

Murakami Haruki and the Ideology of Late-capitalist Japan: Learning How to *Dance Dance Dance*

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Abstract

Murakami Haruki's sixth novel, *Dance Dance Dance*, while offering a direct critique of conditions in late-capitalist Japan, is also a work implicated in maintaining the ideological mystifications of the age. At the same time, its underlying exploration of death undermines the simple idea that it is merely a work about the need to give up private forms of therapy and to engage in public acts of commitment. Rather, it is a transitionary work in Murakami's continued effort to seek both public expressions of commitment and a personal reconciliation with the finality of death.

Abstract in Malay

Novel keenam Murakami Haruki, *Dance Dance Dance*, dalam mengutarakan kritik telus di penghujung zaman kapitalisme Jepun turut berperanan sebagai satu karya yang mempertahankan kecelaruan ideologi era tersebut. Dalam pada itu, isu kematian dalam novel tersebut menggoyahkan konsepnya sebagai karya yang sekadar berkisar tentang perlunya untuk melepaskan terapi berbentuk peribadi dan mengambil bahagian dalam komitmen tuntutan umum. Sebaliknya, karya ini merupakan satu peralihan dalam usaha berterusan Murakami untuk mendapatkan kedua-dua pengungkapan komitmen secara terbuka dan penerimaan secara peribadi kematian sebagai sesuatu yang muktamad.

Keywords

Murakami Haruki, *Dance Dance Dance*, ideology, late-capitalism, individuation, coping strategies

Keywords in Malay

Murakami Haruki, *Dance Dance Dance*, ideologi, zaman penghujung kapitalisme, individuasi, strategi menangani

Murakami Haruki is one of Japan's most popular authors and is also keenly read in the West and throughout East Asia. His success is due in part to the models he provides for surviving and even thriving in consumer driven, late-capitalist

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societies. But when do strategies of survival become strategies of denial, and how might criticisms of a system actually work to maintain it? The narrator of Murakami's sixth novel, *Dansu Dansu Dansu* (Dance Dance Dance, 1988), is constantly bemoaning the waste and excesses of what he describes as advanced capitalism (*kōdoshihonshugi*), what this article, following Fredric Jameson, calls late-capitalism (Jameson, 1991). His strategies for survival, however, only act to further implicate him in the system he despises. While he begins to realise this late in the novel, by this time it is too late to rectify the damage which has been done. In this way, *Dance Dance Dance* acts as warning and is a transitional work in what Murakami has described as his development as a writer from detachment toward commitment (Kawai and Murakami, 1995).

Boku's Story Again: The Continuation of the Search for Individuation

Dance Dance Dance continues the story of Boku (first-person, informal pronoun) first introduced in Murakami's first three novels (the so-called Rat trilogy). In particular, it reintroduces a number of characters first featured in Murakami's third novel, *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (A Wild Sheep Chase, 1982). As *Dance Dance Dance* begins, Boku reveals that he has been dreaming about the *Iruka* Hotel² featured in this earlier work, and has the distinct impression that there is someone there crying for him. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Boku had been led to this hotel by a mysterious call girl with magical ears, and as this new narrative unfolds, it soon becomes clear that it is this woman (whose name is finally revealed as Kiki) that is crying for him and calling him back. Since his last adventure, Boku has withdrawn from the world and has only recently begun making an effort to reconnect again. The world he is returning to, however, is very different from the one he left.

Similar to many of Murakami's novels, *Dance Dance Dance* is set in a specific historical time period, in this case 1983. As many critics have recognised, however, much in the novel clearly reflects the period in which Murakami was writing, the period of Japan's bubble economy in the late 1980's. As Shimada Hiromi writes, for example:

Undoubtedly, the bubble [economy] casts a shadow over Murakami's work, and in *Dance Dance Dance* this is particularly pronounced. From the outset of the story, the date of March 1983 is recorded, and that is when the story is set, but the story was written from December of 1987 to March of the following year, and the atmosphere of this period is reflected in the narrative. (89-90)

² *Iruka* means dolphin in Japanese. As Boku returns to Sapporo again, however, he discovers that the name has been changed to the Dolphin Hotel, written in katakana in the original Japanese and pronounced *Dorufin*. The English translator of this work, Alfred Birnbaum, gets around this problem by calling the *Iruka* Hotel the Dolphin Hotel and the *Dorufin* Hotel the l'Hôtel Dauphin.

