TARRYING WITH THE NUMINOUS: POSTMODERN JAPANESE GOTHIC STORIES

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How does the "postmodern" feature in contemporary Japanese writings? This essay considers the works of two Japanese writers, Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto in light of current postmodern theories and how they illuminate various aspects of modern Japanese literature. I specifically consider Murakami's *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* (1994/5; *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* 1998) and Yoshimoto's "Love Songs" (2000) because both texts rehearse the ludic nature of postmodern writings that problematise meaning and explode signifiers into multifaceted possibilities. Interestingly, both narratives are, to a certain extent, "ghost stories", a genre well-known for its discursive instability. As such, by approaching these ghost stories from a postmodern perspective, this essay seeks to explore questions involving gender, sexuality, history, space and subjectivity that confront and construct the Japanese identity today. I begin this essay with a consideration of the state of contemporary Japanese literature, and how the "postmodern" is a dominant feature. I then briefly discuss the place of ghosts in postmodern narratives, focussing specifically on the way their presence forces the present to confront the past, and thus, distorts contemporaneity. This confrontation is imperative if trauma is to be revisited so that reparation may be possible. I then proceed to analyse the two selected narratives.

The notion of hyper-reality predominates my discussion of Murakami's work. In the simulacral space that characterises the novel, identities and meanings are violently distorted, time becomes arrested or complicated, and familiar representations—such as the hero and the villain—become undetermined. Rather than reading Noboru—the novel's alleged Gothic villain—as the nemesis of Tōru (the story's proverbial hero), I reverse the configuration to demonstrate that it is the latter, with his proclivity towards ennui and listlessness, who is the real villain in text, obstructing the former from "liberating" his patients from their spectre of desires that remain

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fundamentally unfulfillable. In my consideration of Yoshimoto's story, I challenge the pervasive inclination of Western Gothic criticism to characterise "ghosts" as evil and destructive; instead, Yoshimoto's brand of the Gothic provides a more reparative understanding of the numinous, and by extension, the power of memory and history to heal present suffering. In this sense, ghosts, rather than menacing, function as agents of restoration.

Situating the Postmodern in Contemporary Japanese Literature

The dominant literary mode of twentieth-century Japan is the "I-novel" (*shishōsetsu*), which purports to convey the author's self authentically through the transparency of language. Inevitably, the I-novel has a strong autobiographical flavour, and for the most part of modern Japan's literary history (a period inaugurated by the Meiji era [1868-1912]), but especially during the Taishō period (1912-1926), the I-novel formed the "meta-narrative" of both aesthetical and critical discourses (Suzuki 4).[2] Although, by the 1980s, the issues surrounding this category no longer "haunt Japanese writers and readers with the same intensity", as a discourse it "still affects our perception of Japanese literary texts—both the language of those texts and the 'reality' represented in them—as well as our perception of the so-called Japanese literary, cultural, and linguistic tradition" (4). Some of these issues—all of which revolve around the "self"—include the problem of "identity", the trauma of Westernisation, and the correlation between the present and the past (and by extension the future), which continue to confront the Japanese people, compelling them into a perpetual negotiation between preserving tradition and being modern. For example, in her study of contemporary Japanese culture, Marilyn Ivy demonstrates that Japanese-ness has to be perpetually staged through "everyday moments" of "elegiac resources" such as "tourism, folklore studies, education and mass media" in order to recuperate a kind of imagined "authenticity" in its bid to resist complete identification with Westernisation (Ivy 22). But as Ivy correctly surmises, this very act of "staging" is already an admission of loss, even though it is a strategy to counter loss. Yumiko Iida further substantiates this view by demonstrating that such a bifurcated allegiance necessarily results in self-splitting, resulting in "the material basis of consciousness—things empirical, including the human body—[to appear to have] been jeopardised . . . the subject is thus haunted by the return of an imaginary version of the 'material' it seeks to supersede" (Iida 2000, 237). This is indeed a curious paradox: on the one hand, the subject wants to break away

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[2] Hence, it is therefore important to distinguish between the I-novel as a body of literary work, and the I-novel as a critical articulation of a concept (see Suzuki 2-3, Lippit 26).

from being immured in backwardness (read tradition) by identifying with the West (which is synonymous to being modern). On the other hand, however, the very same subject also fears losing his sense of "authenticity" as a Japanese, and thus must return to the very thing that he repudiates. This dilemma, as Iida shows, is profoundly staged on the site of the body.[3]

The complexity of the issues outlined above is further sharpened by postmodernism, especially with regards to notion of historicity and by extension, reality. Although postmodernism is predominantly a Western phenomenon and it is always contentious to inscribe it onto a non-Western culture to interrogate its socio-ideological premises, it cannot be denied that the intensification of globalisation and its concomitant cross-cultural exchanges and adoptions have to a large degree informed the contemporary Japanese cultural landscape. If (and this "if" is highly questionable) Japan cannot be said to be postmodern, its "awareness" of this "cultural logic of late capitalism" (to borrow a phrase by Fredric Jameson) is nevertheless entrenched (Suzuki 4). But more important is the affinity between the postmodern and the modern. Following Linda Hutcheon, I view postmodernism as a continuation of the incomplete project of modernism, rather than a complete severance.[4] As she argues:

> Postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause of these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of "the presence of the past"... it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society... it is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic "return." Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism.

