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A Conversation with Translator Philip Gabriel

Murakami, Found
in Translation

Haruki Murakami, the Japanese writer referred to by the New York Times as a “global imaginative force,” depends on several translators to bring his work to the English-speaking world. One of these, Philip Gabriel, is professor of Japanese literature at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The author of *Spirit Matters: The Transcendent in Modern Japanese Literature* and *Mad Wives and Island Dreams: Shimao Toshio and the Margins of Japanese Literature*, he has translated contemporary Japanese writers such as Masahiko Shimada, Senji Kuroi, and Nobel laureate Kenzaburō Ōe.

Gabriel discovered Murakami’s work in the mid-eighties, while living and teaching in Japan. “I loved his light touch, his humor, his often quirky take on life, as well as the touch of nostalgia for the past that often appeared in these early works,” he explained to Knopf editor Gary Fisketjon and fellow translator Jay Rubin in a roundtable discussion on Murakami. Later, Howard Junker, founder of the literary journal *ZYZZYVA*, asked Gabriel for one of his Murakami translations; “The Kangaroo Communique” was published in the fall of 1988, the first of Murakami’s stories to be published in the U.S. In 1992, the *New Yorker* came to Gabriel for his translation of “Barn Burning,” and shortly thereafter he was translating Murakami’s novels *South of*

the Border, *West of the Sun* and *Sputnik Sweetheart* as well as some nonfiction that became part of the book *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*. Since that time, Gabriel has gone on to translate Kafka on the Shore (for which he was awarded the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize), *1Q84* (Book 3), *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (with Jay Rubin), and Murakami’s recent novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*.

Literary translation is an exhausting process. Gabriel sets his goal at four pages a day. What he likes best is polishing the developing draft, going over it again and again before going back to compare it once again against the original.

Murakami himself speaks of finding his voice in Japanese by writing first in English, then translating it back into his native language. (He is the Japanese translator of writers such as Raymond Carver and J. D. Salinger.) According to Sam Anderson in the *New York Times*, “You could even say that translation is the organizing principle of Murakami’s work: that his stories are not only translated but are about translation. The signature pleasure of a Murakami plot,” Anderson says, “is watching a very ordinary situation ... turn suddenly extraordinary ... watching a character, in other words, being dropped from a position of existential fluency into something completely foreign and then being forced to mediate, awkwardly, between those two realities. A Murakami character is always, in a sense, translating between radically different worlds: mundane and bizarre, natural and supernatural, country and city, male and female, overground and underground. His entire oeuvre, in other words, is the act of translation dramatized.”

Once, while translating a quote from Pushkin’s poem Eugene Onegin that appears in Murakami’s *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Gabriel had a mini-revelation. He reviewed a number of reputable translations from the original Russian in English—no point in translating it from Japanese. He found four versions of these lines from Onegin:

1. He had no urge to rummage /
in the chronological dust.
2. He lacked the slightest predilection /
for raking up historic dust.
3. He lacked the yen to go out poking /
Into the dusty lives of yore—

4. *He had no itch to dig for glories /
Deep in the dust that time has laid.*

I pretended to be Gabriel, weighing the choices; though to be fair, it was hard to judge them out of context. Number 1 was okay, but “chronological dust” sounded a bit clunky. Number 2 didn’t grab me—“the slightest predilection” felt stilted, and “raking up historic dust” sounded like an unpleasant chore. Number 3 was eccentric, had potential. Finally, Number 4—“itch” and “dig” sounded crisp and modern and lacking in pretense. And “Deep in the dust that time has laid” had a handsome, metaphorical resonance.

Number 4 was also Gabriel’s choice. The lesson he learned was one he did not want to forget. He pinned these samples over his desk to remind himself every day that “there are so many possible translations of even one line. So very much depends on the voice you hear in your head...”

I corresponded with Philip Gabriel to find out more about how the process works for him.

—Elizabeth McKenzie

Elizabeth McKenzie: Translators Gregory Rabassa and William Weaver have pointed out that their own moods affect their work—some days they feel like saying *maybe*, other days they feel like saying *perhaps*.