Indeed, Boku is very conscious of the waste and excesses of the age in which he is living, though he is careful to maintain a cynical distance. He lives in a world where human relationships are increasingly being reduced to economic transactions and where everything is for sale. While not particularly fond of the way things are, he is deeply resigned to this situation. He constantly ridicules his job as a freelance journalist, for example, as nothing more than cultural snow shovelling, even though he also realises that such acts are a large part of what keeps the larger economy going. As he explains:

After wasting so much pulp and ink myself, who was I to complain about waste? We live in an advanced capitalist society, after all. Waste is the name of the game, its greatest virtue. Politicians call it “refinements in domestic consumption.” I call it meaningless waste. A difference of opinion. Which doesn’t change the way we live. If I don’t like it, I can move to Bangladesh or Sudan.

I for one am not eager to live in Bangladesh or Sudan.
So I kept working. (*Dance Dance Dance* 12)

This kind of cynical acceptance, of course, is not uncommon in the contemporary age. Living in the aftermath of the 20th century and the current global financial crisis, we all know the system is not perfect; many people just think it works better than any of the competing alternatives. The great ideological wars are over and global capitalism has won. In a similar way, Boku’s cynicism reflects a common attitude of his day, an uneasy acceptance that despite the obvious problems he sees around him, things are not really going to change. In any case, more than a focus on the global economic system, it soon becomes clear there are other questions Boku wishes to address.

To understand the nature of Boku’s psychological journey in *Dance Dance Dance*, it is first necessary to briefly retrace where he has come from. I have previously argued that Murakami’s early trilogy, the so-called Rat trilogy including *Kaze no uta o kike* (Hear the Wind Sing, 1979), *1973, Pinbōru* (Pinball, 1973, 1980), and *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (A Wild Sheep Chase, 1982), which loosely traces Boku’s story from childhood into young adulthood, can be read as an example of the Freudian experience of mourning and melancholia and the beginnings of a loosely defined Jungian search for individuation (Dil, 2010). Boku is learning to mourn and let go of the past, while at the same time creating a new form of identity for himself from the lost fragments of this past. Other critics have also noted the loosely Jungian undertones of these early works with their alter ego *Nezumi* (Rat), and their mysterious women that lead the central protagonist into depths of feeling he has long since forgotten (Imu, 2002; Shimizu 2000 and 2006). As *Dance Dance Dance* begins, there are indications that this journey is beginning again.

As Boku dreams of the hotel he will eventually need to return to, he has the undeniable feeling that he is somehow a part of it. Indeed, the hotel can easily be read as a metaphor for his sense of self. The woman who is there crying for him provides the invitation to begin his journey of individuation one more time. The hotel, as he had first encountered it, reminded him of an organism somehow stalled in its development. As he describes:

What it reminded me of was a biological dead end. A genetic retrogression. A freak accident of nature that stranded some organism up the wrong path without a way back. Evolutionary vector eliminated, orphaned life-form left cowering behind the curtain of history, in *The Land That Time Forgot*. And through no fault of anyone. No one to blame, no one to save it. (3)

By returning to this hotel, he is hoping to get his own stalled development moving again, but it is not until he returns that he realises this hotel has been fundamentally changed by the forces of late-capitalism. The small rundown hotel he remembers has been transformed into a twenty six floor “Modern-Art Deco symphony of glass and steel” (21). In this way, there is a sense that Boku’s psychological journey, at one time perhaps more innocent and straightforward, has been complicated by the acceleration of capitalist development. Throughout the novel, Boku will constantly have to wrestle with the idea that polished veneers and flashy displays of wealth may simply be covering a more sinister core, though ultimately he realises this too late. As he first makes his way to the hotel, however, he still has little idea of what he is actually searching for, and so he simply has to wait. The process of individuation he is involved in is not one that can be forced; rather, it must be allowed to develop spontaneously.