In other words, postmodernism "incorporates the past within its very name and paradoxically seeks to inscribe its criticism of that very past" (Hutcheon 47). Although it does not eschew the past, it is nevertheless highly suspicious of history, and holds it in critical abeyance even as postmodern thought acknowledges the influences of the past on the present. As such, postmodernism constantly engages in interrogative strategies to vex the efficacy of history, disrupt its linearity (especially the notion of "history as progress[ive]"), and to question its claims to authenticity. If a greater part of

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[3] In her book, *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan* (2002), Iida cites the androgyne, the *saibo-gu* (cyborg) and the *kogyaru* ("defiant girls") as examples of subjectivities who, in contemporary Japan, vex simplistic categorisation and challenge the notion of the authentic "Japanese self ".

[4] A view which theorists such as Hans Bertens (in his "Postmodern Culture(s)", 1991) take.

twentieth-century Japan has been heavily impacted by Western (European) modernism, it is almost inevitable that it too would inherit the postmodern (American, especially after World War II) trajectories of the latter part of this century, intensifying further and even transposing the problems already implicit in the modern.[5]

Iida has demonstrated that one of the ways in which the contradictory, hybrid dynamics of the contemporary Japanese self is staged is through the body. Another strategy is, of course, through literature. Here, the impact of postmodernism is ineluctable. As Takayumi Tatsumi observes:

> In Japanese postmodern literature the logic of imitation has been replaced by one of synchronicity—synchronicity between American and Japanese works. It is the logic of hypercapitalism that requires us to throw away our bullshit ideas about causal relationship and to be confronted with the multinational synchronicity between literature and paraliterature. (14)

I am not sure how Tatsumi differentiates between "imitation" and synchronicity, for if Japanese literature is increasingly "postmodernised", is this not another instance of borrowing and adopting (that is, "imitating") a Western literary mode? Nevertheless, Tatsumi's observation with regards to contemporary Japanese writing as being postmodernist is plausible. Especially evident is the way the modernist premise of the I-novel is exposed for its volatility and parodied for its impossible claims.[6] In this essay, I consider Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* as performing such a strategy of destabilising the fiction of modernity.

One of the consequences of suspending historical authenticity to interrogate its silences and repressed memories is the undermining of the notion of "reality" itself. If history is merely a version of "the real", it implies that there are other versions. Reality in this sense, rather than a finite notion, becomes multiple and endlessly multiplied, rendering it fragmentary and highly unstable. In postmodern thought, there is no singular reality, but many contending realities simultaneously asserting, becoming repressed, returning. Such a relativity has often been decried by purists of history, but one of the benefits of such a plurality is the equal attention to various forms

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[5] In postmodernism, the "grand narratives that have ruled over modernity, whether a dialectics of spirit, a hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of a rational subject, or the creation of wealth" are now viewed as incredulous (Pincus143).

[6] This of course does not suggest that the I-novel is an easily identifiable category with fixed characteristics waiting to be undermined by postmodern writers. As Suzuki has argued in her study (5-6), the I-novel is a notoriously slippery and difficult category to define, and many modernist Japanese writers (including Tanizaki and Mishima) are already aware of its suspicious claims and have written anti I-novels and parodies of it.

and levels of what is deemed "real", including (and especially) those which have been under- or devalued by progress and modernisation. One such example is the belief in the numinous (religion, ghosts, afterlife). Ghosts, rather than the menacing configurations often depicted in Western Gothic, are, in Japanese postmodern stories, otherworldly helpmeets who provide wise counsel and supernatural assistance to their downtrodden living counterparts. This is the position I take in my discussion of Banana Yoshimoto's short story, "Love Song", in which the protagonist seeks the ministration of the ghostly to help her stave self-dissolution and reconnect with history and with others. Spectral "reality", rather than juxtaposed from "ours", becomes instead necessary to "our" survival and the appreciation of "our" selves as both historical and intersubjective beings.

A Note on Ghosts and the Gothic

Before I begin my analysis of the two texts however, I want to briefly discuss Japanese Gothic and the place of the spectre in postmodern narratives. In the last ten years, there have been, albeit very limited, English-language studies of the relationship between Japanese literature and the Gothic. Henry Hughes's essay, "Familiarity of the Strange", traces the Japanese Gothic tradition all the way back to the eleventh-century *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), and argues that Japanese Gothic is strongly inflected by Buddhistic-Confucian principles, among which is the concept of self-emptying (60). Charles Shirō Inouye's introduction to a collection of stories by the premodern writer Izumi Kyōka (1873-1939) in *Japanese Gothic Tales* (1996) provides a useful understanding of how the Gothic as an aesthetical mode, and one primarily Anglo-American in heritage, can be usefully deployed to appreciate and illuminate narratives outside the West. For Inouye, the Gothic creates a "dissonance" in the literary landscape, such as when a minor literary expression implicates and disrupts the framework of the dominant one. In nineteenth-century Britain, the Gothic vexed the Enlightenment-influenced realist writing (which was then the dominant literary mode), to reveal inherent problems with both the ideology of the Enlightenment as well as the claims of the realist writing. In the same way with Japanese literature, Inouye sees writers like Kyōka as Gothic because their writings (which were becoming increasingly marginalised) refused to yield under pressure of the literary meta-discourse of the day (the *shishōsetsu*), but instead resisted and challenged the premises of the Meiji Reformation and its literary innovations. But "dissonance" is also at the heart of the I-novel, and strongly informs the core of the modern (and postmodern) literary enterprise. As Tomi Suzuki argues, the discourse of the *shishōsetsu* is itself inherently unstable, and many of its claims are parodied

and flaunted by its very own practitioners as well. It becomes inevitable that many modern and postmodern Japanese writers are therefore "Gothic" to some extent, and this essay considers two contemporary writers whose narratives provocatively nuance this aesthetic.