Philip Gabriel: I definitely agree. Mood is important. Some days I surprise myself how smoothly the translation flows, while on other days it is a hard, arduous slog through each sentence. Several times I’ve had the experience where being very tired actually makes the translation work flow more smoothly. I suppose something closer to the unconscious mind is welling up at times like that. I’m also influenced by what I’ve just read in English, and I have to be careful the narrative voice in the English novel doesn’t leak over to my translation when it’s inappropriate (Japanese teens sounding like Jane Austen, for example). Sometimes I deliberately try to read an English novel that, in my mind at least, reminds me of the Japanese novel I’m translating. But this doesn’t always work out. I remember being excited to learn that, right after he wrote *Kafka on the Shore* (featuring a precocious fifteen-year-old runaway boy), Murakami translated *The Catcher*

in the Rye into Japanese. I grabbed my copy of Salinger, hoping it would put me in the right mood to translate Kafka Tamura’s monologues—Kafka must be a Japanese Holden Caulfield, right?—but discovered, quickly, how different these characters, and their voices, were.

EM: Have you ever been told you’ve enhanced an author’s material with your translation—a particularly apt interpretation of a metaphor, or a word choice?

PG: That would be nice, but no, not really. The closest I got to this was when one author—Kenzaburō Ōe—sent me rewritten passages (totaling a couple of pages) for the novel *Somersault* after it was published in Japanese. He said he had rethought a few ideas and phrases post publication, and was now happy that the translation would more closely reflect his present thinking than the original (albeit in just a couple of places.) Tangentially, I have also run across the issue of mistakes in the original text. In almost all cases I have “corrected” these factual mistakes, which I suppose in a way has enhanced the author’s material. I think all involved would agree that fact checking in the U.S. is generally more rigorous than in Japanese publishing firms.

EM: Do you share Rabassa’s feelings that a translation is never finished? Was there ever a time you’ve translated a work from the Japanese that, despite your best efforts, seems to be missing a certain something it had going for it in the original?

PG: I basically agree with Rabassa. Every time I reread my translations I find passages I would like to rework or rethink, parts that are perhaps, as you said, missing something. The best example I can think of is from Murakami’s novel *Kafka on the Shore*. One of the main characters, Nakata, is an elderly man with developmental issues. His speech is, as several other characters point out, unusual. One thing that makes it unusual is how, in Japanese, Nakata constantly refers to himself in the third person. In Japanese it is common not to use personal pronouns as much as in English, so Nakata’s speech is a mix of sentences that either use “Nakata...” or, more commonly, no pronouns (“I”) at all. In English I could reproduce the third-person

sentences, but not the ones that omit “I.” I suppose you could try it—I did for about three sentences before giving up—but this makes what was normal in the original Japanese into something odd in English, so I didn’t. I ended up with a mix of third-person sentences and ones using “I” and “me.” It seemed to work okay, but it’s definitely missing something since the original has more of a feeling that *all* of Nakata’s utterances are in third person.

EM: Would you be willing to share an example of a passage you’ve translated that differs most from its literal translation?

PG: I don’t have a particular passage at hand, but I would like to underscore the difficulty of translating dialect. I was first drawn to one novel I translated, Yoshida’s *Villain*, because of the Kyushu dialect of the young characters. I lived in Kyushu for many years and it reminded me of the way many of my friends speak. When it came to translating the novel, however, I soon found out how difficult and awkward it is to translate dialect. I’ve heard the story of how Edward Seidensticker, the famous translator of Japanese literature, struggled with the Kansai dialect in Tanizaki’s novel *The Makioka Sisters*, even experimenting with having the dialogue sound like U.S. Southern speech before abandoning that idea. I went through the same process with *Villain*, briefly toying with the idea of having the characters sound “Southern.” I think a few traces of that experiment still linger in the translation—there might still be a “y’all” that escaped—but overall I feel a bit frustrated that I couldn’t reproduce a sense of regionalism in the dialogue more closely. The same issue arose in the latest Murakami short story, “Yesterday,” too, which in the original has a much stronger feeling of Kansai dialect.

EM: Like the way Dorothy Sayers used an evocation of cockney for some of the dialects in her translation of Dante. Has Murakami ever asked for significant changes?

PG: He usually reads and comments on my translations, and has definitely improved the translations by helping me understand the texts more deeply and by catching some translation errors. Being a translator himself, he is conscious of the challenges of translating between two

very different languages. I wouldn’t say he has ever asked me to make a significant change, but we have had to discuss how to handle some significant editing suggestions over the years. In an early magazine story years ago, for instance, the editor wanted to move the position of an entire paragraph from the end of the story to the beginning. We reluctantly agreed to do so, but if I recall correctly we switched it back to its original position when the story was included in a short story collection.

EM: What about *ateji*—the literary technique unique to Japanese writing, in which the kanji are used homophonically but carry other meanings and associations. Does Murakami’s work play with the multiple readings of the kanji?

