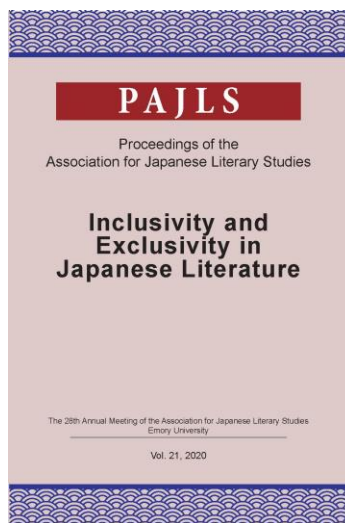


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MURAKAMI HARUKI ON A LITTLE PLANET

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In the early 1980s, after having visited the famed Greek archeological site of the Mycenaean civilization southwest of Athens, Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (1949–) wrote a two-page essay titled “Mikēne no shōwakusei hoteru” ミケーネの小惑星ホテル (The small planet hotel in Mycenae).² As its title indicates, the essay recounts his stay in a local hotel and his interaction with the hotel owner, whom he finds unreservedly happy. Responding to one of the writer’s remarks, the man instantaneously affirms love of life, which prompts Murakami to ask himself a question: How many people in Japan would similarly express life’s joy without a moment’s reservation? This question, posed at the essay’s very end, turns out more complex and profound than it might appear. The essay is not simply illustrative of Murakami’s early wanderlust. Rather, it is pivotal in understanding his oeuvre. Although he is usually not well known to be highly interested in the general public’s welfare on a basic level of emotional fulfillment, the short essay markedly reveals his underlying, yet persistent concern for humanity.

Murakami has often traveled outside of Japan, starting just a few years after he began to write professionally in 1979. His frequent trips to foreign locations resulted in many travel journals and essays, and he incorporated scenes of visits abroad into segments of his novels, such as *Supūtoniku no koibito* スプートニクの恋人 (*Sputnik Sweetheart*, 1999) and *Shikisai wo motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to, kare no junrei no toshi* 色彩を持たない多崎つくると、彼の巡礼の年 (*Colorless Tazaki Tsukuru and His Years of Pilgrimage*, 2013). There are at least three reasons for his international travel. First, highly interested in foreign cultures, he often makes trips abroad for personal pleasure, including participation in athletic competitions like marathons and triathlons. The list of countries discussed in his travel journals alone is quite extensive, including Australia, Austria, Cambodia, China, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Laos, Mexico, Mongolia, Scotland, Turkey, and the United States. In sharp

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This article expands on what I wrote in the afterword to my recent book, *Haruki Murakami and His Early Work: The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Running Artist* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

² The essay is included in *Murakami Asahi-dō* 村上朝日堂 (Tokyo: Wakabayashi Shuppan Kikaku 若林出版企画, 1984), 146–147.

contrast to this, he has commented on his domestic trips far less often. Second, as his reputation has grown internationally, he has often been invited to foreign locations for official functions, such as delivering public speeches, accepting literary awards, and staying at academic institutions as a visiting writer. A variation in this category was his three-week stay in Australia during the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000 to report on the sports event for a publisher. Third and most importantly for his creativity, he intentionally makes an international trip after an uninterrupted period of intense writing. Like his undertakings of different kinds of writing such as translations and short stories, he strategically utilizes trips to foreign lands and participation in athletic events to keep his mind from getting exhausted with writing a full-fledged novel continuously for months.

In the 1980s, before he established a stable reputation with the commercial success of *Noruwē no mori* ノルウエーの森 [*Norwegian Wood*] (1987), Murakami had another reason to often go outside Japan for an extended period of time. Considered a new, promising writer who nevertheless catered to the popular taste and lifestyle of contemporary young people, he often invited unfavorable criticism of frivolity and irrelevance at home. The fact that he kept a certain distance from the literary establishment in Tokyo contributed to the uncomfortable situation.