Eventually something does happen, as Boku, killing time, decides to go and watch a movie starring an old classmate. Even back in high school, as Boku recalls, this classmate, Gotanda, had been “too nice to be real – just like in his movies” (66). He had been popular with teachers, parents, and his peers, and now in his movies often played young successful professionals, usually doctors, teachers, or salary men. In the movie Boku goes to see, *Unrequited Love*, he is playing a biology teacher who has a young female student fall in love with him. In one scene, Gotanda is making love to a woman on a Sunday morning when this young student admirer shows up unannounced. Witnessing Gotanda’s lovemaking, this young girl leaves distraught, and the woman Gotanda is with offers her one line in the film: “What was that all about?” Boku is stunned to realise that this other woman is Kiki. As he concludes, “That’s when I knew: *We were all connected?*” (101).

Kiki, Boku assumes, was the figure calling him back to Sapporo. It seems she has a message for him, and returning to the hotel is his way of trying to find out what that might be. The first clue he gets to her whereabouts is this scene from *Unrequited Love*. Boku eventually makes contact with Gotanda, and they

start spending time together. Slowly, Boku is drawn further and further into Gotanda's world. While Gotanda seems to be living a glamorous movie star lifestyle, he is actually quite lonely and dissatisfied. He can have anything he wants in life, except for what he truly wants, his ex-wife and a return to normalcy. The real problem, however, is that he has started to feel like nothing more than the images he portrays. As he explains, "I mean, it's like which is me and which is the role? Where's the line between me and my shadow" (144).

Behind the glitz and glamour of Gotanda's public persona, there is a dark underside that Boku takes some time to recognise. In fact, it is a strange young girl with clairvoyant abilities named Yuki who actually has to break the news to him: Gotanda killed Kiki. Gotanda, for his part, is not really sure whether he killed her or not, at least not in a literal sense. As he explains, it all happened in some other place, and what he really seemed to be killing was his shadow. What Boku comes to realise is that he and Gotanda are in fact not that far apart. As he explains, "In some ways, Gotanda and I were of the same species. Different circumstances, different thinking, different sensibilities, the same species" (348). While in the earlier trilogy Boku still has a rather likable alter ego in Rat, in this new novel he has a much more sinister doppelganger. He has slowly been sucked into Gotanda's world and has not realised how subtle this seduction has been. He starts to live vicariously through Gotanda and Gotanda through him. Boku is offered fine food, fast cars and women, all the enjoyments this late-capitalist society can offer. The cost, he realises too late, is that his anima, that Jungian symbol for a man's soul, has been killed.

It is also important to recognise the other twist on traditional Jungian themes that appears in this novel – the very unnerving view of the self that emerges. This is not so much the traditional Jungian ideal of an underlying unified self, but the suggestion of a deep void that lies at the heart of subjectivity. Making his way to the new Dolphin Hotel, Boku soon learns that the spirit of the old hotel remains. A receptionist he meets while checking in provides the first clue. As Boku describes, "There was something about her expression I responded to, some embodiment of hotel spirit" (24). Meeting with her later, he finds that she has had a mysterious experience on the sixteenth floor of the hotel. One night, having returned to this floor to retrieve a book from the staff lounge, she had stepped out of the elevator into a world of complete darkness and musty smells. Venturing out, she had found a room with the door slightly ajar and light coming from it. Upon approaching the room, however, she had heard shuffling sounds that she was not entirely convinced were human. Terrified, she had made her way back to the elevator where she had been able to return to a more familiar world.

Boku is later able to visit this same room and discovers the Sheep Man living inside, a strange character that first appears in *A Wild Sheep Chase*. The Sheep Man is a curious figure, only 140 centimetres in height and with horns

that are real. In the earlier novel, he plays the role of mediator between Boku and his significant other, Rat. In this new novel, he continues to play the role of facilitator as Boku presses forward in his psychological quest. This mysterious world he discovers on the sixteenth floor, the Sheep Man explains, exists solely for him. There are things he has lost in his life and things he needs to reconnect together, and the Sheep man is like the switchboard operator making sure all of this happens. The message he receives is simple: “You gotta dance. As long as the music plays. You gotta dance. Don’t even think why” (86). This instruction becomes like a mantra for Boku as the narrative continues: keep dancing, do not think, things will somehow connect up.