As the Gothic often (but not exclusively) deals with the subjects of loss and haunting, spectres inevitably feature prominently. But more than just an uncanny occasion which returns the repressed past to the present, spectres—always transgressive—also disrupt linearity to problematise time altogether. In her study of Asian ghost films, Bliss Cua Lim asserts that:

> The haunting recounted by ghost narratives are not merely instances of the past reasserting itself in a stable present, as is usually assumed: on the contrary, the ghostly return of traumatic events precisely troubles the boundaries of past, present and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogenous, empty time. (287).

She derives the term "noncontemporaneity" from Derrida to describe ghost narratives in which:

> Haunting as ghostly return precisely refuses the idea that things are just "left behind", that the past is inert and the present uniform. Put simply, the ghost forces the point of nonsynchronism. It is this challenge to received ideas of time that makes the spectre a particularly provocative figure for the claims of history. (288)[7]

Lim's observation accords with the postmodern notion of holding different temporalities in critical tension with one another, refusing to privilege either past, present or future. Ghosts, for Lim, not only transgress (temporal) boundaries, but reveal such boundaries to be fabrications in the first place. In the presence of the spectral, the uniformity and inflexibility of history and reality are problematised, exposing instead history's porous, ambiguous construction. Ghosts reveal that the past is very much alive and infused within the present, just as the present is the realisation and consequence of the past. The future, in this sense, is not empty, awaiting history's unfolding to grant it content, nor is the past inert and the present unified. As noncontemporaneous, what spectres ultimately reveal is that the past, present and future are dialectically and dynamically impacting each other all the time, at once.

Related to her view of time, Lim also contends that locality, or site, be it a place or a body, is in this sense, "'spatial palimpsests' traversed by divergent temporalities" (291). Transcribing this view to read

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[7] See Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, xviii-xix.

postmodernism, I view postmodernism as itself a cultural "palimpsest" which inheres within it (its suffix) the modern and the pre-modern. As Leslie Pincus notes, "the postmodern is regularly revisited by the very unities it hopes to exile" (143), implying that the deconstructive, parodic mechanisms of postmodern discourse is only possible because it keeps the "ghosts" which it seeks to exorcise alive. I am, however, sceptical of Pincus's statement. For me, the postmodern, rather than seeking to exile (however futilely) its ghosts, must in fact retain them in dialectical tension in order to be.[8] After all, as mentioned, if the trajectory of the postmodern is the undermining of monolithic history and the pluralising of realities, then the modern and the premodern must be allowed equally prominent presence within its enterprise so that the postmodern does not become another meta-narrative (in Lyotard's sense) itself.

In my discussion of the two postmodern Japanese Gothic narratives, I reiterate some of the modernist issues which continue to haunt the postmodern self and the literary scene. In Murakami's novel, the protagonist must negotiate with the numinous (in the guise of repressed memories and hyperreal embodiments) in order to come to terms with who his "self" is. Written in the style of the *shishōsetsu*, the novel is nevertheless a parody of the tradition by foregrounding a *Boku* (I-narrator) character whose reality (and by extension, his subjectivity) is increasingly fracturing around him. More importantly, and in the tradition of the Gothic, my reading seeks to undermine the villain/hero dichotomy by demonstrating the way in which the *doppelganger* motif disrupts simple binary identifications. Yoshimoto's short and elegant tale evinces, in an interesting manner, Lim's concept of noncontemporaneity. In "Love Songs", a dead woman returns to haunt a former rival in love in order to rescue her from further self-destruction. I argue that through the ministration of spectres, "Love Songs" breaks the boundaries that separate temporalities and spatialities in order to motivate friendship and healing, and to ultimately reinvest the self once again with some kind of meaning.

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[8] As Lim further notes, "[h]aunting or ghostly return insists that 'prior' modes of consciousness are never completely surmounted or occluded, and that social reality depends on a fractious consensus. The spectral estranges our predisposed ways of experiencing space, time, and history and hauntingly insinuates that more worlds than one exist in the world we think we know; times other than the present contend with each other in the disputed Now" (294).

The Ghost of the Hyperreal: Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*

When pressed for a description of Murakami's fiction, Japanese critic Yokō Kazuhiro calls it "ghost story" for lack of a better term (23). Not entirely accurate, this terminology is nevertheless useful as a starting point to approach the work of Japan's literary *enfant terrible*. In a ghost story, realism is punctured by the presence of the unexplained, and the familiar becomes haunted by a numinous quality. Murakami's narratives, as his many critics tell us, operate on precisely such an ambiguity. Matthew Stretcher, for example, describes Murakami's fiction as resting "upon the superimposition of a fantasy world onto a more mimetic one" (1998, 359). But rather than threatening the sense of the normal, which is characteristic of most (Western) ghost stories, in Murakami's writing, ghosts are, strangely enough, bedfellows of reality, and provide an expression for the normal. As Jay Rubin observes, "Murakami would rather . . . gently mystify than unnerve his reader" (1992, 494). In narratives such as "Binbō na obasan no hanashi" ("The Poor Aunt"),[9] *1973-nen no pinbōru* (1980; *Pinball 1973*, 1985) and *Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi* (1992; *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, 1999), the numinous and the familiar exist side by side, the former encouraging, even motivating, the survival of the latter. Matthew Stretcher resorts to the technicalities of "magic realism" to explain this interesting correlation in Murakami's work (1999).[10] For Stretcher, this mode of representation becomes Murakami's "means by which [he] shows his readers two 'worlds'—one conscious, the other unconscious—and permits seamless crossover between them by characters who have become only memories, and by memories that reemerge from the mind to become new characters again" (1999: 268).[11] But Stretcher's argument can be countered by a view Lucie Armitt proposes in her discussion of the correlation between magic realism and the Gothic. As she points out, "in magic realism ghosts are simply 'there', usually giving testimony to voices of those whom society has silenced or rendered 'disappeared', but rarely the primary focus of the mystery of a text. In the Gothic the phantom *is* that central source" (Armitt 315). Armitt views the ghost as a metaphor for what is otherwise unspeakable and ambiguous; based on this view, it is arguable that Murakami's writings do not deploy "ghosts" merely to titillate, but as pervasive textual presences which destabilise familiarity and vex