One of the foreign countries that Murakami visited most frequently in the eighties was Greece. For instance, being an avid runner, he ran the original full Marathon route in the midsummer of 1983. He and his wife once stayed on the small island of Spetses for a few months past the summer peak season in 1986. He also made a pilgrimage to isolated Greek orthodox monasteries on the peninsula of Athos in 1988. It is easily inferable, then, that Greece became his favorite place to visit after his first trip there in the early 1980s, and that journey included a night stay in Mycenae. Highly interested in world history since his high school days, he stopped by the ancient ruins related to Agamemnon as part of his Greek tour with his wife, and wrote the short essay as a result.

In the essay, however, he does not comment on the Mycenaean ruins, apart from the cursory remark that tourists usually choose not to stay in the nearby village because Mycenae is located just a few hours driving distance from Athens. Instead, he writes about the hotel they stayed in, the family that managed the modest establishment, and how dark and deserted the small village became in the evening after tourists were gone. As he indicates in the Japanese title (小惑星), the name of the hotel is *La Petite Planète* in French. Murakami does not mention the name of the family business owner, only referring to him as パイロット氏 or Mr. Pilot. According to the essay's brief biographical account, Mr. Pilot joined the

Greek Air Force as a young man. But, disgusted with the Cyprus conflicts, he left the military, came back to his native village, and established the village's best overnight accommodations.

The essay does not tell us, however, how this Greek man founded the hotel that sits two kilometers away from the ruins. According to one of his daughters, the hotel's current manager, he struggled to find employment in Greece after his discharge from the air force. In search of a job, he went to Paris and landed a menial position in a hotel. The quality of his work and the level of his education soon attracted the hotel owner's attention, and she eventually entrusted him with the management of branch properties in the same hotel chain. This is how he learned the hotel business. As a token of her appreciation for his commitment, the owner gave him a copy of the book *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*, 1943) one day. Over the course of several years, while he worked for her hotel chain most of the year, Mr. Pilot went back to his native village to build his own hotel in the summer. In the end, he named his completed hotel *La Petite Planète* after Saint-Exupéry's story.

By the time Murakami came to visit Mycenae, the hotel was a well-established family business that catered to tourists, and the former military man was married with two small daughters. Total strangers as they were, he and Murakami somehow struck up a mutual liking for each other far beyond the expected courtesy between hotel proprietor and guest. With enthusiasm, the hotel owner served his visitors from Asia the sea fish he had caught that morning, and the writer quickly nicknamed him Zorba. In the total darkness that surrounded them at night because the hotel was located away from the edge of the village, they greatly enjoyed talking to each other, most probably in English. It is in this context that Murakami as the narrator of the essay finds "Mr. Pilot" so exuberantly joyous with life. In response to the narrator's comment, "幸せそうですね (You look happy)," he immediately answers, "もちろん...とてもとても幸せだよ (Of course...I'm very, very happy)."

Mr. Pilot's simple, unhesitant, straightforward reply induces Murakami to wonder how many people in Japan would respond in the same manner if they are asked about the emotional fulfillment of their lives. This question, placed at the very end of the short essay, is apparently meant to signal to the reader a message more complex than it might seem at first glance. First, Murakami's question is obviously rhetorical. Very few people would give a definite, positive answer. More importantly, in spite of its form as an internal monologue, the question is meant for the readers of the essay. Readers are confronted with the question on a personal level that requires them to examine, if only momentarily, the

relevance of what constitutes living to their heart's fullest level of contentment. Murakami suggests that even at that time, when the nation's economy was thriving and expanding at an unprecedented rate, the vast majority of people in Japan would not be able to give a positive answer without somewhat qualifying their assessment of feelings or ideas of happiness.

