

On Endings「終結について」

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In January of 1974, at the age of 25, I sat down in a small room in Fushimi Momoyama in Kyoto and began to teach myself to read Japanese. My text was the 天声人語 (Vox Populi, Vox Dei) essay from that day's Asahi Newspaper (朝日新聞). Although it was very short, it took me all morning to figure out. Still, I enjoyed it. That then became my daily ritual: wake up, go out and buy a newspaper, have a cup of coffee, read 天声人語. All the rest of the paper went to waste except for the sports section (I painstakingly deciphered the baseball box scores, and the top sumo wrestlers' names, a pleasant way to pick up difficult kanji). But I was satisfied. After all, I was reading the same essay as millions of Japanese, and at the same time. I was plugged in!

Since each 天声人語 was taking several hours to read, I decided I might as well try translating them as I went along. This helped me push my reading ability forward, and gave me something that I could show to others (and myself) to prove that I was actually working. Soon, I had a nice fat folder full of translated 天声人語 essays on a wide range of topics, from the changing seasons, to the ability of the Japanese loach (どじょう) to predict earthquakes, to the sudden and critical shortage of toilet paper, an unforeseen result of the Oil Shock. I showed this folder to an American friend whose opinions I respected, hoping that he would find the essays as interesting as I did, but he was less than impressed. "What are they trying to say?" he grouched. "I mean, they don't seem to lead anywhere. They don't even have proper endings!"

His criticism caught me by surprise. It had never occurred to me as I went through my morning routine that the essays I was struggling through were lacking in any way – to the contrary, I found most of them interesting, and a few quite beautiful. Was the problem my translations? Perhaps. But what had triggered my friend's sour dismissal was not so much their style as their structure: for him, essays were supposed to develop their argument in a sequence of rationally ordered steps, and end in a conclusive way. These essays, by contrast, were too impressionistic, their endings too ambiguous to satisfy his desire for "completion." I had had no such problem. For one thing, I was

reading them in Japanese, not English; for another, his train of thought ran along a straighter and more logical track than mine. Looking back, it's fortunate he went into the corporate world and I into literature, and not the other way around.

The expectation that narratives, including essays, should conclude in clear, unambiguous ways is not just personal, of course; it is also cultural and linguistic. Many critics have noted that Japanese essays, novels and short stories tend to lack the “closure” – 終結性 in Japanese – Western readers supposedly require. Indeed, when I started teaching thirty years ago, students often complained that, while Japanese novels and stories in translation were interesting to read, they found the endings unsatisfying. This seemed to be the case not only for works connected to the I-Novel 私小説 tradition – what Akutagawa Ryunosuke called “plot-less stories” (「話」らしい話) in his essay “Literary, All Too Literary” 「文芸的な、余りに文芸的な」, a genre even today's younger Japanese readers find somewhat baffling – but also for works by “plot-centered” modern (近代) writers ranging from Natsume Soseki to Mishima Yukio. Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, the most skillful modern (近代) writer when it comes to plot, ends his longest novel, *The Makioka Sisters* (細雪), with Yukiko's diarrhea on the train to Tokyo – try analyzing *that* with a bunch of undergraduates!

These days, however, North American readers have less of a problem with narratives that fail to follow the classical Aristotelian pattern. I was reminded of this recently when teaching Kawabata Yasunari's novel *Snow Country* (雪国) to a class of Canadian students. As is widely known, Kawabata published *Snow Country* in numerous versions, lengthening it over the years from a short story to a novella to a short novel to the “final” and longest version, still only 175 pages in English translation. Curious as to what their reaction would be, I gave my class Xeroxed copies of the text in four stages over four weeks. Thus we were able to discuss *Snow Country's* various incarnations in sequence, asking, among other questions, “Where might have been the best place to end the narrative?” I had thought the universal choice would be the fire scene that ends Kawabata's last and longest version, in which many of the opposing forces in the novel – fire and snow, Komako and Yoko, Shimamura and the Milky Way (天の川), etc. – come crashing together in highly “conclusive” fashion. Yet more of my students preferred the “short novel” incarnation, which ends shortly after the “good girl, good woman” (いい子、いい女) scene, when a bubbling

teakettle leads Shimamura to imagine the sound of the wind in the pines, then picture Komako's feet tripping in his direction. In other words, they favoured leaving out the somewhat melodramatic ending altogether, even though omitting it meant "closing" the novel in a far less definitive way.