Later in the novel, Boku does indeed find Kiki, or at least what he thinks is Kiki. On holiday with Yuki in Honolulu, he sees a woman walking down the street who looks just like her. Leaving Yuki locked in the car, he follows this woman on foot until she comes to a building and rides the elevator up to the eighth floor. Boku follows after her, but what he finds there is not Kiki, but six skeletons. It is one of those strange moments, similar to the visit to the sixteenth floor at the Dolphin Hotel, where Boku steps into some kind of parallel world. What he finds on this floor, however, are six reminders of death. The puzzle that remains to be solved is who these six skeletons represent. By the end of the novel, he has worked out likely candidates for five of them.³ The remaining one, however, remains a mystery: “Who was skeleton number six then? The Sheep Man? Someone else? Myself?” (392). The suggestion that this sixth skeleton could in fact be an omen for his own death is perhaps the most sinister possibility, but not without some merit. In his first visit at the Dolphin Hotel Boku visits the sixteenth floor. In Honolulu he visits the eighth. Does this suggest that his next visit to this strange other world will be to the fourth floor, an ominous number in Japan where it is also a homophone for death. It is one possible reading.

If one accepts that these buildings are metaphors for the self, then there are two interesting implications that arise. Firstly, within the self, as the existence of the Sheep man suggests, is a strange entity trying to pull the pieces of a bizarre puzzle together. There is a sense of reassurance that if one keeps dancing, keeps moving forward, then somehow the seemingly random strands of one’s life are going to come together. This, of course, is a message with Jungian undertones and a perspective that has deep resonance with Murakami’s *modus operandi* as a writer. As Murakami explains,

I think that writing novels... is in many ways an act of self-therapy.
Undoubtedly, there are those who have some kind of message and write it

³ The five deaths he accounts for are Rat, Kiki, Mei (a prostitute he sleeps with paid for by Gotanda), Dick North (a one armed poet who lives with Yuki’s mother Ame in Hawaii), and finally Gotanda who eventually kills himself by driving his Maserati into Tokyo Bay.

in a novel, but in my case at least, that is not how it works. Rather, I feel like I write novels in order to find out what kind of message is in me to begin with. In the process of writing a story, these kinds of messages just suddenly float up from the darkness – of course, most of the time, they are written in incomprehensible code. (Murakami and Kawai 79-80)

On the other hand, the more Boku continues to move forward in his journey, the more he seems to be receiving a message about his own death. In particular, this is the message he receives in Honolulu as he follows Kiki into this second building. This is not a message about the appeal of some deeper unified self that can be discovered at the end of one's journey, but rather a message about the reality of non-being. This is why Western critics have frequently turned to Lacanian psychoanalysis in their readings of Murakami's work, an acknowledgement of this underlying appeal to absence rather than presence. Such a reading, however, is not entirely incongruous with the reception of Jungian thought in Japan where, perhaps influenced by the Buddhist tradition and similar philosophies of non-being, the emphasis on the Jungian self has never been as strong. What we have then is a view of the self that provides for both a deep compensatory unconscious that can provide the reassurance of meaning, provided of course one continues to keep dancing, and a realisation that there is no teleological endpoint that one is being led to other than non-being. It is this mixture of existentially driven resignation and unconsciously driven regeneration, I would argue, that qualifies Murakami for the label of Existential Gnostic.

Dance Dance Dance as a Critique of Late-Capitalist Japan: Dance Dance Dance as an Ideological Support to Late-Capitalist Japan

So how does this approach stack up against the problems of living in late-capitalist Japan? Is it a legitimate response to the anxieties and uncertainties of the age, or is it an ideologically suspect obfuscation that distracts from the important issues of the day? Slavoj Žižek has written a lot about the continued relevance of ideological critiques in our supposedly post-ideological age. For Marx, ideology was a form of "false consciousness," a distortion of reality that prevented people from grasping their true material conditions of existence.⁴ The antidote to such deception was to raise consciousness. As Žižek argues, however, in late-capitalist societies we already know. The power of the system comes not from what it hides from us, but from how it gets us to continue doing despite our knowing. The system takes our cynicism into account from the very beginning. It does not require our deep belief and commitment, simply our continued compliance. As Žižek explains, "we know there is no truth in authority, yet we continue to play its game and to obey it in order not to disturb

⁴ The phrase "false consciousness" was actually coined by Friedrich Engels (1820 -1895).

the usual run of things.... Truth is suspended in the name of efficiency: the ultimate legitimisation of the system is that it works” (*Enjoy Your Symptom* x).