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[9] Anthologised *in Chūgoku yuki no surōbōto* (*Slow Boat to China*, 1983).

[10] Likewise Susan Napier in her essay "The Magic of Identity" (1995, esp. 471-3).

[11] This "seamless crossover" between worlds is most distinctively portrayed in *Sekai no owari to hadō-boirudo wandārando* (1985, *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, 1991)

interpretation. It is therefore more prudent to suggest that Murakami employs both magic realism and Gothic aesthetics in his narratives.

The most common descriptor of Murakami's work would be "postmodern fiction",[12] and hence, in order to appreciate Murakami's Gothic tendencies, one must understand the postmodern concerns which his writings espouse. But before proceeding to discuss his writing from such a framework, it is necessary that I first delineate the affinities between the Gothic and postmodernism. Allan Lloyd Smith's useful comparative reading highlights as some of their shared characteristics the indeterminacy of textuality, the crisis of epistemological and ontological premises, a suspicion of historical determinants that nevertheless invites a strong sense of nostalgia, a predilection towards the unspeakable and the excessive, and finally, a pervasive self-reflexivity that "undermine[s] the coherent reader-author relationship of the realist novel" (Smith 13). It would not be far-fetched to say that postmodern fiction is to a point an updated version of Gothic literature, for many of the preoccupations of the former hark back to those of the latter. In view of this, I argue that Murakami's work is decidedly Gothic because of its postmodern strains as well. In his narratives, the crisis of the subject is invariably related to an urban landscape that is constantly shifting, refusing him a concrete presence, and resulting in his continuous fragmentation and reconstruction. In such a space, the subject becomes an isolated figure who is desperate for human relationship, but is set back by his own indifference and tedium. Surrounded by material wealth and variegated pleasures, he becomes what Georg Simmel would call an *infelices possidente* (unhappy dweller), but without even realising that he is unhappy.[13]

To elicit the postmodern Gothic strains in Murakami's writings, I focus my discussion on *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* (1994/5; *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* 1998), a monumental work with a complex and dizzying plot.[14] As it is not possible to discuss this lengthy novel in its entirety, I shall confine my analysis to Tōru Okada's (the protagonist) search for his missing wife, and the ominous presence of the Gothic villain, Noboru Wataya, the hero's brother-in-law. *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* functions as a layered-narrative that is reminiscent of the Gothic strategy of framing stories within stories. The main frame is the story of Tōru Okada (the I-hero, or *boku*, of the tale), whose acutely unadventurous life suddenly turns topsy-turvy when his wife

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[12] See Fuminobu Murakami's (2002) essay, for example.

[13] See *Simmel on Culture* (259-62). This situation, according to Simmel, is the "typical problematic condition of [post]modern humanity: the feeling of being surrounded by an immense number of cultural elements, which are not meaningless, but not profoundly meaningful to the individual either" (73).

[14] At least one reader has noted the Gothic strains in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. See Toshifumi Miyawaki's introductory note to Sinda Gregory's and Larry McCaffery's interview with Murakami (113).

of six years, Kumiko, disappears one day. In trying to locate her, Tōru comes across an array of mysterious characters who each has his or her amazing, and often horrifying, stories to tell: Lieutenant Mamiya and his gruesome World War II experiences in the forgotten plain of Nomonhan (where he witnessed a fellow soldier flayed alive) and the Siberian Gulag;[15] Malta and Creta Kanō, shamanistic sisters, and of whom the latter is intimately connected to Noboru Wataya; Nutmeg and Cinnamon, a mother-and-son mystical-healer team, and the former of whom hides a dark history which involves intimate knowledge of a zoo massacre, the execution of Chinese students (both by Japanese soldiers allegedly during the occupation of Manchukuo towards the end of World War II), and the eerie murder of her husband. To reclaim his wife, Tōru must listen carefully to their tales (or, to word it differently, he must allow himself to be "haunted" by their ghosts), and to try and piece them together into a coherent jigsaw puzzle that will solve *his* mystery.   Indeed, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is a study of postmodern intertextuality *par excellence*. Such a pastiche-like technique suggests that all stories are ultimately related, despite their seeming disparity. But from the brief outline, such an intertextuality also suggests that stories which constitute the "big picture" often contain spectres of the unspeakable, which are then disregarded for the sake of foregrounding the straightforward, progressive version.   The "big picture" often chooses to emphasise the elevated stories, and elide the more haunting episodes that go into constructing it.   But for Murakami, it is precisely such terrifying, private moments that are privileged, reinforcing *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*'s proclivity towards the Gothic.