Second, although the question refers to the situation in Japan, its scope easily transcends national confines and extends to many other societies in the world. The essay was originally published as a column serialized in a periodical and was later included in a book with the other essays from the same series in 1984. Although the essay is set in Greece, it is unlikely that Murakami had international readers in mind. The book was published purely for the Japanese readership without any plans for translation. As such, he includes details to help make it accessible to Japanese readers by approximating the Greek village's small size to that of a particular street in Tokyo. Even so, the essay inquires into the essence of human life on a daily, individual basis that is not tied to any sociocultural circumstances or a given historical frame. Thus, in a broader context, the question of happiness that the essay addresses pertains to people all over the world.

Third, the essay places the issue of who truly feels happy in a critical perspective of exclusivity. Generally speaking, people should ideally have unadulterated happiness with their life while a few unfortunate ones hope to join the majority. In reality, however, with the proportion reversed between the two groups, few people wholeheartedly embrace what life offers, whereas the rest of the population chronically feel deprived of genuine joy. Most people are likely complacent with the status quo, but this does not necessarily mean that they live their life fulfilled, as they vaguely feel unsatisfied and yet do not quite understand what might be missing to make it whole. At the same time, an increasing number of people in today's world raise voices of discontent, perceiving themselves to be disadvantaged for various reasons related to the situation in which they are placed. By asking his rhetorical question, Murakami implies that the overall state of this exclusion from a supposed norm of happiness except for a few rare cases is fundamentally amiss and detrimental to what human life should be.

It ought to be noted here that he does not consider it necessary to turn to an idyllic way of rural life in order to attain a full sense of happiness. After all, not everyone aspires to or is able to live in the countryside. Murakami himself has been accustomed to amenities of the city since birth. He has always written fiction about characters living in metropolitan areas, and he would not opt to spend a significant part of his life in a rural

setting. “Mr. Pilot,” for his part, is not immune from the concerns of modern life. For example, as a tiny piece of the capitalist system, his service-oriented business closely tied to the tourist industry can easily get affected by the fluctuations of the world’s economy and political turbulences. Thus, Murakami does not present a purely agrarian society as a utopia. While offering no new wisdom, he implicitly asserts that what makes us truly happy, at least in one basic form, involves both satisfaction with what one has, no matter how modest or simple it might be, and a strong sense of connectedness with loved ones that is not damaged or threatened by external forces.

This idea of human life as it should be appears in one form or another in his other writings. For instance, in his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize in 2009, against the backdrop of the Palestinian/Israeli conflicts, he metaphorically yet clearly argued against the oppression of a vulnerable group by a dominant one. In the acceptance speech for the 2011 Catalunya Prize, he commented on the aftermath of the great earthquake that had struck Japan a few months earlier. Reflecting on the disasters of nuclear reactor meltdowns that resulted in lives lost and the forced evacuation of all the people from the affected areas, he chastised the Japanese, including himself, for their pursuit of convenience in accepting nuclear power as a safe and inexpensive source of energy. In his fiction, characters tend not to be happy with their own lives, especially those who have wealth, power, and abilities for worldly success in efficiency-focused society, yet remain isolated from others. A typical example, among others, is Menshiki in his latest novel, *Kishidanchō goroshi* 騎士団長殺し (*Killing Commendatore*, 2017). On the other hand, his stories after 1990 often show protagonists, isolated and with limited means, struggling for a reunion with their soul mates or spouses through which they hope to bring about healing to their already damaged selves. That is the case with four of his major novels, including *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), *1Q84* (2009, 2010), and *Killing Commendatore*.

While Murakami’s fiction in general thematically deals with emergent anxieties and the unsteady basis of individual existence in postindustrial society, the concern about human happiness he expressed at an early stage of his writing career continues to inform his critical stance against sociopolitical realities. His one-time chance encounter with a hotel owner in a remote corner of Greece turns out to be significant in the sense that it succinctly reveals part of Murakami’s philosophy of life. Metaphorically, in the course of life’s journey through the world in search of a meaning of

true happiness, his visit to Mycenae was a brief landing on a small planet that nevertheless gave him an occasion for musing and reflection with a lasting effect.