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The literary auto-representation of Haruki Murakami: rewriting celebrity authorship in 1Q84

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Introduction

It is difficult to overestimate the fame and success of Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami. After winning the Gunzō Award with his debut novel *Kaze no uta o kike* (*Hear the Wind Sing*; 1979), he went on to become a literary sensation with his novel *Noruwei no mori* (*Norwegian Wood*; 1987), which to date has sold over 10 million copies in Japan alone. His works have been translated into dozens of languages and every new novel authored by Murakami is a guaranteed bestseller, welcomed by a worldwide media frenzy.

Yet Murakami's celebrity is not uncontested. He has been faulted for not adhering to the standards of Japanese *junbungaku* ('pure' literature). Matthew C. Strecher (2011, p. 856) observes that some of Murakami's critics consider his prose 'to be lacking in depth'; to them, the author's style [signals] a rejection of the Modernist urge toward literary language'. By way of example, Strecher refers to the esteemed literary scholar Masao Miyoshi, who called Murakami's work 'a smooth, popular item of consumption', offering readers a 'symbol deciphering game' that 'should not be taken too seriously' (Miyoshi 1994, p. 234). Jay Rubin (2012, pp. 8–9) adds that several critics even claim that Murakami's popularity signifies there is 'something wrong' with 'all of contemporary Japanese literature': they feel that he is writing 'for the passing tastes of a young audience'. In this light, it is telling that, in an international context, Murakami is often mentioned as a potential Nobel Prize winner, whereas he has never been awarded the Akutagawa Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards for new authors in his country of origin.

The author himself has not remained unaffected by these criticisms:¹ he has repeatedly claimed that he sees himself as an 'outcast of the Japanese literary world' (Poole 2014) and that he has become a 'loner' who shirks away from 'literary circles', as he prefers to be by himself and have no 'writer friends' (Wray 2009, p. 346). At the same time, Murakami has repeatedly felt the need to speak out in interviews against accusations of writing an over-commercialised, allegedly 'Westernized' form of literature (Suter 2008, Franssen 2017). In fact, the literary establishment's rejection of his work motivates Murakami to continue to 'rebel against that world' (Onishi 2005), up to the point that not winning the Akutagawa Prize, as Rubin (2012, p. 234) notes, has become 'something of a point of pride' for him.

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The dismissal of Murakami's success by the Japanese literary establishment as well as the author's cultivation of his position as a critical outsider in response to it provide a telling example of the complex interplay between the self-presentation of celebrity authors and the audience's evaluation of their well-known authorial persona. The Swiss literary sociologist Jérôme Meizoz has analysed this interplay as the relation between 'auto-representation' and 'hetero-representation' (Meizoz 2007, p. 45). Auto-representation, for Meizoz, covers all acts of self-fashioning by the author (autobiographical writing, interviews, correspondence); hetero-representation is the shaping of the authorial image by others (biographies, reviews, literary historiography, media coverage). According to Meizoz, both processes contribute to the collective 'figuration' of the author: they can affirm each other, contradict each other, or create a polarising feedback loop – as seems to be the case with Murakami and his critics.

In Meizoz's (2007) case studies of authorial figuration, auto-representation is believed to be achieved first and foremost through personal correspondence and autobiographical writings. In this contribution, however, I argue that Murakami's auto-representation also manifests itself in his novelistic writing. In other words, the author's response to the Japanese literary establishment is not limited to statements in interviews (Franssen 2017), his clearly autobiographically motivated works (Suter 2016), or his online performances (Flood 2015), but his fictional work, too, determines his position vis-à-vis the Japanese literary world, the nature of novelistic writing, and the predicaments of literary authorship in contemporary celebrity culture. Whilst previous Murakami readers have demonstrated that the author's works reflect on contemporary cultural production in general (Olster 2003, Seats 2006, Strecher 2014, Suter 2016), then, my point is more specific: Murakami's fictional writing can be read as a form of auto-representation and thus as an attempt to regain control over his figuration as a literary celebrity. It is in particular his bestseller novel *Ichi-kyū-hachi-yon* (2009–2010), translated as *1Q84*, that can be regarded as a polemic intervention in the debate about the success of 'The Murakami Phenomenon' (Zielinska-Elliott 2015).