To begin my analysis of the novel, I want to refer to a characteristic of contemporary Gothic asserted by Valdine Clemens. According to Clemens, the Gothic helps to re-forge the lost "imaginative connection" between the past, present, and future, the dead and the living, in a society that is increasingly threatened by "cultural rootlessness" that is the result of "accelerating technological change". Such advancements produce a sense of dread about the future as well as a "temporal fragmentation" (Clemens 5).[16] If sociologists such as Ivy and Iida are correct in their observations, contemporary Japan seems to be contending with such "cultural rootlessness" in which "the world loses its shape, life loses its meaning, and the subject loses its identity" (Iida 2000, 237). In Murakami's narrative, this sense of meaninglessness and loss is exemplified by his *boku*, the jobless Tōru. When Tōru is first introduced, he is living a thoroughly mundane life that revolves around housekeeping and cooking pasta. It is during this interim period that

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[15] For English-language treatments of this episode, see Jay Rubin (1998) and Susan Fisher (2000). Fisher's essay is more substantial.

[16] Clemen's observation may equally describe the condition of Japanese modernity.

he questions the nature of his existence for the first time:

> We can invest enormous time and energy in serious efforts to know another person, but in the end, how close can we come to that person's essence? We convince ourselves that we know the other person well, but do we really know anything important about anyone? (Murakami 24) [17]

Tōru asks these questions in relation to his wife Kumiko, who has become increasingly estranged from him, but I read them as fundamentally compromising his self-knowledge as well, a point which he eventually acknowledges: "Would I ever see the rest? Or would I grow old and die without ever really knowing her? If that was all that lay in store for me, then what was the point of this married life I am leading? *What was the point of my life at all* if I was spending it in bed with an unknown companion?" (30, my emphasis). At the same time, he has been receiving obscene phone calls from a woman who seems to know who he is, but whom he cannot recognise despite her insistence that he knows her (5, 8). Here, the play between knowing and unknowing is initiated, and for the rest of the novel, Tōru (and the reader) will be "forced out of his initial state of inertia" and "vigorously [launched] into the quest" (Stretcher 1998, 359) to discover his wife and himself.

What Tōru eventually learns is that the disembodied voice on the phone is really Kumiko trying to reach out to him for help. "Spiritually" held captive against her will by her brother, Noboru Wataya, Kumiko cries out to her husband to rescue her from an internal void which is gradually engulfing her. I use the term "spiritual" because it is never clear what Noboru Wataya does to her. An inkling however is provided by Creta Kanō, another of Noboru's victims. She first met Noboru when a sex-worker, and during their encounter, he placed "something" inside her that caused her an intense pain that is strangely commingled with pleasure—a *destructive jouissance*. But from this comes a hollowing out experience that is akin to abortion:

> The pleasure and pain were one . . .. I had to swallow the two as a single entity. In the midst of the pain and pleasure, my flesh went on splitting in two. There was no way for me to prevent it from happening. Then something very weird occurred. From between the two split halves of my physical self came crawling a thing that I had never seen or touched before. How large it was I could not tell, but it was wet and slippery as a newborn baby. I hadn't the slightest idea

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[17] All references to *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* are to the Harvill edition (1998), trans. Jay Rubin.

what it was. It had always been inside me, and yet it was something of which I had no knowledge. This man had drawn it out of me. (Murakami 301)

Metaphorically, I read this "thing" that crawls out of Creta as her "future". Always inside her—a part of her—she does not realise its presence until it is drawn out of her, that is, until she loses it. What Noboru has removed from Creta's person is her self that is not-yet, but would now never be, unless the process is reversed and this "future self" is restored to her. Creta manages to "save" herself (unlike Kumiko's older sister, Noboru's first victim) through a sexual relation with Tōru which occurs in his dreamscape, which, as Stretcher sees it, inverts Creta's victimised position into an active one (Stretcher 1999, 291). Creta's salvation provides Tōru with "the secret to reversing the effects of Noboru's mutilation" (291), and that is to play the sexually passive role in order for Noboru's victim to gain ascendance, and thus restore her inner disequilibrium. This is especially crucial in the case of Kumiko, for to rescue her is Tōru's only way of ultimately discovering himself: "I had to get Kumiko back. With my own hands, I had to pull her back into this world. Because if I didn't, that would be the end of me. This person, this self that I thought of as 'me', would be lost" (Murakami 338).

What Stretcher does not discuss, however, is Noboru's (and by extension, Tōru's) symbolic qualities that enable him to perform his "destructive" acts. Characteristic of the Gothic villain, Noboru is also a kind of anti-hero whose function remains ambiguous in the narrative. On the one hand, he can be read as a postmodern villain, an embodiment of the system known as late-capitalism, an individual who has hyper-identified with the simulacral space of the postmodern urban landscape. Young, intelligent, famous, and under constant and excessive media focus, Noboru registers more as a commanding screen image than a real person. As Tōru aptly comments, "On the television screen, he looked far more intelligent and reliable than the real Noboru Wataya . . .. In the medium of television, Noboru Wataya had found the place where he belonged. The mass media welcomed him with open arms, and he welcomed them with equal enthusiasm" (75). He carries within him a "false depth" (Deleuze 55) which he tries to implant into his victims by emptying them of *their* subjectivity (that is, by robbing them of a future-self). His power is profound, for what he destroys is the victims' potential for a meaningful future, turning them into zombie-like creatures whose lives are now pointless because they have been unmistakably defiled (Murakami 304).

