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Matthew Strecher. *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 296 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-9198-2.

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One problem scholars of contemporary literature researching the works of a living author are very familiar with is the fact that the author in question may, and indeed often does, publish a new text just at the time when we are finalizing our investigation of their oeuvre, throwing a spanner in the wheels of our academic inquiry. That Matthew Strecher's book skillfully stands up to this challenge, smoothly incorporating Haruki's latest novel, *Colorless Tazaki Tsukuru and His Years of Pilgrimage*, into its overall argument, is a testament both to the insight and coherence of Strecher's analysis and to the uncanny power of Murakami's writing to enter our inner minds and give substance to our imagination.

The Forbidden Worlds of Murakami Haruki is a brilliant work of scholarship, reassessing Murakami Haruki's literary production of the past thirty-five years in light of one of the most significant, and most elusive, features of his fiction, namely the use of what Strecher defines as the "metaphysical realm." According to Strecher, the metaphysical realm in Murakami's work is the place where individual subjects are able to connect to their "inner narrative," get in touch with their innermost feelings and (re)construct a worldview that is closer to their true self than the false myths or "collective narratives" produced by society. In Strecher's view, in a later phase, beginning roughly with the novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1995) and the nonfiction works *Underground* (1997) and *Underground 2* (1998), Murakami presents the metaphysical realm also as a way to discover a larger, more universal "Narrative" that can connect individuals above and beyond any specific discourse produced by a single group of people, and thus a way to possibly overcome the ensuing ideological divisions and conflicts.

The book details the many uses of this feature within Murakami's works, noting how, albeit complex, it is always tied to the idea of establishing, maintaining, or otherwise protecting individual identity while at the same time establishing contact with others (p. 25). Throughout his analysis, Strecher touches upon several related modes of representation and political/social engagement, such as mythology, psychoanalysis, and historiography. Combining a thorough close reading of most of Murakami's novels and a few select short stories and works of nonfiction with a clever use of a broad range of theoretical frameworks, Strecher provides a reinterpretation of Murakami's fiction that complicates our understanding not only of this popular and provocative author but also of the role of literature in world societies.

The introduction begins with a thorough summary of the biographical and historical background to Murakami's use of the metaphysical in his fiction, with particular focus on the author's double positioning as an "international" and as a "Japanese" writer, and on his multifaceted relationship with social and political commitment. While this might feel slightly redundant to someone familiar with Murakami's work and its critical reception, as an accessible and engaging survey of these issues it offers an excellent introduction to this author for the general audience, and could be very useful to students of Japanese literature and culture at universities and colleges around the world, which are increasingly including works by Murakami in their curriculum. The introduction then proceeds to outline Murakami's own reflections on the meaning and function of this metaphysical realm, and its similarities with Carl Gustav Jung's idea of the collective unconscious.

Chapter 1 outlines Murakami's reflections on the linguistically mediated nature of experience and the power of language to constitute reality. Comparing Murakami's early novels to the works of postmodernist authors such as Umberto Eco, Strecher examines this author's distinctive brand of metalinguistic and metatextual play. Strecher sees Murakami's novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* as a turning point in this respect, the moment when the author first conceives of the act of narrating a story, turning lived experience into language, not just as a form of play but as a step towards rebuilding a shattered identity, and possibly healing trauma. This feature becomes even more important in *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) and *1Q84* (2009-10). In the latter we also see the emergence of a clear distinction between spoken and written language, where the latter is able to provide greater coherence and order to an otherwise unsettling, formless reality.

Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the portrayal of the metaphysical realm in Murakami's fiction, from something akin to the Freudian idea of the individual subconscious in early works such as the *Rat Trilogy*, to something closer to the Jungian notion of collective unconscious in post-1995 works. While in texts such as *Hear the Wind Sing* (1979) and *Pinball, 1973* (1980) the metaphysical realm acquires a degree of reality in *this world* only as part of the narrator's psyche, in *The Wind-up Bird's Chronicle* the world *over there* begins to encroach more concretely onto the characters' everyday reality, not just through their minds, but through a series of material passageways, including liminal spaces like forests and dungeons, technological devices such as television screens, and even characters' bodies, particularly women's wombs.

Chapter 3 delves into the relationship between Murakami's use of the metaphysical realm and representations of the *other world* in classical mythology, specifically ancient Greek and ancient Japanese. Examining Murakami's combination of different mythological sources, Strecher stresses that this author's use of myth *both celebrates and obliterates regional distinctions and cultural specificities*, (p. 122), arguably a significant factor in the growth of his global popularity. Relying on Joseph Campbell's distinction between the figures of the shaman and the priest, Strecher notes that Murakami's protagonists often take a shaman-like role, acting like *true prophets* who rely on lived experience, not on false myths, to understand and possibly change reality.

Chapter 4 shifts to a rather different topic, Mu-

rakami's use of hybrid narrative modes that combine journalistic and novelistic style to produce what Strecher defines as *literary journalism* and *journalistic fiction*. While this narrative mode might seem very distant from the fantastical one that characterizes the works examined in the previous chapters, Strecher shows how Murakami seamlessly blends realism and supernatural to produce a distinctive type of social critique. Noting the similarities, for example, between the portrayal of Kanda Miyuki, a former member of the Aum shinrikyō cult interviewed by Murakami for *Underground 2*, and that of Fuka-eri, the fictional daughter of a cult leader in his novel *1Q84*, Strecher convincingly argues that both girls are seen as *problematic* in a society that has no particular objection to fantasy fiction or virtual reality but is intolerant of anyone with the temerity to claim that her *visions* might actually be real (p. 191), thus further demonstrating the complex interconnection between the metaphysical and the political in Murakami.

The fifth and last chapter focuses almost exclusively on *Colorless Tazaki Tsukuru and His Years of Pilgrimage*, interpreting the novel in light of the framework established thus far. While the novel is closer to other *realistic* texts by Murakami such as *Norwegian Wood* (1987) and *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (1992) than to fantastical ones like *1Q84*, Strecher deftly shows how the whole novel is informed by the idea that dreams have the power to constitute reality, and its ultimate message is that individual growth is best achieved through a journey into the metaphysical realm.

The conclusion briefly addresses some of Murakami's least fantastical works, such as his collections of essays and travelogues, briefly touching also on his translations of North American authors. Although interesting, this section seems a little sketchy; one positive aspect is that it might provide future graduate students with some juicy topics for essays and theses.

My only criticism of the book is that it occasionally indulges in something that Strecher himself had warned us against in his previous work on Murakami, namely overinterpretation of the plethora of symbols displayed in his fiction. Thus for example, while it is intriguing to speculate whether Rat's girlfriend in *Pinball, 1973* might be none other than the nine-fingered girl the narrator met in a bar in *Hear the Wind Sing*, or whether the torturers of officer Yamamoto in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* skinned him alive in an effort to *literally remove his outer skin to reveal the genuine core lurking inside* (p. 92), pinning down these details seems unnecessary,

and a distraction from an otherwise consistently insightful and closely knit analysis. Similarly, the interpretation of female characters in Murakami as often venting their psychic energy through sexual acts in chapter 3 seems a little hasty, lumping together very different women, from introvert, abject Naoko in *Norwegian Wood* to assertive, independent Aomame in *1Q84*, in a way that seemed unconvincing to me. An in-depth analysis of female char-

acters in Murakami is another long overdue study that would shed important light on this author, but that is obviously beyond the scope of this monograph, which is otherwise excellent.

Overall, this is an original and very insightful book, which provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary Japanese and world literature, and is a genuine pleasure to read.

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