What this cynicism masks, however, is the ways one’s strategies for surviving this system can actually be the very ideological mystifications that keep it going. While the more radical move might be to call the bluff and to really try and change things, our sense of futility in the face of overwhelming complexity, our fear of simply making things worse in our efforts to make them better, and our belief that whatever the failings of this system it is at least satisfying most of our material needs, helps us in our rationalisations that this is simply the way things must be. What this complacency hides, however, is the very real ways this system is still not working for millions of people, and how, despite the challenges, our political engagement is required to make a difference. Such cynical distance is the first sign that something is not right in Boku’s world.

Besides this universal appeal to cynicism, there are three other survival strategies operating in *Dance Dance Dance* that can also be seen as ideologically suspect: a new age “go with the flow” attitude, a turn towards careful consumption and new forms of discipline, and a tendency to enjoy through the Other. Žižek has argued that perhaps one of the ultimate postmodern ironies is the contemporary exchange between Western and Asian cultures where just as Western economic and political models seem to have reached their widest point of influence, the Judeo-Christian legacy is at its most vulnerable. Instead, what we have, he argues, is “the onslaught of the New Age ‘Asiatic’ thought, which in its different guises, from the ‘Western Buddhism’... to different ‘Taois,’ is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism” (*On Belief* 12). As Žižek jokes, if Max Weber’s classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* had been written in our day, it might have been titled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*. One might ask whether Murakami’s fiction is simply part of this “hegemonic ideology of global capitalism,” a “remedy for the stresses/tension of the capitalist dynamic” which in actuality functions as global capitalism’s “ideal ideological supplement?” (*On Belief* 12). This appeal to some kind of new age “go with the flow” attitude is deserving of further attention.

The basic philosophy of this so-called “Western Buddhism” as Žižek sees it is this:

[O]ne should... “let oneself go,” drift along, while retaining an inner difference towards the mad dance of this accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.... (*On Belief* 13)

It is a philosophy based on the fact that increasingly, in this complex world, we are losing our ability to cognitively map the conditions in which we live and

thus, the philosophy goes, “instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavour to retain control...” (12-13). As Boku searches for meaning behind the seemingly contingent array of characters and events in his life, he seems comforted by the fact that despite the waste and extravagances surrounding him, his real quest is somehow about reconnecting with himself and the things he has lost in his life. Putting aside the question of whether or not he believes there is really some innermost kernel to discover, he is willing to let go of his sense of conscious control and to follow the mysterious intrusions of his life wherever they may take him. The message is that if he just keeps moving, somehow things are going to work out.

This, of course, is sometimes a useful strategy in a world where the only constant is change and where attempts to control and manipulate this mad process often come across as comical. Without this sense of inner confidence and belief, how is one supposed to cope in an age of uncertainty? Clearly, however, there is something disturbing about this belief when it is employed as an excuse for failing to wrestle with the big picture and the difficult challenge of trying to work things out and make them better. When an inner conviction blocks our minds to further information and potentially troubling perspectives, then clearly we are trading inner certainty for the discomfort of facing our ignorance. I may not know, but my unconscious does, and so I just need to follow it. While the nature of the human condition means we have to sometimes act before we know, and that given this situation it is sometimes best to think we know before we actually do, the potential downside is that our inner convictions can close us off from deeper levels of engagement and insight.

Boku, of course, while critical of the society around him, finds himself compelled by an inner conviction that there is something waiting for him in Sapporo. Rather than trying to slow down and grasp what is going on, he is happy to continue going with the flow. Reflecting on his dream about the Iruka Hotel and what it might mean for him at the start of the novel, for example, Boku finally rolls over in bed, sighs, and offers the following insight into his thoughts: “*Oh give in*, I thought. But the idea of giving in didn’t take hold. *It’s out of your hands, kid. Whatever you may be thinking, you can’t resist. The story’s already decided*” (6). The question is what is this conviction of fate doing for his sense of political agency? If everything is unfolding as it should, then what could ever be wrong?

