is a really good store that makes amazing homemade tofu, and it was great for me to have that around. My routine was always the same:

Around lunch time, I would leave my house, and go to a bookstore or record lending shop or a game center, after which I'd eat lunch at a *soba* restaurant or spaghetti place, shop for dinner, and finally buy tofu on my way home.

I'll give you three clues on how to eat really delicious tofu: first, you have to buy the tofu from a proper tofu store – the supermarket is no good – and, second, when you get home you have to put the tofu in a bowl of water and then stick it in the fridge straightaway. Finally, you have to eat it on the day you bought it. Therefore, you really need to have a tofu place in your neighborhood! I can't just go to a far away place every time in order to buy tofu...

One day, though, I went for a walk and stopped by the tofu place like always, and the shutters were closed and a “for rent” sign was up. It seemed the smiling happy tofu family had closed up shop and left for who-knows-where.

Now what's going to happen to my tofu eating life!?



## Concerning Tofu (III)

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 150-152)

You know, wives in Paris don't go out and “stock up” on bread. For every meal they go out to buy bread, but if there are any leftovers they throw them out. No matter what anybody says, I think meals should be like that. The same can be said about tofu: you eat it when you first buy it. Do you really expect me to eat tofu that has been sitting out all night? This is the way that normal people think, at least.

Because it's often troublesome to not eat what gets left out overnight, the spirit of that sort of laziness is what makes people put preservatives in food to make them last longer. See, people are basically lazy and so they end up eating stuff that's been sitting out overnight. That's why we have all these preservatives and things in food now, to make them last longer.

It's because they're worried about exactly this sort of thing that tofu sellers wake up at 4 am and make tofu so it will be ready for the morning *miso*, but because everybody else eats bread (...at my house too...), or they use the tofu at the supermarket that have preservatives and stay fresh longer, it's very discouraging for the tofu sellers. Therefore, proper tofu stores are beginning to disappear one by one from towns. Recently, in fact, the commendable sort of people who are willing to wake up at 4 am to work have also disappeared.

It's too bad...

Speaking of tofu, I can't really describe it but the tofu I ate when I was a child near the Nanzen Temple in Kyoto was really delicious. The tofu of Nanzen Temple is very well known but it has become commercialized nowadays to suit the sightseeing of fashionable people. As a whole, it tasted simpler and more natural in the past.

Because my father's house was near the temple, I used to go for walks along the small river to the Ginkaku Temple area, end up at the small garden section where there was a tofu stand, and eat hot tofu while blowing on it. This kind of tofu is a simple vegetarian food for the common people, much like the corner crepe stands in Paris.

I also think something is wrong with how they have recently been trying to make tofu dinners into main courses that cost 5000¥.

It's just tofu, isn't it?

Tofu does its best to just be tofu. I really like the way that tofu just wants to be itself.

## Concerning Tofu (IV)

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 153-155)

What's the number one most delicious way to eat tofu?

When I had free time once, I tried to think about it, and decided that there really is only one answer: after a fling.

Er, well...if, at first blush, this idea really turns you off, rest assured, it's all in the imagination. This isn't a "true story." I'd hate to have you think this idea is based on my personal experience. No, this is a story of hypothesis.

First, I am taking a walk in the early afternoon when a 30-something-year-old sexy wife gasps, "oh!" when looking at my face. I'm thinking, "What in the world?" when just then a little girl, who's maybe five and who was following the woman, comes running up to me, yelling "Daddy!" When I listen closely to the woman's story, it turns out that I am the spitting image of her husband, who passed away last year.

Now, the woman, she says, "Now, now, this is not your father," to the little girl, but the kid insists ("Daaaddy!") and won't let go of my hand.

Well, I'm not the kind of guy who's bothered by stuff like this, so I find myself agreeing to "play Daddy for a little while" and next thing I know we've all gone to the park and had some fun and the kid has gotten tired and fallen fast asleep.

After that, it's like the die had been cast: I end up walking them home and then I do *it* with the widow. So, by the time she and I finish up, it's evening and outside the house there is the jingle-jingle of this guy selling tofu from a bicycle. While fixing her mussed-up hair, the woman calls out to him and she buys two blocks of silken tofu, fixes up one block with green onion and ginger, and sets it out with some beer for me. "Something to tide you over for now," she says, "While I get some dinner ready."

Now, that kind of "*tide you over for now* tofu erotica" is just downright good!

