Murakami Haruki the Translator

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Although fictional works by Murakami Haruki村上春樹 (b. 1949) are easily accessible through translation, it is little known in the West that he has translated a large number of pieces from modern and contemporary American literature into Japanese. He is keenly conscious not only of the importance of his original works translated into other languages but also of the benefits that he enjoys by engaging himself in the act of translating the works of others. The pleasure he derives from it is comparable to his passion for running.

A Major Translator

Outside of his native land, Murakami Haruki is widely recognized as the most accessible Japanese writer with his works translated into many languages. They include major novels, such as Sekai no owari to hâdoboirudo wandârando 世界の終わり とハードボイルド・ワンダーランド (The End of the World and Hardboiled Wonderland, 1985), Noruwê no mori ノルウェーの森 (Norwegian Wood, 1987), Nejimakidori kuronikuru ねじまき鳥クロニクル (The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, 1994–1995), Umibe no Kafuka 海辺のカフカ (Kafka on the Shore, 2002), and 1Q84 (2009–2010), as well as a number of mid-sized novels and short stories. Indicative of his prolificness as it is, this list actually proves partial, for his writing is far from limited to fiction. His oeuvre also includes numerous pieces of translation and nonfiction, including essays, travel journals, and interviews. Out of these two categories, the latter is at least known to English-speaking countries with the translation of Hashiru koto nitsuite kataru tokini boku no kataru koto 走ることについて語るときに僕の語ること (What I Talk about When I Talk about Running, 2007), in which he details one of his real-life passions. In contrast, it is not well known in the West that he has translated a considerable amount of literary fiction, mainly by American writers, into Japanese. It is important to point out the significance that Murakami’s translation carries in his overall activities as a professional writer.
The list of his translations from modern and contemporary American literature is quite extensive, including works by C. D. B. Bryan (1936–2009), Truman Capote (1924–84), Raymond Carver (1938–88), Raymond Chandler (1888–1959), F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940), Mikal Gilmore (b. 1951), Mark Helprin (b. 1947), John Irving (b. 1942), Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929), Tim O’Brien (b. 1946), Grace Paley (1922–2007), J. D. Salinger (1919–2010), Shel Silverstein (1930–99), Mark Strand (1934–2014), Paul Theroux (b. 1941), Chris Van Allsburg (b. 1949), and several others to date. There are a number of reasons for his fascination with American literature. He belongs to the first post-WWII generation that grew up under heavy influences from American culture. Three of the favorite novels of his teenage years were Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Chandler’s *Long Goodbye*, and Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*, all of which he eventually translated into Japanese, despite the previous existence of widely accepted versions by other translators.

**Fascination with American Literature**

Since gaining recognition outside Japan in the 1980s, he has visited the United States on many occasions, including visiting professorships at Princeton University and Tufts University in the early 1990s, making direct contact with some of the contemporary American writers whom he highly regards. They include, for instance, O’Brien and Paley when they gave speeches at Princeton and in New York City, respectively. At Princeton, he made good friends with Mary Morris (b. 1947), though admitted feeling somewhat awed at English Department luncheons in the presence of dignitaries like Joyce Carol Oates (b. 1938) and Toni Morrison (b. 1931). (“Art of Fiction,” 124). In 1984, he took an early morning jog in Central Park with Irving, who suggested it in lieu of a regular interview (2007 *Hashiru koto*, 239). In that same year Murakami also visited Raymond Carver at his home on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State; Murakami was an ardent admirer of Carver and translated his complete works into Japanese.1 With Fitzgerald, such personal contact was obviously impossible, but thanks to his translation of Fitzgerald’s novels and his own novels translated into English, Murakami was invited over a weekend to the home of the American writer’s granddaughter in a small village near Philadelphia during his Princeton days (1994, 50-63). Apart from the fact that he highly