Ghostwriters and literary hypes: authorial models in *1Q84*

Although the novel consists of approximately 1000 pages in the 2011 English translation, Strecher (2014, p. 57) observes that Murakami's *1Q84* 'may be summed up quite simply as the story of two soulmates, Kawana Tengo and Aomame Masami, who are separated at the age of ten, and the process by which they are reunited as adults some twenty-five years later'. The novel opens with Aomame stuck in a traffic jam on one of Tokyo's highways. As she exits her taxi, she finds that she has left the familiar world of the year 1984 and entered a parallel dimension, which she decides to call '1Q84'. Aomame's narrative, centred on her struggle to find her way back to 1984, is transected by the story of her soulmate Tengo, who gets involved in a literary scam involving his ghostwriting of a debutant's manuscript. The fictional universe evoked in the manuscript, mysteriously enough, seems almost identical to that of 1Q84. Before the two soulmates finally reunite, after a long and hazardous quest in which the move through parallel yet strangely connected dimensions, they are confronted with a grubby private investigator, a secretive religious cult, mysterious 'Little People', and 'air chrysalises' – glowing cocoons that appear out of thin air.

Other readers have offered insightful interpretations of *1Q84*'s rich storylines, interpreting it as a journey into the unconsciousness (Strecher 2014), a gender-critical plea for the female narrative voice (Hansen 2010), a reflection on changing perspectives on masculinity in Japanese society (Nihei 2013), or a story about the power of storytelling (Yeung 2017). In the margins of their interpretations, some readers (Rubin 2012, Clerici 2016, Marling 2016) have touched upon the hints of autobiography in *1Q84*, but, as Clerici (2016, p. 264) points out, 'it is impossible to read a story like *1Q84* as straight autobiography'. Clerici has a valid point, but it is possible, as I will demonstrate, to engage in a reading of *1Q84* as a work *about* Murakami's celebrity authorship, without reducing the work to mere autobiography in doing so.

1Q84 provides a reflection on the different ways of becoming an author. In the novel, two different types of literary authorship are juxtaposed: the mediagenic one-hit-wonder, on the one hand; and the paper-pushing ghostwriter, more at ease with anonymity, on the other. The narrative of *1Q84* works through the tensions between these two types of authorship, juxtaposing them without reducing them to an unambiguous opposition. Moreover, the fact that Murakami has incorporated details from his literary career in the narrative – as will become clear – invites his readers to understand the novel not only as a reflection on literary authorship in general, but also as an act of what Meizoz (2007) would label 'auto-representation'.

An interpretation of *1Q84* as a commentary on the business of being a (famous) writer begins by acknowledging that its main characters are all professionally involved in the literary industry. The character of Tengo is introduced as a prep-school mathematics teacher who works on the side as a copywriter and proofreader for literary magazines. He has been writing his whole life, but he is unsure whether he really has 'the talent to write fiction' (p. 21).² In the second chapter of the novel, the reader finds him discussing a manuscript with his friend, an editor called Komatsu who is described as 'a dedicated editor of literary magazines' with 'a certain reputation as one of the top people in the industry' (p. 19). The manuscript is entitled *Air Chrysalis* and was written by the 17-year-old girl Eriko Fukada, who has submitted it in a 'new writer's prize' magazine contest under the pen name of 'Fuka-Eri' (pp. 16–17). The editor is not convinced by the stylistic qualities of the manuscript, but he is taken in with the storyline. His unusual proposal is that Tengo should rewrite the manuscript as a ghostwriter. After revisions, he intends to re-submit the manuscript under Fuka-Eri's name. The experienced editor is sure she will win the new writer's prize and is even aiming for another award: the famous Akutagawa Prize.