But, nothing's gonna come of all this unless I go looking for a sexy widow whose husband was the spitting image of me, right? And that's just never gonna happen. Guess I'm just not the affair-having type after all.

## II. Concerning Translation

“Let us only say that there are difficulties, and that translation, as Allen Tate said of criticism, is forever impossible and forever necessary.”

~Edward Seidensticker

For Michael Seats, yet another academic interested in Haruki Murakami’s identity as a writer, where a writer comes from does not necessarily matter when discussing issues of “global versus local,” it is *how* the writer’s works are *translated* cross-culturally that matters:

Murakami’s reception in Germany was described as confronting the reading public with a completely different image of the Japan that has conventionally been represented in translations of Japanese literature, with one review of *Hitsuji o Meguru Boken (A Wild Sheep Chase)* hailing Murakami as the ‘star of postmodern Japanese literature.’ ... More recently, Murakami’s fiction appearing in German has been the subject of considerable controversy amongst scholars and publishers... The problem revolved around the German translation having been produced directly from the English version of the text, rather than from the original Japanese. This controversy highlights the implicit ‘global imperatives’ facing many contemporary Japanese artists... (*Murakami Haruki: The Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Culture*, 26-27)

The issue with the German translations of Murakami, for Seats, is that they do not take into account the original Japanese versions. Without giving *any* attention to the direct translation, something imperative becomes lost. Of course, these issues have existed as long as translation has. Hugo Friedrich reminds us, in his essay “On The Art of Translation,” that:

The art of translation will always have to cope with the reality of untranslatability from one language to another...one could say that, in a poetic sense, the art of translation is affected by language boundaries in proportion to the shades of subtlety of the original and the demands translators place on themselves...translators find themselves constantly restricted to remain, as closely as possible, faithful to the original text (*Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, 11).

Therefore, Seats' issue with the German translations of Murakami is a product of the overall difficulty of translation and how translators, throughout history, have tried to deal with the inescapable fact that they will never be fully able to capture *everything* about an original text. Some translators choose to take shortcuts, others take monumental liberties, and still some try to remain as loyal to the text as possible, and produce something essentially unreadable. Regardless of technique, translation is a difficult task – even more so when the two languages being compared are as far apart as, well, English and Japanese.

“The style and manner in a Translation should be of the same character with that of the Original...a Translation should have all the ease of original composition,” Lord Woodhouselee wrote in 1791. Sounds simple enough – but academic Edward Seidensticker is quick to point out in his essay “On Trying to Translate Japanese,” that this concept is, in fact, a contradiction: the translation should have the “spirit of the original foreign language,” but it should also have “the spirit of the language it is being translated into” (in this case, English)? How is that possible? Seidensticker writes:

...And the farther apart the languages, the more real the contradiction. Without knowing a word in Russian, one senses that Constance Garnett's “style and manner” are not those of her Russians. How else explain the fact that her Tolstoy and Turgenev and Dostoyevski all sound exactly alike? One cannot believe that three such disparate geniuses sound alike in Russian. And when she offers Russianisms, “little mother” and the like, one feels that she is not quite in

English. Sometimes she has chosen one of Woodhouselee's principles, sometimes the other, and so to a degree have all translators (*The Craft of Translation*, 143).

Seidensticker goes on to explain that when it comes to English and Japanese, the contradiction grows in proportion to how much *more* different the two languages are from one another. English and Japanese have completely dissimilar sentence structures, grammatical rules, and usages of pronouns, to name a few – the list of their differences could go on for pages. How, then, does one even *begin* to approach translating a Haruki Murakami text, or any such work of Japanese literature?

According to another academic writer, Marleigh Grayer Ryan, and her essay “Translating Modern Japanese Literature,” a translator of Japanese must be completely in tune with how the Japanese people “sit, stand, walk, talk, play, mourn,” as well as “know how they feel, both actually and artistically (49).” She also explains that it is not the language itself that will do justice to a translation from Japanese into some other language – it is the *emotion* that matters:

[Unexpressed language] It is, of course, common to all languages, but is so exquisitely refined in Japanese that its identification and ultimate transmission are matters of great significance. Without it, a translation is empty, vapid, drained of the emotion upon which the original Japanese is predicated...I would argue that without the emotion – in Japanese, inextricably bound to unexpressed language – the translation is profoundly inadequate, for emotion is the substance of Japanese literature. It is where the Japanese genius lies, and failure to convey it in the translation deprives the literature of its greatest value (*The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 49).