As a hyperreal configuration (a false depth) whose existence is premised on representation, Noboru fulfils Deleuze's view of someone who is manipulative but who is ultimately inert (metonymically suggested by his impotence, as Creta Kanō discovers [Murakami 300]). Apart from reducing

his victim's will to power by making void her interiority, he also asserts his power *via* his *mediated*, or televised, self. For despite his hyperreality, Noboru's power is genuine enough to cause actual damage: he is able to use his mediated self to victimise "real" individuals (Murakami 579). Underneath his apparent calm is "tumult, restlessness and passion" (Deleuze 42) that have no channel to manifest, leading to a discovery that "within [himself are] the limits of the organised" and directly, to a discovery of his "monstrosity" (42). This is precisely why Tōru is such a threat to Noboru: for while the latter represents illusion, Tōru, with all his ennui and lack of ambition is at least "reality".

On the other hand however, it is also possible to read Noboru as a healer, a kind of ultimate therapist who is able to assist the patient in confronting what Lacanian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek would term the void of the real. As Žižek explains:

> [What we experience as] reality is not the "thing itself", it is always-already symbolised, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanisms—and the problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully "covering" the real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt. This real (the part of reality that remains non-symbolized) returns in the guise of spectral apparitions. Consequently, "spectre" is not to be confused with "symbolic fiction", with the fact that reality itself has the structure of a fiction in that it is symbolically (or, as some sociologists put it, "socially") constructed; the notions of spectre and (symbolic) fiction are codependent in their very incompatibility (they are "complementary" in the quantum-mechanical sense). To put it simply, reality is never directly "itself", it presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolization, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality. (1994a, 21)

Žižek differentiates between reality (which can be symbolised) and the real (the surplus of the symbolic, that which cannot be represented by a signifier), and argues that the latter, when affected, reveals the fantasy (or fiction) of the former. The real, in other words, exposes the void that is inherent in any symbolic systems, and directly discloses the constructed-ness, or fabrication, of such systems. As such, there is no reality (including subjectivity) but the real—the realisation of our own emptiness and our self as fundamentally a fantastic construction. Noboru's ability to empty his victims/patients of their future can be understood as connecting them with the real, uncovering for

them in the process the pointlessness of their desires and existential pursuits. Rather than a villain whose intent is to "devoid" interiority, Noboru, in this alternative reading, is a healer who shows his patients the unrealiasable spectre of the future which nevertheless traps them within varieties of desire. His patients however, unable to relinquish their own illusive desires, refuse to accept their "real" fate in the void.

This contradictory reading of Noboru also implicates an appreciation of Tōru, thus intensifying the ambivalence and dissonance of Murakami's narrative. For Tōru to "break the spell", he must enter Noboru's "fairy tale" world (580) *via* a different dreamscape. Here, Tōru can defeat his nemesis who remains indefeasible in hyperreality because he is always protected behind mediated screens. In a dream, armed with a baseball bat, Tōru charges at Noboru and fatally bludgeons him; in the real world, Noboru suddenly collapses and goes into a coma (598). This unconventional method of circumventing threat can only occur in the magic-realist realm of Murakami, where what transpires in a dream equally affects reality. Tōru has succeeded in halting Noboru's plan to "bring out something that the great mass of people keep hidden in the darkness of their unconscious" for his political ends, a strategy that "has a direct connection with the darkest depths of history, because its final effect is to destroy and obliterate people on a massive scale" (578). This "plan" is never apparent in the novel (in this regard, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* is a metaphysical detective fiction as well), but Mamiya's war stories are certainly implicated, which is why Tōru must listen to them in order to understand the terror he is facing. But, as noted, if Noboru's villainy is a contentious point, then Tōru heroism is also problematic. For if Noboru is considered a healer who reclaims the void, then Tōru is the actual preserver of fantasies, jealous of his enemy who can reach the subjective core of his patients to disclose their essential nothingness, and desirous of sustaining a constructed, symbolic reality. Read in this way, Tōru's ennui is merely a guise for what Žižek designates an "obsessional neurotic" who:

> On the "constituted", imaginary, phenomenal level he is of course caught in the masochistic logic of his compulsive acts, he is humiliating himself, preventing his success, organizing his failure, and so on; but the crucial question is again how to locate the vicious, superego gaze for which he is humiliating himself, for which this obsessional organizing of failure procures pleasure . . . the hysterical neurotic is experiencing himself as somebody who is enacting a role *for the other*, his imaginary identification is his "being-for-the-other". (1994b, 106)

In other words, Tōru's apathy is really a masochistic performance of self-defeat, an act from which he derives a perverse pleasure playing a role for the other who, in this case, is his wife. By performing duties that traditionally belong to the Japanese wife, Tōru is using his joblessness, to justify his laziness, believing that this is a sacrifice of his masculinity ("his imaginary identification").[18] Indeed, it is a pleasure sustained by the logic of consumerism and materialism, a logic that Noboru, through his therapeutic powers, tries to break in his patients. If this is the case, Tōru's rescue mission would take on a sinister dimension. He is not saving Kumiko from the evil that Noboru has committed upon her, but himself and his apathetic existence from dismantling, which would invariably force him to confront his own void in the real. Tōru, in this sense, is the "real" villain of the novel. His position as protagonist is deeply ironic, and if my reading is tenable, certainly unveils a disturbing dissonance in a Gothic text where no one can be taken for granted.