Lacan would have seen all this as simply proving that, “a letter always arrives at its destination.” What he meant by this was not that there was somehow a message there all along just waiting to be discovered, but rather that the past is always rewritten by the present. He rejected the illusion of a

teleological end point subtly working behind the scenes, but rather focused on radical contingencies. As Žižek explains:

If... Lacanian theory insists categorically that a letter *does* always arrive at its destination, it is not because of an unshakeable belief in teleology, in the power of a message to reach its preordained goal: Lacan's exposition of the way a letter arrives at its destination *lays bare the very mechanism of teleological illusion*. (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 9-10)

Whatever "message" Boku might find at the end of his journey to justify his early intuition, Lacan would simply have seen as an act of retrospective creation. His position starts with Freud rather than Jung. For Jung, as seen, seeming contingency can give way to deeper meaning. As Žižek explains, however, within Freudian interpretation "meaning is strictly *secondary*, a way to 'internalize' the traumatic shock of some preceding contingent encounter" (*The Fright of Real Tears* 100). Freud called this act of retrospective meaning making *Nachträglichkeit*; Lacan *après-coup*. It is a completely different concept from the Jungian notion of synchronicity.

The defence offered by the Sheep Man for this sense of fate and the promise of connecting things up in the future is encapsulated in what he calls tendencies. As he explains to Boku, "even if you did everything over again, your whole life, you got tendencies to do just what you did, all over again" (85). Less important than the contingencies of time and place, the Sheep Man suggests, are the tendencies one carries within them from the start. This, of course, is true to a degree, a fact most dramatically illustrated when identical twins are reunited after years of separation and realise the similar themes underlying their different life paths. And besides, human beings have an incredible ability to habituate to the highs and lows of life whatever the outcome. In this way, a philosophy that tells you to give yourself up to your fate and to simply go along for the ride is probably going to work out one way or another; we should never underestimate the ability of human minds to spin retrospective stories that make sense of things. And yet, as necessary as all this might be, surely there are times when it is better to try and resist this pull of fatalism. In this way, Boku's commitment to the uncanny promptings of his unconscious can seem ideologically suspect.

While the above mentioned "go with the flow" attitude provides one strategy for survival, another involves learning how to maximise the opportunities of the consumer age and building private worlds of discipline and meaning. These kinds of strategies are constantly employed in Murakami's fiction where ordinary characters are continuously thrust into extraordinary worlds. Boku, whatever his deficiencies, is at least a man who tries to live according to his own set of rules. As he explains to one character in the novel playfully named Makimura Hiraku, "I'm not stubborn. I just work according to

my system” (204). It is this system that helps keep him sane despite the insanity surrounding him.

As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, one of the central underlying messages of late-capitalist societies is human insufficiency. It is encapsulated in what he calls “the bitter experience of fully-fledged postmodern consumers” (73). Interestingly, he sees this bitter experience coming from the challenge of living with increased freedom. As he explains:

The bitter experience in question is the experience of freedom: of the misery of life composed of risky choices, which always mean taking some chances while forfeiting others; of incurable uncertainty built into every choice; of the unbearable, because unshared, responsibility of the unknown consequences of every choice; of the constant fear of foreclosing future and yet unforeseen possibilities; of the dread of personal inadequacy; of experiencing less and not as strongly as others perhaps do; of the nightmare of being not up to the new and improved formulae of life which the notoriously capricious future may bring. (73)

It is this freedom and uncertainty that creates the market for the numerous guides and gurus who appear promising to offer us the new formula for success. In particular, it provides for what Bauman labels “the aristocracy of consumerism.” As he explains, these are

those who have managed to transform life into a work of the art of sensation-gathering and sensation-enhancement, thanks to consuming more than ordinary seekers of peak-experience, consuming more refined products, and consuming them in a more sophisticated manner. (70)

Boku recognises the almost religious function consumerism is fulfilling around him and includes this in his critique of the age. As he explains:

Advanced capitalism has transcended itself. Not to overstate things, financial dealings have practically become a religious activity. The new mysticism. People worship capital, adore its aura, genuflect before Porsches and Tokyo land values. Worshiping everything their shiny Porsches symbolise. It’s the only stuff of myth that’s left in the world.