If, then, emotion is what matters when considering Japanese literature, perhaps the first thing to do when translating a collection of stories like Murakami's *Asahidō* into English, for example, is, instead of dwelling on the enormity of the grammatical differences, or the odd syntax of the words, to focus on the overall *feel* of the text itself - aspects such as

tone, style, and narrative voice (and such was the technique that I ultimately *did* use to translate the sections of Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* that appear throughout this project). As mentioned earlier, there is a primary emotional tone running throughout *Asahidō* that helps to bring about a better understanding of the text, and provides a solid starting point for the translation itself: Murakami's sense of humor.

There is a fascinating moment, during the process of translation, when one realizes, for the first time, why and how to laugh at something in a language he or she did not grow up speaking. Humor is curious in that it is both completely natural, and also extremely context-based – therefore, translating it is both easier *and* more involved than any other type of translation. “Humor translation,” writes Jeroen Vandaele in the essay “(Re-)Constructing Humor: Meanings and Means,” “Is qualitatively different from 'other types' of translation and, consequently, one cannot write about humor translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation (150).” Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a Japanese sense of humor would differ from an American one, or any other, for that matter. Nationality (our physical place on the globe) is one of the large determining factors of social upbringing, media content, and the beliefs, as well as the quirks, of the culture, or cultures, that reside within it. Humor serves, in many ways, as one of the simplest, yet consistent, forms of social commentary – and there would not be much to comment on without concepts like nationality as a base. The beauty of being a translator is that translation is so much *more* than simply knowing a language fluently: it is knowing a *culture* fluently. In order for the magical moment to happen – for the translator to recognize the humor in what they are translating – they must first understand



what the people of the language being translated find funny.

The Japanese are historically a serious, hard-working people – their senses of humor are a bit more reserved than those of Americans or Europeans, for example. “They don’t tell jokes centering on taboos, other religions, people with variegated sexual preferences or people in power. The dirty joke is virtually unknown here (1),” explains Roger Pulvers, in a 2009 *Japan Times* article titled “Humor May be Universal, but Japan’s is Largely its Smut-free Own.” Part of the reason for this is Japan’s strict sense of social propriety, as well as censorship laws. Japan’s views on humor are a bit behind, in the sense that they draw from periods and areas of history more akin to Victorian England and Kaiser-run Germany, rather than the modern age and government systems of now. Specific political, religious, and social jokes are still considered somewhat “dangerous,” and generally distasteful. *Generally*.

Japanese humor, then, is more about “harmless fun.” Slapstick or “comedy-of-manners (1)” types of humor are fairly common in Japanese movies and television, both live-action and animated. “Since such comedy-of-manners humor is often based on wordplay and knowledge of local customs, it can easily be missed by non-Japanese (1),” explains Pulvers. Those that get made fun of are characters such as “the country bumpkin” or “local fool” (1) – never politicians or the higher-ups. Self-deprecating humor and satire also exist – but usually relating to the Japanese people as a whole (or Osaka people as a whole, etc.), rather than calling out one individual in particular.

Pulvers concludes that:

“The Japanese most certainly laugh about themselves as much as the next nationality – but to appreciate that laughter, a solid background in the culture and language is essential. Even then it might be elusive, because Japanese humor is, if nothing else, *not* in your face (1).”

When translating Haruki Murakami’s *Asahidō*, there is a definite adherence to what Pulvers describes in his essay: Murakami is quick to poke fun at his people, as a whole, and their quirks. As was discussed earlier, it soon becomes apparent, while translating, that he is making a satirical connection back to the “elitist Tokyo writers” he mentions in the Salon Books interview, and his dislike of them – never one person in particular, but a social *group* (though he *does* get dangerously close to poking fun at some individual higher-ups by mentioning the economists Takemura Ken’ichi and Tanaka Kakue in “Concerning Part-Time Jobs”).

Jumping into the process of translating *Asahidō*, however, one realizes after a few reads that Murakami is adding another layer to his work that goes beyond Pulvers’, and many others’, common analysis of Japanese humor. By incorporating short, choppy sentences, and a plethora of colloquialisms and (sometimes made-up) sayings, Murakami is building a narrative voice that, in and of itself, is funny – in both Japanese *and* English. Perhaps Murakami was aware of the possibility for translation, or, more likely, he seems to be acutely in-tune with humor’s ability to breach all barriers of human difference – whether such difference exists between people of the same culture, or of many. In the case of *Asahidō*, the aim of the humor seems more geared toward differences between the Japanese people themselves, primarily the Kanto and Kansai people, rather than between peoples of the world – which is what makes it an important addition to the Murakami canon: it is so vividly concerned with locality. There are moments when Murakami jumps

in (such as in “Concerning Tofu II”) with comments like “...if you are in the Kansai region...(147)” referencing the specific area he comes from – sort of like a shout-out to his people, implying that only the inhabitants of that area would “get” the comment that follows.

