The Enduring Significance of Shadow: From Nagai Kafū's 'River Sumida' to Murakami Haruki's *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*

Stephen Dodd, SOAS

There are various reasons I don't count myself as a fan of Murakami, but this is not to ignore the huge attraction of his work to readers in many countries of the world. And I should also note how, over the years, quite a lot of my own students have written a range of thoughtful, insightful, and persuasive essays on Murakami. In addition, the fact is that I too have been very attracted—seduced might be the better word—by certain aspects of his writing, and by some (though definitely not all) of his texts. Now, there is probably nothing worse than a grumpy ageing academic moaning about what they don't like. So, in the spirit of positivity and gratitude, I would like to take the opportunity in this paper to return to the first Murakami book I ever read in the early 1990s, the book that I literally could not put down. Fortunately, I was on a plane from London to Tokyo, and those were the Aeroflot days when there was nothing to drink but sickly lemonade, and the only inflight entertainment available was to enjoy the view of Siberia passing by at a snail's pace from the window seat. And so, I had every reason to lose myself in Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World. By the time we were coming down into Tokyo and I was finishing the novel, I was entranced and captivated, but also, I believe, I felt the seeds of doubt and disenchantment with Murakami's writing that have stayed with me until the present day.

Now, temporal distance is a fantastic purifier that allows only the most important things to rise to the surface. When, in preparation for writing this essay, I thought back over my experience of reading the novel about 25 years ago, one particular thought immediately came to me. I had been disturbed by the relationship between Boku and his shadow. Let me say that this is not necessarily a bad thing; a feeling of being disturbed can be a very positive factor in any book worth reading because this is often a sign that new perspectives are being opened up to the reader.

During the course of this essay, I will go into details about the role of the shadow in Japanese literature and in Murakami's novel in particular, but first let me suggest why, from a broader perspective, the concept of the shadow has served as an important metaphor to explain the way in which human beings can experience and interpret reality.

A while back, a friend reminded me of a story related to the Italian astrologer Galileo and his observations of the moon in the early seventeenth century. When Galileo turned his telescope to the moon's surface, he noticed that the dark lines making up the lunar spots changed as the moon shifted position. He concluded that these lines were actually shadows, and the surface of the moon must therefore be dotted with mountains and valleys. From that moment, the medieval view of the moon as one of a series of pristine orbs hanging in the heavens was dispelled, and it was possible to see familiar links between our world and the moon far away up there in the sky. In other words, Galileo's discovery of shadow led to an entirely new understanding of the

universe that irretrievably demolished our earlier understanding of the Heavens as nothing more than a beautiful but inert manifestation of God's glory.

But shadow has also served as a significant factor in the narrower world of modern Japanese literature. I will come to the symbolic significance of shadow in *Hard Boiled Wonderland* shortly. But, before that, let me reflect on another example of the power of shadow, that is, in Nagai Kafu's 1909 story, 'The River Sumida.' This beautiful depiction of Tokyo showed little interest in the brightly lit spaces of the modern Meiji capital, places such as Ginza. Rather, his words lingered lovingly over the shaded alleyways and backstreets of the cityscape, which were dotted with dark enclosed retreats.

In this story, we are introduced to the seventeen-year-old Chōkichi, who is instinctively inclined towards the pre-Meiji arts of music and acting; his mother O-toyo who, despite being a teacher of *Tokiwazu* traditional music, wants her son to study hard in order to succeed as a modern bureaucrat; his uncle Ragetsu, a haiku poet whose disreputable youthful exploits got him expelled from the family home; and O-ito, Chōkichi's fifteen-year-old love interest who is about to enter a geisha house as the story begins. 'The River Sumida' was written in the first couple of years following Kafū's return to Japan after a five-year journey around the United States and Europe. Most events of the story, which take place around the *shitamachi* area close to the river, are portrayed in a way that strongly hints at the traumatic effects of Westernization on the Japanese psychological as well as physical landscape. In fact, Kafū had nothing against the West *per se*: many of his experiences abroad were entirely positive. However, upon his return to Japan he lamented what he felt was the way his country was turning into a pale imitation of the West at the same time as it

was losing its own (as he saw it) authentic identity. In other words, Chōkichi may be interpreted as a symbol of resistance against the forces of modernity.