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estems these American writers, there are several reasons for his considerable commitment to translation. On the practical side, although his great reverence for Kafka and Dostoevsky, for instance, is well documented, he does not have enough linguistic proficiency in any other foreign languages than English to venture a commercially viable and professionally refined translation. In contrast, he is fluent in English, especially for reading. The first book he read in English was *The Name Is Archer* (1955) by Ross Macdonald [Kenneth Millar] (1915–83), a copy of which he picked up as a high school student at a used bookstore frequented by international visitors to the port city of Kobe (2004 “Art of Fiction,” 125). Thereafter, almost an inborn rebel against the social system of Japan, he developed his personal habit of reading fiction in English outside of English classes at school (2000, 56). As a result, he has no problem appreciating English texts in the original.

**Being Translated**

Other reasons for his commitment to translation are more directly linked to his writing profession. He is very conscious of his works translated into many languages, not only because he is the author but also because he himself is a translator who knows all the potential challenges of the undertaking. It is one of his pleasures during trips abroad to find his translated books on bookstore shelves (Carver, Murakami & O’Brien, 2008, 5). Since he does not read foreign language books with confidence except in English, he initially did not pay much attention to the accuracy of his translated fictions, simply feeling gratitude for the translators and answering their questions. Even when he was asked to check English versions, he gave minimal suggestions to the translators, while enjoying reading them as if they were new stories to him because he generally does not reread his works, once published, in Japanese. The reading experience of his translated work thus allows him to reexamine it objectively (1996, 68-69; 2000, 19-20, 28-29, 77). By the early 2000s, however, he realized that, due to scarcity of professionals who can translate directly from Japanese, the English versions, not the originals, are sometimes translated into other languages. Since then, he has come to believe that close attention should be paid to the accuracy of English translations (2000, 82-83; 2004 “Art of Fiction,” 138).

**Translating Benefits**

There are three ways in which Murakami’s practice as a translator converges with his practice as a writer. First, he considers translating
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rather like a personal pleasure (Carver, Murakami, & O’Brien, 2008, 4). This does not mean that he makes light of translation. He simply enjoys the very act of translation that brings about “an unsurpassed, intangible bounty,” even though that process likely requires patient commitment to overcome certain difficulties (2000, 4, 50, 80-81, 110).\(^2\) He “let[s] each line of his favorite works pass through [his] body and [his] mind” (2004 “Art of Fiction,” 125). In contrast, once he embarks on writing a novel, he maintains a rigorous, self-imposed schedule by forcing himself to sit at the desk for a set number of hours every day, for months, whether he can actually write with inspiration or not. He calls this writing regimen “the Chandler method,” after Raymond Chandler whose advice about how to write a novel he remembers having read (1989, 42-46). Needless to say, the entire task of constructing a novel from a scratch in this way is mentally exhaustive.

At the same time, he explains that his fiction-writing essentially undergoes the same process as translating, for he has consistently dealt with his native tongue like “a pseudo-foreign language” to avoid too close familiarity with it (1996, 69). He translates “the original text inside [him]” into Japanese (2003 “écrire,” 98).\(^4\) This suggests that he first conceives his story as a non-Japanese proto-text in his fiction-making, only to dismantle it so that it can by necessity be reconstructed “from zero” as a readable Japanese text. Accordingly, his fiction-writing is “a formative operation entirely separate” from fiction-making (2003 “écrire,” 98). In this sense, his “creative writing and translating...might rather be two sides of the same coin” (1996, 69). Therefore, he is used to the act of translation on a fundamental level through fiction-writing (2003 “écrire,” 98), further enabling himself to take pleasure in actual translation.