There is an especially enjoyable section within the story “The Issue with Movie Subtitles,” where Murakami calls forth a very “Japanese” colloquialism/saying – *koto de ocha wo nigoshite shimatta* (263) – which, when translated literally, means “to keep from muddying the tea.” It’s funny because it is the Japanese equivalent of the English “getting out of a sticky situation,” but it’s so *wonderfully* Japanese, due to the reference to tea, which is an integral aspect of Japanese culture and society. In Japanese tea ceremony, the green tea must be perfectly mixed, pure, with little-to-no bubbles, and certainly nothing “to muddy it.” It is a very strict and formal process. To “muddy the tea” is offensive not only to the ritual of the tea ceremony, but much of what tradition means to the Japanese people in general. The beauty of such tonal or narrative humor, though, is that such phrasing becomes funny in English not only because it provides insight into the local humor of the Japanese in general, but also because English-speakers can relate to the feeling: “to get out of a sticky situation,” regardless of language or original wording, means the same thing anywhere. Another phrase from “The Issue with Movie Subtitles” – *kouiu no wa komaru* (261) - for example, translates directly to “And that’s what is really difficult about this” – but based on the overall tone of the story (Murakami’s frustration and annoyance with having to see various movies subtitled badly or dubbed badly, his short, choppy sentences, and his overall exaggeration of the entire subtitling situation), it

is more accurately akin to the English phrase “and that’s what really *sucks* about this.” He’s got some attitude here, and it’s an attitude that is acutely critical...but also *hilarious*. The humor itself draws attention to Murakami’s concerns, many of them specific to Japanese society, revealing to the reader everything learned up until this point: Murakami’s separation from the elitists in Tokyo, his status as a quirky outsider due to his job choice and unique likes and dislikes, and his complex existence as a global writer *and* a man inherently tied to his home country.

Through humor, readers all over the world are able to relate to and learn from Murakami – a window into his mind that is suddenly blown open by translation. Murakami’s humor is the foundation of *Asahidō*; by beginning with it, and translating it, *Asahidō* becomes a legitimate part of the global discussion of Murakami’s identity as a writer. Through translation, we are exposed to Murakami’s local side – an important opposition to his more anonymous fictional voices. For the study of global literature, this is a vital addition to the ongoing discussion of Haruki Murakami and his works. Taking into account *all* works by an author is the key to understanding his intentions, opinions, literary values, and much more. The first step, then, is translation: to recognize the significance and potential for works like *Asahidō*, and labor to bring that understanding to the rest of the world.

## Concerning Ants (I)

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 132-134)

The ant is an admirable creature.

I'm not saying that just to compliment them, I really think they're great. From the time that I was a child I used to love to watch them. Whenever I have free time now, I also observe them. The other day, for example, as I was waiting for the bus, right by my feet there was a colony of ants working like hell to make a nest, so I watched them intently for about 15 minutes.

As I'm sure you know, the creatures called ants make a nest underground by digging a hole, but when they dig this hole, they have this one problem: *how* do they get the sand out? I'm sure those of you that have seen the movie *The Great Escape* would know that this issue is really a troublesome one.

So, speaking of the ants now, how they solve this problem is actually a simple story. What makes it so simple is that each ant just moves one grain of sand at a time! Now, *I* think this is really tedious labor, but, because the ant is such a workaholic, he probably thinks it's just fine. .

What I think is great about ants, though, is how they *place* the sand. What I mean is, the ants bring the sand above ground, but they don't chuck it over the edge and leave it near the nest; instead, they take it away. If they put the sand near the entrance to the nest, then it would just mound up there, and they know precisely how much trouble that would be. So they come out, walk for maybe 5 or 10 inches, find an appropriate place for the grain of sand, put it down and then return to the hole. They sort of look around and judge where to put the grains, and by looking at them from behind, you can just *tell* that they're thinking hard about where to put the sand. It gives me this really good feeling

Now, not all of them do it, though. Some of them just plop their grain of sand down right there at the entrance to the hole, like they're sneering at all the other workers. I guess that ants, just like people, come in various stripes.