Latter-day capitalism. Like it or not, it’s the society we live in. (55)

The question which arises again is whether Boku’s cynical distance is really as removed as he might like to think.

Many of Murakami’s protagonists, it can be argued, belong to this kind of refined cultural class. While they do not necessarily consume more than the average Japanese consumer, they are arguably more refined or sophisticated in their tastes. Their choices in music, food, and clothing, while not necessarily

elitist, are careful and deliberate. Like Murakami himself, they often have an encyclopaedic knowledge of music, simple but particular tastes in food, and understated but carefully selected wardrobes. Their clothes and cars often seem intended to signify a touch of the ordinary, while their tastes in music and literature reflect their individuality and laid-back familiarity with both high and low culture. They may not “genuflect before Porches and Tokyo land values,” but they are also not entirely free from a certain reverence for their own particular cultural brands. They are connoisseurs of culture, not in a loud, obnoxious way, but in a quietly sophisticated one.

The irony, of course, is that even while superficial choices are proliferating, the big, monumental ones are being closed off. You can have anything you want, as long as you do not ask for too much. As Chiyoko Kawakami explains:

This act of selecting goods is a compulsive one for many of Murakami’s protagonists.... The problem is that this act of selecting things with obsessive preciseness is becoming the sole existential “experience” that provides the individual with the illusion of a self or subjectivity. (322-23)

No amount of expanding consumer choice, of course, will ever offset the loss of diminishing political agency, and no amount of cynicism or ironic detachment will ever make this acceptable. While the ability to express identity through consumer choice clearly holds an endless fascination for human beings, it is a poor substitute for the ability to make political ones.

Associated with this reverence for consumerism is the driving need in late-capitalist societies to maximise pleasure, for even pleasure can be a burden when people are not sure if they are doing it right. As Bauman explains:

It is not just that more sublime pleasures ought to be offered – one needs also to learn how to squeeze the potential they contain, the potential that opens up in full solely to the past masters of the art of experiencing, the artists who know how to “let themselves go” and who have made their mind and body, through diligent training, fit to receive the full impact of the overwhelming sensation. (71)

Murakami might very well be seen as one of these “masters of the art of experiencing,” someone who has trained his mind and body and has learnt the art of letting go. His interest in physical health and exercise has grown with his interest in writing, and he sees the two as intricately connected (Murakami and Kawai 114-20). The self-destructive writer was almost a cliché in the postwar Japanese literary scene. Writers like Dazai Osamu and others of the so-called *Burai-ha* (Decadent School) slowly destroyed their bodies through addiction and neglect even while producing great literature. Murakami, on the other hand,

takes the opposite approach. He quit smoking early on in his writing career and started to live a very disciplined lifestyle. He goes to bed early, wakes early, eats healthily, swims regularly, and even runs marathons and participates in triathlons. All of this effort, he claims, is to sustain himself as a writer.

These kinds of private forms of discipline are also evident in Murakami's novels, not in terms of fitness regimes, but in terms of small mundane tasks carried out with an obsessive attention to detail, simple activities like cooking a meal or ironing a shirt. In *Dance Dance Dance* Boku's job fulfils a similar function. While he is not particularly convinced that it serves any larger social good, he does see value in what it can do for him personally as a form of social rehabilitation. Where others would slacken off and do the minimum amount of work required, his philosophy is always to do a thorough job. As he explains, "I went the extra step because, for me, it was the simplest way. Self-discipline. Giving my disused fingers and head a practical – and if at all possible, harmless – dose of overwork" (13). These routines take on an almost ritualistic significance in Murakami's novels, helping his protagonists hold mundane reality together. Again, while an emphasis on hard work and discipline is not a bad thing in itself, given the way Murakami's protagonists use these rituals to hold off larger anxieties and in turn the larger kinds of social analysis this might inspire, it is not an entirely innocent strategy. The private illusion of choice through consumption and the ability to hold back anxiety through private ritual and discipline, while useful survival techniques in an ever accelerating age, can also be seen as techniques for masking a more fundamental anxiety that can only be addressed at the political level.