An important characteristic of shadow is that things are not clearly defined: reality always remains enticingly ambiguous. And Kafū very skilfully employs this ambiguity between real and imaginary spaces in his depiction of Chōkichi's visits to the Miyatoza kabuki theatre. The boy has an extremely strong dislike for the brash modern world of Meiji, when young men are encouraged to pursue selfish ambition and celebrate the ideals encapsulated in the term, risshin shusse. In one scene, it is early spring time and, escaping from the harsh sunlight of early spring, he plunges into an enclosed theatrical world in which 'the warm, sour (*kusai*) smell of the theatre crowds pressed down from the yet darker regions above' [臭い生暖かい人込みの温気がなお更暗い上の方から吹き下りて来る]. The crowds that gather in this enclosed theatrical environment are no so much ambitious Meiji individuals, but rather, refugees just like Chōkichi who are fleeing a world beyond their control. The audience consists of a group of uprooted ghosts whose only choice is to seek comfort in numbers.

In 'The River Sumida,' Kafū uses this theatrical space as a way to articulate a kind of freedom by throwing into further question the distinctions between reality and artificiality. Chōkichi is totally bewitched as he watches a scene on the stage in which a courtesan gazes upon the moon, the outline of which is reproduced on stage by 'strings pulling away clouds to reveal a light, a large round hole in the black screen.' [真黒に塗りたてた空の書割の中央を大きく穿抜いてある円い穴に灯がついて、雲形の蔽ひをば糸で引き上げる] However, the fact that this theatrical effect is complete amateurish in no way detracts from its profound impact upon

Chōkichi. Quite the contrary, it allows him to re-evaluate earlier experiences in the 'real' world beyond the theatre's confines. The entirely artificial theatrical scene now before him actually appears to take on a more realistic aura when he recalls how he caught sigh of a similarly bright moon (that is, the 'real' moon) from the Imado Bridge. These two visions of the moon, one 'real' and one 'theatrical,' become so blended that it is no longer possible to decide which perception of the moon is more authentic, with the result that 'the stage was no longer a stage.'「もう舞台は舞台でなくなった」 It seems natural, then, that, after leaving the theatre and stopping for a moment on the actual bridge, he should stand for a moment in the bitter cold, and hum a fragment of a traditional Jōruri (puppet theatre) ballad. Art and reality overlap with each other.

Some have suggested that Kafu's preference for protective, shadowy locations—whether the dark backstreets of the city or the theatre—gave him licence to replay the pleasurable memories of an earlier Edo landscape to his heart's content. There is some truth in that interpretation, but it is also possible to appreciate these spaces as a repository of dreams, fantasies and barely repressed unconscious urges. Far from implying a rejection of the modern world, these dark backwaters constitute an absolutely vital aspect of what it meant to be Japanese at the end of the Meiji period. In other words, Kafu's landscapes describe what might be called the shadow to modernity.

By the time Murakami wrote Hard Boiled Wonderland, a huge number of social, political and historical changes had transformed Japan beyond recognition, and yet it is in the shared context of this broader literary and cultural background that shadow continues to play such a significant role. You

will recall that Murakami's Hard Boiled Wonderland is in two parts, structured in alternating chapters that depict these separate realms of existence, until they merge at the end. The protagonist, known as Watashi, works as a calcutec. His job is to shuffle information within his own brain for a quasi-governmental organization called the System. In the course of the novel, he is pursued by semiotics, technicians who work for a rival organization known as the Factory. It turns out that a brilliant professor had placed some technology into Watashi's brain, and this has led to the creation of a dream-like walled town within Watashi's mind known as the End of the World. The protagonist of this alternative world is also a first-person figure but, in line with the more introverted nature of this world, he is given the less formal Japanese title of Boku. At the end of the novel, Watashi decides to abandon Hard Boiled Wonderland in favour of the End of the World, where he expects to dwell forever as his Boku persona together with the librarian with whom he has fallen in love.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the relationship that really disturbed me when I first read the book was between Boku and his own shadow. When Boku enters the walled town, the Gatekeeper uses a knife to cut away his shadow. This is a prerequisite for all people who choose to enter this protective world. As the novel reaches its climax, there is some possibility that Boku and his shadow will reunite and throw themselves into the Southern Pond, thus escaping and returning to the relatively more realistic world of Hard Boiled Wonderland. But they don't and, as a reader, it was with deep sadness and disappointment that I experienced this failure to reconnect.

I will return to this final scene later, but let me first reflect on the various ways in which shadow appears to function as a kind of yeast to the novel, informing the text, filling it out, and bringing forth a sense of life and potential.

For one thing, the initial separation of Boku and his shadow suggests the traumatic replacement of three-dimensional depth with a shadow-less two-dimensional portrayal of reality. But in reality, the novel is loaded with other mirrored images and reflections that function like shadows. And these shadows generate life and energy. Most obviously, the chapters alternate between two worlds, so that the brighter cyber-reality of Hard Boiled Wonderland is juxtaposed against the more dream-like space of the End of the World. It takes a while for the reader to identify corresponding echoes between the two, but by the story's end, these worlds have become so interlinked that it is hard to discern the point at which one space—or rather one chapter—ends and another begins. As far as the reader is concerned, the novel is structured in such a way as to generate a kind of dynamic bipolar activity in the reader's brain.