Komatsu admits, however, that his ultimate motivation for the intended hoax is to expose the pretence and hypocrisy of the literary establishment. He argues that the production of literature, in his view, is 'not much different from the way a factory makes clocks' (p. 25): publishers hire professional writers to create stories to cater for a specific audience. Tengo's ghostwriting, in Komatsu's opinion, would therefore not be anything out of the ordinary. Yet, the editor points out, 'in the self-conscious world of literary fiction' such production methods 'are not openly sanctioned, so as a practical strategy we have to set Fuka-Eri up as our single author' (p. 25). Ultimately, Komatsu confesses 'I'd be doing it to screw the literary world': 'Those bastards all huddle together in their gloomy cave and kiss each other's asses, and lick each other's wounds, and trip each

other up, all the while spewing this pompous crap about the mission of literature' (p. 25).

Tengo, doubtful about the plan, demands to know why Komatsu believes he should be the person to ghostwrite the novel. The editor points out that although Fuka-Eri has 'something special' – stunning looks, an intriguing pen name, and an unusual imagination – she lacks something that Tengo, however, does possess. '[You] *like* to write' (p. 18; emphasis added), Komatsu tells him:

Your story lines are good. You have taste. [...] you write with intelligence and sensitivity. And real power. Unlike Fuka Eri, though, you still haven't grasped exactly what it is you want to write about. Which is why a lot of your stories are missing something at the core. (p. 24)

Unable to make up his mind, Tengo finds himself getting caught up in Komatsu's plans. He agrees to rewrite Fuka-Eri's novel, which goes on to take the new writer's prize and becomes a much acclaimed work. In the end, however, its supposed author does not win the coveted Akutagawa Prize. Later in the novel it is mentioned that 'because the book was so widely discussed, the selection committee for the Akutagawa Prize, the most prestigious literary award, kept their distance from it' (p. 581). By this point, however, Komatsu has lost his interest in critical acclaim and has become preoccupied with the novel's commercial potential: '[Make] no mistake about it', he says to Tengo, 'this is going to be a bestseller' (pp. 229–230). In a commercial respect, then, the editor's plan has succeeded, as *Air Chrysalis* becomes an instant success and its author the literary sensation of the year.

The relevance of *1Q84* for Murakami's auto-presentation is clear from the outset. As the plot is set into motion, striking similarities with the story of the author's own literary career come to the fore. Both Fuka-Eri and Tengo, each in their own way, evoke the authorial persona of Murakami. As with Fuka-Eri, the author made his debut by submitting his first work to a new writer's contest organised by a literary journal (*Gunzō*, in Murakami's case); like Tengo, he is an outsider to the literary world, who keeps to himself and simply 'likes to write' (Poole 2014). The plot and style of *Air Chrysalis* are distinctly surreal, much like Murakami's own works. Furthermore, Komatsu's vision of literary writing as a form of commercial production like any other invites a comparison with the critical rejection of Murakami's work as 'a smooth, popular item of consumption' (Miyoshi 1994, p. 234). Finally, the decision by the literary establishment in *1Q84* to keep their distance from *Air Chrysalis*, refusing to consider the much-discussed sensation as a potential winner of the Akutagawa Prize, of course, strongly resonates with the fact that the best-selling, globally popular Murakami has never won this prize, presumably as it is reserved for authors of *junbungaku*, the 'pure literature' in the tradition of the Japanese literary canon (see Kawakami 2002).

Along the lines of this interpretation, then, *1Q84* can be read as a novelistic response to the power relations structuring the literary field in which its author takes up his position. The characters and events portrayed in Murakami's novel expose the publishing industry's superficial obsession with glamorous and media-savvy celebrity authors as well as the literary establishment's snobbish distrust of popularity and bestseller success. The figure of Komatsu, for example, is a caricature of the literary entrepreneur, who views novels merely as marketable commodities. Likewise, the media success of Fuka-Eri exposes the general public's craving for mediagenic personalities. A humorous touch is

manifest in the descriptions of the public reception of *Air Chrysalis*. Critics fail to see through Komatsu's hoax as Fuka-Eri, despite her unworldly, taciturn character and inability to speak in continuous sentences, turns out to be a media success. When she has to conduct a press conference, she stuns the audience: she is 'downright witty' and makes 'a great impression' (p. 227). In other words, the fact that she cannot produce a proper sentence, ironically, in no way prevents her from being a literary sensation. At the same time, *1Q84* depicts literary critics and jury members as members of an elitist clique, disdainful of bestselling successes and focused exclusively on what they perceive to be 'pure' literature. Along the way, Murakami pokes fun at critics who describe his work as a 'symbol deciphering game', as he has Tengo read a couple of *Air Chrysalis* reviews in which critics judge Fuka-Eri's supposedly 'deliberately cryptic posture' to be a form of 'authorial laziness' (p. 380; see Rubin 2012, p. 377–378). Thus, although not autobiographical, *1Q84* is arguably 'about' Murakami's career as a celebrity author.