Second, Murakami professionally benefits from translating pieces by other writers (2003 Sarinjâ senki, 7). Because he treats Japanese like a foreign language and does not consider the highly aestheticized style of earlier writers (like Mishima and Kawabata) compatible with his own, he rebels against the national literary tradition and seeks to learn from foreign writers (2003 “écrire,” 98; 2003 “rongu intabyû,” 38) whose novels he accesses in the original, later translating many of them into Japanese (2000, 219-220). Because “translation is an extremely dense reading” (2000, 199), translating from English enables him to understand the merit of a certain style more clearly than is possible through mere reading (2000, 57-59, 110-112; Carver, Murakami, & O’Brien, 2008, 4-5). It is very similar to the practice of “copying” or “tracing] the writing in good books” through which people could learn many aspects of writing

\(^2\) Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent translations are mine.
in the past (2000, 57-58, 111; 2006, 153). He even personifies the act of translation as “at once an important teacher of style and a good literary friend” whom he has constantly trusted (Carver, Murakami, & O’Brien, 2008, 5; See also 2003 “écriture,” 98).

Understandably, he chooses to translate “books from which [he] could learn something” (2004 “Art of Fiction,” 138; See also 2000, 40, 87-88, 200, 237-238). For instance, he claims to have learned a “powerful storytelling voice” from Irving, because what he gains through translation is not practical technicalities but “a big thing,” such as “[t]he author’s breathing, his perspective, his sensations” (2006, 153). Contrary to the Western reader’s expectation, he avoids translating postmodern works by such writers as John Barth, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon, to whom he is often compared, for he anticipates “a crash—[his] insanity against their insanity.” Instead, the writers he rather chooses for translation are “realistic writers,” because “[t]heir work requires a very close reading to translate” (2004 “Art of Fiction,” 139). At the same time, he prefers writers like Carver and O’Brien, whose works occasionally become “irrational,” on the ground that he somehow feels “more comfortable when things are messy” (2006, 153).

Third, he intentionally alternates between different kinds of writing. As with translation, he basically writes short stories for personal pleasure. Although he can finish a short story within a week, he “often completes a set of five or six short stories intensively in one to two months,” because that manner of composition renders them correlative and meaningful to each other (2007 “15 no shitsumon,” 37; 2009 “Seichô,” 43-44). Importantly, he does not write a novel while he is writing a group of short stories, thereby providing himself with a period of respite from the intensity of writing a single fictional narrative of considerable length.

Similarly, but with a much shorter or irregular cycle, he utilizes translation to enhance his capacity for producing novels. He “translates when [he] is not writing a novel and writes a novel when [he] wants to” (2009 “Seichô,” 72; See also 2000, 37-38, 208, and Carver, Murakami, & O’Brien, 2008, 4). For instance, he “spent several months writing a long novel in the mornings and recovering from the fatigue by translating [Chandler’s Farewell, My Lovely (1940)] in the afternoons” (2009 “Herajika,” 34). He purposefully avoids writing novels exclusively one after another, interspersing long periods of writing with diversions like foreign travel and athletic competition. More significantly, for creative relaxation, he chooses to write short stories and nonfictional pieces or make translations. This is essential in order to relieve himself not only of mental exhaustion but of the dangers of psychological disequilibrium that can come of writing novels about the fear and violence inherent to

Translating as Jogging

Murakami often compares writing to another of his passions, running. In a discussion of the difference in writing a novel and short stories, he metaphorically explains:

I am originally a long-distance runner. To run a long distance, however, I need not only gain stamina but also develop inner muscles [with sprints] systematically. My belief is that a work of profundity only becomes possible with an effective combination of [muscular] explosiveness and durability. (2007 “15 no shitsumon,” 37)

If writing a novel is analogous to running a marathon and creating short stories to short-distance dashes, a relevant question here is what translating would compare to. Although Murakami does not provide an answer, it must be a relatively short- or mid-distance running that is not intended as a serious preparation for a competitive race. Translation would rather approximate a self-controlled, yet joyous run to make occasionally with a respected friend, like the jog he took with John Irving one morning in 1984. He might not be able to articulate much of his own thought while running, but he learns greatly, even philosophically, by steadily observing how his running mate manages the exercise. And that practice strengthens his will and ability to run his course at different levels, making various kinds of running and writing possible further on. It follows that translation plays a vital, integral role in maintaining his prolific career as a writer of fiction.

References