But if you think about it, it's not like each and every grain of sand *needs* to be schlepped so far from the whole. The sand probably *should* be equally distributed around the ground, so it's ok that some of the ants just put the sand near the nest. Each ant just judges the situation for himself and goes about his business.

Man, ants are great.

## Concerning Ants (II)

From Haruki Murakami's *Asahidō* (pages 135-137)

Last time, I talked about how great ants are, but, you know, if you watch them closely, ants gradually become more and more scary. Why they become scary is just this: they all live inside a dark hole, as a collective social group, and never say anything! Even if you watch them for a long time, they are so quiet that you end up wondering what in the world they could possibly be thinking about.

In the past, I remember there was this movie called “The-Giant-Ant-Something-or-Other,” in which an ant became gigantic due to a nuclear experiment and started attacking humans, and just imagining that sort of situation now...it's so terrifying! The thing is, if it was a movie about humans getting attacked by a pride of lions, then I could just give up and forget about it, but because it was about the giant ant, and how it uses its sharp fangs to squirt paralyzing liquid and stab you, and then drag you down into its dark hole, where the sticky Queen ant eats you...from the bottom of my heart, it was *truly* terrifying. Dying can't be helped, but I wouldn't want to die that way!

There was also this other movie, about people getting captured by African natives, and the natives put some sweet honey on the soft parts of the peoples' bodies and then tied them up near an ant colony...

The part about the soft parts of the body, how it was expressed was actually quite awesome. I was able to imagine the way the ants ate the soft body parts – *chomp chomp!* – and I found that that in itself was pretty scary.

I absolutely would not want to die that way! To have the soft parts of your body eaten like that by ants...I'd hate that!

During the time when I was a kid, there were quite a few fine examples of nasty movies like those, and usually with that kind of movie you'd have to go to the outskirts of town to a second- or third-run theater to view them. But you know, that sort of place, one that has its own sort of "atmosphere," is better for that sort of movie than a fancy, clean "road-show" theater.

And then there's another one, "The Poisonous Tarantula" – so there really are who knows how many animal-becomes-giant-due-to-nuclear-experiment movies out there. The giant spider in this one had lots of whiskery hair, and it gave me a creepy-crawly feeling when I thought about touching it. Thinking about being caught in the giant spider nest also brought on a lot of horrors for me – which was good. But you can definitely count it as yet another way I'd hate to die!



#### IV. How well do we know Haruki Murakami? (II)

After reading several selections from *Asahidō*, one can see that there *is*, in fact, a local side to Haruki Murakami that his bestselling fictions and other short story collections fail to capture. It is a locality rich with Murakami's opinions and views on his own status within the Japan that *he* knows (the quirky Kansai metropolitan side of Japan), which is inherently tied to his strong rejection of Japan's group-centered mentality. What happens then, when these several *Asahidō* selections are translated into English is that *Asahidō*'s message, so vivid and humorous, allows for a new way to re-write Haruki Murakami's biography. The answer, then, to the question of "how well do we know Haruki Murakami?" might go a little something like this:

Haruki Murakami was born on what may or may not have been a nice day in January in 1949, to parents who were not necessarily examples of what he himself would grow up to be (well, except that they both liked literature, and so did he – still does, even). Murakami was raised in the Kansai region of Japan, where there are temples and shrines and everybody talks a little funny. Murakami grew up to be the sort of man who pays attention to details – sometimes to a morbid extent (ever ponder the ways you absolutely wouldn't want to die?). He does not necessarily enjoy public transportation, as it's a little creepy (everybody sits together in a collective social group, but nobody says anything at all!), but he could always go for a nice, simple meal (even bread is acceptable, sometimes). He enjoys movies, especially Western ones, but only if he can see them with subtitles – dubbed movies can get a little *weird*, if you catch my drift.

Murakami's secret (or perhaps not-so-secret) passion is music, especially jazz... all he ever used to buy with his part-time work money was records, and when he got older he opened his own coffeehouse/evening jazz bar called "Peter Cat" (part-time wages are always determined by the price of coffee, didn't you know?). Murakami's never really had a love affair, but sometimes dreams about it (who doesn't?), and he is the sort of guy who only believes in things he can touch and feel with his own hands... reality is a tricky thing, something we should think about, and always keep reaching for.

Murakami just wants to be Murakami, though.

And I love the way that, like tofu, Haruki Murakami just wants to be himself.

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