PG: This is one of the (almost) unique features of Japanese that could potentially make the translator lose sleep. In some of his books, the names of people in the book (I’m avoiding the word characters because it is ambiguous!), written in kanji, are significant and a topic of discussion. Murakami seems to favor unusual names recently (his early protagonists were mostly nameless), thus Aomame and Tengo in *1Q84*.

EM: You’ve been quoted as saying: “Stoicism in Japanese culture causes certain climaxes to be very low-key, and I’ve had to underscore certain scenes for an American audience.” Could you say how?

PG: More often Japanese authors add what I think are extraneous explanations of characters’ emotional reactions. For instance, having someone say, “I can’t believe that!” and then add “he said, sounding dubious.” It’s obvious from the statement that he’s dubious, but often Japanese authors add these additional explanations, as if making absolutely sure the reader gets it. The translator has to do a bit of editing as he goes along, in this and many other ways.

EM: For you, is the idea in a translation to render the work entirely as if written by someone in English? Or is there ever a sense of wanting to retain, in the syntax or the word choice, a flavor of the other language and culture?

PG: Generally, yes, you're aiming at a text that sounds as if it had been written in English. If it reads smoothly in the original, then that's how you want it to read in translation. And most Japanese novels I've worked on would fit into that group. If there is some deliberate "otherness" in the original text, then that needs to be taken into account in the translation and not necessarily smoothed over. So in theory the answer to your second question could be "yes," but again, the copy editors and editor may opt for something that reads more smoothly. The final published translation is the work of many hands, not only the translator's.

EM: In Murakami's recent novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, published by Knopf in 2014, one can see your mark from the beginning. Here are the first two sentences of the novel:

From July of his sophomore year in college until the following January, all Tsukuru Tazaki could think about was dying. He turned twenty during this time, but this special watershed—becoming an adult—meant nothing.

You used the word "watershed" rather than the literal translation for: 刻み目, "kizamime," meaning "notch mark." You discarded "notch mark," bypassed other possibilities such as "milestone" or "turning point." "Watershed" brings very specific associations with it.

PG: The literal translation or standard dictionary definition just doesn't work here. I can't recall if I came up with "watershed," or perhaps it was the editor. I may have started with "turning point" or something like that. I have a vague memory that I did. The point comes across easily in Japanese, since age twenty is when one officially becomes an adult, but I felt something clear and unambiguous needed to be put here since U.S. readers wouldn't necessarily associate age twenty with anything in particular. And you're right, many words we choose—for instance, "watershed"—will have associations that the original Japanese term may not. By the way, that opening paragraph also alludes to the Japanese school year and how it's different from that in the U.S.: sophomore year for Tsukuru would start in the spring and continue on past summer break. There are

many things taken for granted by readers of the original that may be potentially puzzling for readers in English.

EM: What was your experience working on *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*?

PG: After the lengthy *IQ84* (which I only did one third of—hats off to Jay Rubin!) it was nice to work on a novel of more manageable length. I have thoroughly enjoyed translating all the novels and stories of Murakami's that I have done, and *Tsukuru* was no exception. It's a more somber story, but still with flashes of Murakami's characteristic quirky wit and viewpoint, and reading him (as I've been doing regularly since 1986) always feels to me like coming home.

EM: Any new translations in the works?

PG: I just finished translating four short stories by Murakami and am working on a novel by the author Kōtarō Isaka. Also some short essays on jazz musicians by Murakami.

Philip Gabriel is Professor of Japanese literature in the Department of East Asian Studies, the University of Arizona. He is the author of *Mad Wives and Island Dreams: Shimao Toshio and the Margins of Japanese Literature* and *Spirit Matters: The Transcendent In Modern Japanese Literature* and has translated many novels and short stories by the writer Haruki Murakami, including *Kafka on the Shore*, *IQ84* (co-translation), and most recently *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, which debuted at #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Other recent translations include *Parade*, by Shuichi Yoshida, and *Genocide of One* by Kazuaki Takano. Gabriel is recipient of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature (2001) for his translation of Senji Kuroi's *Life in the Cul-de-Sac*, and the 2006 PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize for his translation of *Kafka on the Shore*.

Elizabeth McKenzie is the editor of *My Postwar Life: New Writings from Japan and Okinawa*, and was the recipient of the Japan-US Friendship Commission Creative Artist Fellowship. Her novel *The Portable Veblen* is forthcoming from Penguin Press in 2016, and her short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, among others.