Conclusion

With *1Q84*, Murakami offers a work of auto-representation that responds to the main tendencies in the authorial hetero-representation. In doing so, he indirectly fashions himself as an author who questions the superficial world of literary hypes and media-genic authors, and at the same time distances himself from the conventions of the literary world and its elitist dedication to 'pure literature'.

However, *1Q84* does more than simply offer a straightforward opposition between two authorial personas. In his reading of the novel, William Marling (2016, p. 133) labels Tengo as the character 'who serves as proxy for Murakami', but the relations between the characters and their author are far more layered and complex. The entrepreneurial attitude and calculated publishing strategies characteristic of Komatsu, for instance, are certainly not foreign to Murakami's public image: the author's Tokyo business office often provides the setting for his interviews and he has even confessed that the success of his novel *Norwegian Wood* was the result of a 'strategic choice' to 'break into the mainstream' (Wray 2009, p. 340).

Furthermore, the contrast between the hyped celebrity author Fuka-Eri and the anonymous grub-street hack Tengo is undercut by the fact that the latter starts out as a copy editor, a cog in the machinery of the literary industry, but has in him the authorial powers to affect, in the most profound sense, the world. For, in the course of the novel, Tengo's gift reveals itself to be so powerful that the fictional reality he created in *Air Chrysalis* slowly but surely transforms his own reality. After (co-)creating a world in which air chrysalises appear from nowhere and two moons hang in the sky, Tengo begins to encounter these elements in real life – as does Aomame, as she tries to find her way out of the alternative dimension that makes up '1Q84'. 'What kind of reality mimics fictional creations?', Tengo wonders:

Could I have somehow left the real world and entered the world of *Air Chrysalis* like Alice falling down the rabbit hole? Or could the real world have been made over so as to match exactly the story of *Air Chrysalis*? (p. 548)

Both explanations, the novel seems to suggest, are correct. While Aomame has fallen down the rabbit hole as she descended an emergency exit ladder, Tengo's powerful

imagination has proven capable of giving reality itself a makeover. At the same time, Tengu would not have been able to discover his true potential without his involvement in the publishing industry, as it is Fuka-Eri, the celebrity, who provides him with the storyline that allows him to tap into his talents. Furthermore, it is telling that the fraudulent process of ghostwriting Fuka-Eri's novel serves to awaken Tengu's slumbering literary talents. After finishing his work as a ghostwriter, Tengu returns to his own stories and discovers that the rewrite has 'dislodged a rock that had been blocking his well-spring until now [...]. *Air Chrysalis* had probably stimulated something that had been deep inside him all along' (p. 198). Finally, he has grasped what he wants to write about.

It turns out, then, that the two authorial personae – the celebrity author and the grub-street hack – are deeply dependent on each other. They meet at the level of the authorial auto-representation: the sum of choices made by the author in literary works, essays, interviews, and public performances. In fact, this is already indicated early on in the novel, when Komatsu reveals his literary scheme to Tengu. 'We put the two writers together and invent a brand-new one', the experienced editor explains to Tengu: 'We add your perfect style to Fuka-Eri's raw story. It's an ideal combination' (p. 24). Although Komatsu's objective was first and foremost of a commercial nature, he confirms one of the novel's main points, underlining the general message conveyed by Murakami's auto-representation: bestselling success can be attained by combining a professional attitude with an authentic literary calling.

Notes

1. See the analysis presented in Franssen (2017), which this contribution elaborates on.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to page numbers refer to Murakami (2011).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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