The contradictory reading of the alleged hero and villain directly brings me back to the dilemma of the "self" in postmodern Japanese literature. In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the traditional binarism that rigidly dichotomises self from other is destabilised to reveal the porous, fantastic configuration of subjectivity. Good and evil lose their meaning when villains and heroes switch places, or merge into each other. The borders that distinguish one identity from another are transgressed and altogether dissolved, leaving in their stead a plurality of subjective realities, some of which contradict one another. If *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* is a ghost story, it is a ghost story that demonstrates how signifiers are always haunted by, and dependent on, their binary other, sometimes to the extent of collapsing into each other. Noboru and Tōru may exemplify two distinctive characters, but they are also each other's Gothic double. As Creta astutely suggests:

> "Noboru Wataya is a person who belongs to a world that is the exact opposite of yours," said Creta Kanō. Then she seemed to be searching for words she needed to continue. "In a world where you are losing everything, Mr Okada, Noboru Wataya is gaining everything. In a world where you are rejected, he is accepted. And the opposite is just as true. Which is why he hates you so intensely". (312)

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[18] Strangely and ironically enough, Tōru too often desires to merge with the void of the real, and to escape from the consumerist, hyperrealistic urbanised existence. Throughout the novel, there are many occasions where he would climb down a dark, empty well and spend time there indulging in its quietness. But these "escapes" are always temporary, implying a desire that does not translate into total embracement.

But more than just serving as each other's foils, they also mirror one another, positioning the self/other as equally heroic/villainous. As such, the "I" of this novel, as my reading reveals, inheres a private, hidden and contradictory self that only careful textual extrapolation can reveal. Murakami's novel can be construed as a parody of the "I-novel", which implicates the verifiability of the narrative even on the level of the textual itself. It is a text mixed up with, or haunted, by its own deconstructive spectre, directly creating a dissonance characteristic of the Gothic. This profoundly nihilistic reading of a *bildungsroman* with an otherwise "happy ending" certainly raises the question of the self-reflexivity and a self-parodic quality characteristic of postmodern writing.

Spectral Reparation: Banana Yoshimoto's "Love Songs"

If Murakami's ghost story demonstrates that the self is a slippery signifier whose core is fundamentally devoid of fixed meanings, Banana Yoshimoto's (b. 1964) ghost stories, on the other hand, rescues the signifier of self from emptying. The "other", rather than a presence which threatens to dissolve the "I", surfaces to redeem the "I" that has become inundated by the existential angst of living in a (postmodern) world devoid of constants and truths. Yoshimoto's Gothic is also unique in that the element of shock in her narratives is often muted despite the gravity of her themes, which usually revolve around death.[19] As Ann Sherif notes, Yoshimoto's "writings do not harbour the darkness of much other modern Japanese fiction because her narrative concerns the processes of grieving and healing and exhibits a steadfast belief in the possibility of reintegration into society, even after extreme alienation or trauma" (279). Difficult circumstances are not directly encountered by the protagonist (almost always a first person narrator), but merely reported to them, and this substantially subdues the terror which is symptomatic of most Gothic writings. As such, Yoshimoto's stories are closer in spirit to Asian Gothic, in which a deep respect for the supernatural for its healing and reconstituting powers are admitted.

     In Yoshimoto's fictive world, the very subjects "that are sensationalised or made strange by her literary contemporaries" (Sherif 294) are domesticated to encourage a sympathetic engagement with, and appreciation for, them. This strategy also functions as an indirect criticism of the Japanese patriarchal system that structures and strictures individuals (men and women) into certain rigid classifications. As critics have noted, the

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[19] In fact, one Japanese critic has noted that the primary theme in Yoshimoto's stories is death (Koyata Washida, "*Yoshimoto Banana no shudai wa shi*", or "Death is Yoshimoto Banana's main theme").

father-figure in her stories is either absent or rendered inconsequential, although the possibility of his violent return is always looming (Treat 289).[20] My discussion of Yoshimoto will focus on the short story, "Love Songs", which gathers together some of her central themes and motifs. In this bittersweet ghost story, the narrator, Fumi, is haunted by the ghost of Haru, a woman whom she once rivalled in a love triangle. Haru's ghost, wanting a reunion with Fumi, gently calls to her with a "faint song more sensual than an angel's" (Yoshimoto 2000, 71). Upon a suggestion by her new boyfriend Mizuo, Fumi visits a midget medium, Tanaka, who can put her in contact with Haru. A reconciliation is subsequently reached, and Fumi, who has been suffering from depression and suicidal tendencies hitherto, finds a new lease on life.

When the narrative introduces Fumi, she is heavily inebriated and deeply fatalistic. Her feeling of anomy recalls the *sono nani mo nasa* sensation (tedium of life)[21] that is characteristic of Murakami's work as well, and is possibly a lingering effect from her involvement in the "bizarre triangular relationship" (71). For it soon becomes apparent that Fumi has never really forgotten Haru. Although recollection of this "other woman" situates her as "nasty" (71), there is also a hint of regretful nostalgia (73). While challenging Haru for the attention of their lover, Fumi also developed a kind of homoerotic bond with her rival which unconsciously bolstered their competition (81). As Fumi would later confess to the medium, "'It seems we may really have liked each other. In fact we might have had a little lesbian dynamic going on'" (91). Fumi's intoxicated listlessness may be symptomatic of melancholia, a performative of identification (in the Freudian sense) with the dead woman who, in life, was also an alcoholic who drank herself to death.[22] But unlike the Freudian model in which the haunted self becomes increasingly ruptured and in the end, self-destructs, in "Love Songs", melancholia is given a redemptive twist when the "other" who is now ingested within seeks a return from without to rescue the melancholic subject from a slow death. Haru actively seeks reunion with Fumi so that the latter can finally "let go" and move on, and as such, represents an aspect of Asian belief with regards to the netherworld. As Iwasaka and Toelken note in their study of Japanese rituals, the "dead do not rest: they are busy helping the family" (36), or in the case of "Love Song", a loved one. Fumi's reparation becomes a catalyst for her emotional renewal (or transformation), represented by her change of heart towards Mizuo. Her initial tentative feelings for Mizuo (possibly related to her inability to "let go" a lost love,