This process by which one side is played off against the other appears even within the first chapter, where Watashi thrusts his hands into both left and right pockets to make separate but simultaneous calculations of the coins in his hands. He is refining his work skills here, as he aims to hone the separate parts of his brain so that they can be brought together eventually, as Murakami describes it, "like two halves of a split melon." Indeed, the pairing of opposites is reflected in the very layout of the End of the World. On one of his walks through the town, Boku comes upon the north semi-circular plaza with its clock tower and its air of mystery. In contrast, the south plaza across the river is described

as being similarly shaped, but having no atmosphere at all. These plazas are different but at the same time they form two halves of a whole. They are meaningful only to the extent that they compliment and echo each other. It is surely no coincidence that these two semi-circular spaces, juxtaposed within Watashi's mind, resemble the physical shape of the brain in which the End of the World is lodged. The overall effect of this mutual shadowing is to produce the dynamic tension and constant toing-and-froing that characterizes the function of the human mind.

But shadow and mirroring also function in the novel as a darker and more threating force. Even within the realm of Hard Boiled Wonderland, which most closely resembles the familiar experience of everyday metropolitan life in Japan, there is another subterranean space only meters below the city's subway system; a place of foul smells, danger and unseen horrors. Within its shadows lurk the INKlings, ghoulish creatures upon which it is claimed that the kappa myth was based. And even worse, the terrain of this contemporary version of the mythical Shinto Yomi no kuni, or World of Darkness, is honeycombed with holes filled with leeches that, should he fall in, threaten to dissolve Watashi into a horrific bloody gore. There are echoes here of another dystopic fairy tale, namely, Izumi Kyoka's Saint of Mt. Koya, where the monk is showered with leeches as he passes through a forest on the way to the home of the woman who uses men's lust to turn them into wild beasts. But, whether in Kyoka's story or Murakami's novel, these threatening and nightmarish scenes function as a test, to ensure that the hero can pass muster to reach the end of his journey. In both cases, such horrific and shadowy landscapes might best be understood as what Sigmund Freud

called the return of the repressed, the manifestation of a dark side that nevertheless constitutes an inescapable feature of the broader reality.

But, while such shadowy worlds can point to a dystopian space that engenders revulsion, sometimes it is the very lack of shadow in Murakami's novel that implies an equally unpalatable realm of possibilities. In the End of the World, the characters have no names; they are known only by their functions. There is the Gatekeeper whose role is to guard the entrance to the walled town and keep watch over the dismembered shadows of newcomers like Boku: there is the Caretaker at the power station, a harmless and ineffectual figure who belongs neither to the town nor the surrounding woods: and the Librarian, whose shadow died when she was 17 years old, and who barely remembers her own mother. Boku, meanwhile, bears the title of Dreamreader, since his role is to excavate fragments of memory trapped in the unicorn skulls. In some ways, to be identified entirely in terms of function promises complete freedom from the tyranny of choice and insecurity. As the Colonel, another archetypal figure in the novel, explains to Boku, the town is perfect and offers everything we need; the sooner Boku lets his shadow die, the sooner he will dissolve into the bliss of unknowing.

Related to this matter of function, I am reminded of Sakaguchi Ango's essay, "A Personal View of Japanese Culture" ("Nihon bunka shikan"), in which he elaborates on three sights that struck him as irresistibly beautiful; the Kosuge Prison on the outskirts of Tokyo which he often saw from his commuter train, a dry ice factory located on Tsukudajima in Tokyo Bay, and a Japanese warship he came across during a trip to a port. What he loves about these three things is

their utter functionality and their total lack of extraneous frills. Moreover, all three structures—characterized by prison routine, factory monotony and naval discipline—signify enclosed and highly regulated human communities. In other words, every angle and aspect of these structures is known and trusted. There is simply no space for hesitation or insecurity: everything in its place. The fact that Ango wrote this essay in 1942 only underlines the fascist potential of these ideas.

However, even if there is a seductive appeal in the possibility of existing in the End of the World entirely as a functioning part rather than as an individual, there is also a down side. And it makes absolute sense that the one who lays out the terrible cost of having no shadow is none other than Boku's shadow, who becomes increasingly desperate during the course of the novel to convince Boku to join up with him again and escape what is literally a mind-numbing world. When Boku finally informs his shadow that he has grown so attached to the town and especially to the town Librarian that he has decided to stay, his shadow can certainly see a certain logic in his decision. And yet, his shadow is obliged to point out that, although the townsfolk might well feel content because they have no mind, and consequently lack any impulse to fight or hate, they also lack the things that give meaning to life: namely, joy, communion, a sense of love.