I thought back to our class discussion on *Snow Country* when I heard the rumour, still unsubstantiated at the time of this writing, that Murakami Haruki is in the process of preparing a sequel to add to his most recent novel, *IQ84*, which appeared as a completed work in the spring of 2009. I had read *IQ84* as soon as it came out (my reading ability having improved since my 天声人語 period) and had assumed that the novel was over when the second volume ended, with the apparent death of one hero, Aomame, and the liberation of the other, Tengo, from his debilitating obsession with his mother's desertion and his father's coldness. I admit that this ending surprised me – I had expected to find out the circumstances behind the mysterious disappearances of Tengo's married girlfriend and his editor, for example, and gain a glimpse of what was going on behind the walls of the Sakigake commune. Yet never did it cross my mind that another volume might be in the works. As far as I was concerned, *IQ84* had ended. True, there were some lingering questions, but I had already answered those on my own using my imagination and the hints provided by Murakami's earlier writing.

It is not my intention to try and guess why Murakami may have chosen to publish his latest novel(s) in this fashion – I am sure he will have plenty to say on the matter if and when the sequel comes out. Rather, I am interested in this pattern – rare in "serious" writing, though quite common in science fiction – from a reader's point of view. In my case, "completing" *IQ84* to my satisfaction required me to do some detective work. (Had I known a sequel was forthcoming, of course, I would have simply sat back and let Haruki do the work for me.) In retrospect, I can see that I used two sets of "clues" in this process. One set was "intratextual" – clues that could be gleaned from a close reading of the novel – while the other was "extratextual"; in other words, clues taken from Murakami's work to date, especially novels like *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*. To give but one example, being a romantic at heart, I was particularly concerned to know if Tengo and Aomame would eventually consummate their love. To fill in this blank, my mind followed a series of logical steps, based on the clues I had to work with:

- 1) First, I assumed the gun in Aomame's mouth went off.
- 2) It therefore followed that whatever future she and Tengo might share would be based on his relationship with her "daughter," the body he saw (imagined?) in the cocoon in his father's room.
- 3) I also assumed that the Fukaeri that Tengo knows is not the "real" Fukaeri, but Fukaeri's "daughter" (my main clue here was her lack of pubic hair) .
- 4) Since the "daughter" Fukaeri learned so much in the home of Professor Ebisuno, and then with Tengo, I assumed that the "daughter" Aomame would also be teachable.
- 5) Thus, so my reasoning went, if and when Tengo found her he would be able to invest the "new Aomame" with a new soul or *kokoro*, purified of the orgies and murders of her "mother's" past. (This is much like what we see at the end of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, where "boku" pledges to spend all eternity restoring the *kokoro* of his love, the town's Librarian.)
- 6) The new Aomame, however, would have something to give back, namely the kind of supernatural power that Fukaeri possesses. She and Tengo (and possibly Fukaeri) would thus form a team that could save the world from the "dark forces" threatening it.

I offer this "analysis," much of which took place quite unconsciously, not because I think it correctly predicts how the story might develop (other readers, for example, have guessed that Aomame's story may actually be Tengo's novel, a plausible reading that never entered my mind) , but rather because it shows how, given the right sort of enticement, an audience instinctively moves to "close" an aspect of a novel or a film that matters to them. This is a highly subjective process, not to mention a great deal of fun. In the original cut of the cinematic classic *Bladerunner*, to take a particularly famous case, hints are left near the end that not only Harrison Ford's lover but Ford himself may in fact be a replicant, a discovery which challenges the audience to look back on the rest of the film in a new way. In the case of Japanese literature, Tanizaki in particular loved to leave clues strewn along the way that his readers could pick up later; in *The Key* [鍵], for instance, he suggests very late in the game that a third party may have been privy to the two diaries all along, a crucial bit of information that forces the reader to rethink the whole novel.

However other readers may have chosen to creatively “close” *IQ84*, the fact remains that a sequel may be on the way. If that is indeed how it turns out, then I am sure once we have read it we will be unable to recall the first two volumes in the same way: a new “closure” – indeed, a whole new reading – will superimpose itself on the one we manufactured earlier. Yet it will not be entirely gone. To borrow one of the most striking images in Murakami’s sprawling tour de force, at that point there will in effect be two moons in the sky: a larger, brighter moon (our reading of the new, expanded story) that absorbs everyone’s attention; and a smaller, dimmer moon (our reading of the original two-volume text) of which few are aware.

終結について

西洋の批評家は日本の小説を、終結性が欠けていると評してきた。例えば、川端康成の『雪国』は、元々短編小説として書かれ、我々のよく知る「決定版」に至るまで、段階を経て長くなっていった。村上春樹は、現在『1Q84』の第三巻に取りかかっているとところかもしれない。一度それを読んでしまえば、我々は最初の二巻を今と同じように思い起こすことは出来なくなるだろう。『1Q84』の中に出てくる非常に印象深いイメージに喩えるならば、その時点で空には二つの月が浮かぶことになるのである。一つは大きく明るい月（新しい、拡張された物語の読み）であり、誰もがそれに目を向ける。もう一つは小さく暗い月（元の二巻本テキストの読み）であり、その存在を意識する者はほとんどいなくなる。（原文英語、訳：浅羽麗）