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[20] Examples include "Love Songs" (in *Shirakawa Yofune*, 1989; translated as *Asleep*, 2000) and *Kitchin* (1988; *Kitchen*, 1994).
[21] This is Yoshimoto's phrase (1989, 236).
[22] See Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1957).

that is, Haru) is now replaced by a genuine affection (Yoshimoto 2000, 102), and in place of emptiness and apathy (69) is a "feeling of security, that sweetness, that pain, that gentleness" (102). Haru's song continues to hover, but as a dying, if still pleasant, cadence—one which Fumi can now afford to "stop wanting to remember" and will, in time, "forget" (103).

The story's most Gothic episode occurs when Fumi eventually meets Haru during a séance, but rather than capitalising on the possibility of the horror of such a moment, Yoshimoto chooses instead to emphasise the healing and reconciliation afforded by this occasion. The horror is offset mainly by Haru's playfulness. Fumi is warned by Tanaka, prior to her excursion into the netherworld, that she must not step beyond the threshold of the room in which the séance is performed, even if Haru's ghost invites her to do so. His final words are sinister: "And there have been plenty of people like that—people who leave the room and then realise that they can't get back. A few of them never returned. So you've got to be careful, see?" (92). Later, during the meeting, Haru at one point goes and opens the door, and Fumi construes this as a possible "invitation". But Haru, as though reading her mind, immediately dispels Fumi's fears by telling her that she merely wants to make an allegorical point (that she could "invite" Fumi if she would) (95). In this way, the potential threat of the other is deflected back to Fumi's self, and turns out to be a harmless display of calculated mischief on Haru's part.

Despite this supernatural encounter, one wonders, along with Fumi, whether or not her experience is authentic. Emerging from the séance, the still-sceptical Fumi asks Tanaka if it was all merely a "trick" (97). She wonders if her powerful longing for Haru may not have catalysed a will-to-believe that her meeting with her former rival is real, cleverly facilitated further by Tanaka (102). Yet, in the end, Fumi realises that what is important is not so much the authenticity of her encounter, but what has resulted from it. As she quietly ponders, "Greater than all the mysteries, a calm even breeze led through me, cleansing me" (102). And perhaps, this is Yoshimoto's point as well: in a postmodern cultural space overwhelmed by meaningless, self-referential signs which render time static and the self vacuous, "Love Songs" provides a glimpse of hope engendered through reconciliation with the past so that the present self may discover a possible future. In this way, the "nostalgic paradigm" (Treat 297) departs significantly from that of an earlier narrative, *Tsugumi* (1989; *Goodbye Tsugumi*, 2002), which William Treat reads as casting "the 'present' as desirous from the future, just as the past is desirous from the present" (297). If this earlier novel implies a necessity for adherence to a particular temporality for purposes of narcissistic self-preservation (such as ensuring eternal youth through early death), "Love Songs" seems to suggest that the self is forged through an acknowledgement of, and reconciliation with, other

"selves" fragmented or separated by different temporalities. "Haunting" in this story is a metaphor for an unresolved past, which leads to a vexation of the self's present and future. For Fumi to heal and move on, she must revisit her past.

Yoshimoto's invocation of the numinous for redemptive purposes accords well with Lim's concept of "noncontemporaneity". The past, rather than an inert entity (it is not Fumi who initiates this reparative reunion, but Haru from beyond), breaks through temporal borders (nonsynchronous) in order to directly affect the present in order to deliver a future. As Clive Bloom asserts, "ghosts tell us of stability and permanence. In a world of rapid change they speak of the unchanging and the traditional: the ghost is innately conservative" (163). Bloom's argument may not sit well with a certain postmodern trend that views history as suspiciously distorting, but when read in light of Lim's concept, the interconnectivity of temporalities is a deeply postmodern characteristic (see Hutcheon's quotes earlier in the essay). The so-called unchanging traditions may be imagined, or fantasised, socio-ideological enterprises that serve to cohere and unify people, but their consequences and effects are nevertheless "real" and directly intrude, for good or bad, into peoples' lives.

Conclusion

Spectres do several things in postmodern Gothic writings: they transgress borders (temporal, spatial), open up hidden recesses within the self to reveal the self's emptiness, disrupt the linearity of history, refuse the self an uncritical identification within socio-ideological apparatuses, and finally, bring about reparation and reconciliation. Harbouring between the world of the living and the space of the dead, ghosts are indeed liminal configurations. Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* wonderfully exploits this liminal identity of the ghost by casting it as equally villainous and heroic. Noboru and Tōru, each other's double, are also each other's ghost: as they haunt each other, they also haunt the text's meaning and interpretation, refusing its denouement a clear closure. Tōru may be the narrative's protagonist, but in defeating Noboru, does he also not deepen the trauma of the postmodern self—the self that is premised on fantasy and irreality? Yoshimoto's story capitalises on the ghost's liminality in a different way. Grafting the past onto the present to reveal the latter's dependence on the former, Yoshimoto chooses to show a redemptive side of history, and that despite posmodernism's healthy suspicion of historical claims, it should nevertheless also acknowledge some of the positive, if painful lessons the past can teach us and the heritages it has left behind.

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