Yet another manifestation of shadow in Murakami's novel is related to the wider context of history that informs what are otherwise purely discrete and momentary events within the literary text. The existence of this broader contextual perspective is particularly important in the case of Murakami because the extent to which he actually engages with Japanese historical events has become a major source of discussion amongst critics. 1995 is normally picked

out as the year in which Murakami shifted in his literature from a depiction of detachment to one of greater social commitment. This was the year in which *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* came out, with its exploration, among other things, of Japanese brutality in the wartime puppet state of Manchukuo. Moreover, the natural disaster of the Kobe earthquake, and the man-made horror of the Aum Shinrikyo gas attack, which both took place in the same year, led Murakami to probe deeper into shared social trauma through his works. We see this in the short story collection, *after the quake*, and his non-fictional piece, *Underground*. My point here is that the author's attempt to encompass broader social events in his writing in the form of both fictional and non-fictional genres suggests that neither genre is adequate on its own.

In fact, this mixture of fictional and non-fictional narratives is also to be found in Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World. In the book, it is the libraries, which are present in both realms, that anchor fragmentary experiences in a broader and more significant historical context. For example, in the world of Hard Boiled Wonderland, Watashi gleans information on unicorns from books that he gets from the library. One of these books suggests that the unicorn is merely a mythical creature, while another hints at the tantalizing possibility that perhaps unicorns do indeed exist. This latter book blurs the boundaries between history and fiction by describing what appears to be a factual account of the skull of a unicorn that was discovered in the Ukraine just before the Russian Revolution. It is described as passing through various hands until it disappeared during the Siege of Leningrad in 1941. It reads like a mixture of fact and fiction.

Meanwhile, in the End of the World, it is a matter of fact that unicorns exist: they can be seen grazing in the fields, and their skulls fill the library stacks in place of books. But the barrier between history and fiction, between dream and reality, is no less tenuous. In his role of Dreamreader, Boku extracts the traces of human memory that linger in those bleached and bony frames. And yet, the memories can only be grasped piecemeal, never as a complete picture. In short, both libraries offer the possibility of disclosing meaning and piecing together time, but in both cases meaning and history are only half grasped, and remain enveloped in shadow.

Now, through these various reflections on the role of shadow, I hope to have given some clue as to why, all those years ago on my flight to Japan, I was so entranced by the unfolding narrative of Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World that I never even noticed the endless expanse of Siberia slowly turning below. But let me finish with a few words on why I never felt entirely comfortable with Murakami even then, and why I still don't. In a nutshell, the problem for me is that I don't believe Murakami ever breaks through to a satisfactory ending. He promises so much, but never quite delivers.

You will recall that, at the end of the book, Boku goes to the gatehouse where his seriously weakened shadow is being held captive. Boku carries his shadow through deep snow towards the Southern Pool where they intend to dive in together and escape the walled town. But once at the pool, Boku informs his shadow that he has decided to remain with the librarian who has become his lover. His shadow has no option but to escape alone by diving into the pool. The consequence is that Boku will be banned from the town because his shadow has

never fully died, and the librarian will also have to leave the town because Boku has restored enough fragments of memory to her through his reading of the skulls that she now no longer qualifies as a resident of the town. In other words, they are both condemned to live out their lives in the limbo of the woods with other outcastes who also retain traces of mind.

Now, I see the romantic appeal here, and I see why this self-sacrificing side of Boku is something to celebrate and admire, and I also see how it demonstrates a satisfying denouement of sorts. However, at least within the parameters of the novel, it is the Hard Boiled Wonderland, rather than The End of the World, that comes closest to what we might describe as a real world. Boku will only ever exist as a figment of Watashi's imagination. In my opinion, this is a cop out, a refusal to engage fully with life. I would suggest that Murakami is an author who has failed to try and use his words to push beyond the limits of his present knowledge. Murakami remains too unwilling to go beyond: he is too comfortable. In that sense, the disturbance I feel as a reader is more of a negative, rather than a positive, kind. It is as if Murakami, having looked at the moon and having seen the shadows of the mountains, felt that his discovery was too earth-shattering, and decided to switch to another telescope that lacked the power to see shadows. You cannot do that and be taken seriously. Having said that, boy, what a tempting thought that, at the end of my own days, I find myself knocking on the gate of that walled town!!