The last ideological message evident in this novel is what Žižek sees as a tendency in late-capitalist societies to enjoy through the Other. This is a consequence of the way the social mandate to enjoy can become so intense that it becomes what Žižek describes as a "monstrous *duty*" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 114). In earlier stages of economic and cultural development, enjoyment was often seen as something that needed to be sacrificed in the service of a larger system. Japan's early modernity, for example, came to be structured in strongly nationalistic terms with the Emperor as the symbolic head of the nation. At least as far as the official ideology went, personal needs and desires were to be sacrificed in the interests of the nation and later the Empire.⁵ In many late-capitalist societies, however, with the expansion of consumerism and the need for ever new areas of profit extraction, a strong superego imperative to enjoy has emerged. The message is not only that we should have it all, but that we should have it all right *now*. Ironically, rather than opening us up to unlimited enjoyment, this imperative can become a burden we are forced to bear.

⁵ For a discussion of the major ideological forces operating in Japan's early modernity see Gluck, 1985.

So what does it mean to enjoy through the Other? One example Žižek offers to explain this dynamic is of professional mourners used in some cultures to satisfy the intensive emotional and time demands involved in mourning someone properly. In this way, the symbolic mandate of mourning the deceased in the appropriate manner is met, while at the same time freeing up the individual for other demands in life. Another example he offers more directly related to enjoyment is of canned laughter in television shows. As he explains, "you think you enjoyed the show, but the Other did it for you. The gesture of criticism here is that, no, it was *not you* who laughed, it was the Other (the TV set) who did it" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 115). Enjoying through the Other, in other words, is a process of enjoying vicariously. The Other enjoys in your place so that you do not have to. Another popular outlet for such vicarious enjoyment in late-capitalist societies is the cult of celebrity. Movie and pop stars are those who live in a world apart, seemingly involved in an endless parade of consumption and enjoyment. They provide the evidence that the system is delivering on its promise. Even as we toil away in the mundane circumstances of our lives, we know that elsewhere there are beautiful people doing and enjoying beautiful things. The internet only multiplies such opportunities.

Of course, in *Dance Dance Dance*, it is Gotanda who plays this role of the Other, and it is only when Boku finally begins to see through his façade that he starts to recognise the very dark underside of the system in which he is participating. Rather than truly offering a model of unrestrained enjoyment, Gotanda is a model of misery. Suffocated by his plastic persona, he has also lashed out and killed what he believed was his shadow in some dream-like state. In reality, he has killed one of the most precious people in Boku's life, Kiki. In this way, Boku's confrontation with Gotanda comes too late.

This is not an uncommon pattern in Murakami's fiction where a central protagonist's therapeutic journey eventually brings them to a final encounter with some dark alter ego. This began in Murakami's early trilogy with a quiet heart to heart between Boku and Rat, develops in *Dance Dance Dance* to a belated awareness of the evil inherent in Gotanda, and moves on in a later novel to a violent and bloody life and death confrontation between a central protagonist and his clearly sinister alter ego, a figure that, like Gotanda, also has a high media profile.⁶ In this way, one can sense the ongoing nature of Murakami's literary project and the way he builds on psychological themes found in earlier works. Near the end of *Dance Dance Dance*, Gotanda commits suicide by driving his expensive Maserati into the ocean. Boku is thus left to pick up the pieces and to come to terms with the fact that he acted too late.

⁶ The novel in question is *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* (The Wind-up Bird Chronicle, 1994 and 1995).

Is this novel then a simple message about the limits of the therapeutic quest and the need for engaging in political action without delay? While undoubtedly this is part of it, the other underlying message about the inevitably of death goes some way towards undermining it. Murakami's fiction since *Dance Dance Dance* has increasingly come to wrestle with the question of secular salvation and the ways we might come to terms with the lack at the heart of subjectivity. In this way, Murakami's literary project is about more than his claimed movement from detachment to commitment. Rather, it is as an attempt to explore how the questions of therapy, commitment, and secular salvation might all come together. Seen in this larger perspective, *Dance Dance Dance* is a transitional work that, while it fails to offer an adequate model of commitment, does offer a late realisation of the dangers of surrendering to the seductions of late-capitalist societies and continues to wrestle with the question of how an evolving therapeutic discourse might be able to deal with the ultimate question of death and meaning.

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