

**“THE CREATURE DISAPPEARS FOR OUR CONVENIENCE”: AN
ANALYSIS OF MURAKAMI HARUKI’S “ELEPHANT VANISHES”**

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The Elephant Vanishes came out in 1993 as the first English collection of short stories by Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (1949–). Selecting from existing Japanese pieces, it was “another new re-edited collection” that “an American publisher originally made.”¹ Among them, “Pan’ya saishūgeki パン屋再襲撃 [The Second Bakery Attack]” (1985) and “TV pīpuru TV ピーブル [TV People]” (1989) mark the early stage of the author’s writing career in the sense that they were title pieces of Japanese collections respectively in 1986 and 1990. However, they do not receive special arrangement in the English version with seventeen pieces. In contrast, although originally positioned second after the title piece at the beginning of the Japanese book *The Second Bakery Attack*, the translated short story “Zō no shōmetsu 象の消滅 [The Elephant Vanishes]” (1985) assumes dual significance in the English edition as its eponymous text and with its placement at the very end. This added significance might partly come from a marketing consideration with the perplexingly curious title.² Still, the story has not attracted much critical attention, presumably considered frivolous because of the reader’s difficulty in making sense, or even “an ultimate negation to convey a story with some actual meaning attached to it other than the story itself.”³

¹ Aoyama Minami, “Murakami Haruki no ‘Zō no shōmetsu’ 村上春樹の「象の消滅」 [Murakami Haruki’s ‘Elephant Vanishes’]” in Komata Tomoshi, ed., *Murakami Haruki Nihon bungaku kenkyū ronbun shūsei* 46 (Tokyo: Wakakusa shobō, 1998), 252, 238. All the translations from Japanese secondary sources are mine.

² Jay Rubin, “Zō no tsukurikata: Murakami Haruki wo yakushite 象のつくり方: 村上春樹を訳して [How to Make an Elephant: On Having Translated Murakami Haruki]” *Kokusahi Kōryū* 73 (1996), 63–64. Rubin, one of the two translators of the pieces included in *The Elephant Vanishes*, ascribes its final edited form to the liking of an editor at Alfred A. Knopf that originally published the collection.

³ Nakamura Miharū, “Yukue fumei no jinbutsu kankei: ‘shōmetsu’ to ‘renkan’ no monogatari 行方不明の人物関係: <消滅>と<連環>の物語 [The

The assumption here is that the physical effacement of an elephant in the text is indeed not supposed to allow a rational explanation and is expected to remain a mystery. This does not mean, however, that the reading experience of “The Elephant Vanishes” yields little interpretative understanding. As Wada Atsuhiko points out, an unspecified, yet central issue is economic efficiency, and, despite of his skepticism, it is certainly possible to figure out to a great extent, for instance, the root cause of the protagonist’s “tendency to get attracted to what the elephant stands for” as well as “the gap that lies between” the two main characters.⁴ In addition, what makes this text outstanding is not the Kafkaesque weirdness of the story told but the fact that the text as a whole is structured unstable with a discrepancy between an imaginatively unusual content and a sharply divided form. It is not “a comforting text” about irretrievable loss that “finds a way how to get along with the system rather than criticize it.”⁵ A persistent sense of antipathy to the socioeconomic system underlies apparent irrationality of the essentially disquieting text, aimed at “the problematic and incompletely conceptualized relationships between the individual and society” in postindustrial reality.⁶

As often the case with Murakami’s early fictional pieces, an unnamed man around the age of thirty, more specifically thirty-one years old by the end of September in this case, narrates the story about an unrealistic, even absurd occurrence. Unmarried, he lives alone in an unspecified “town,” commuting to a company as an office worker. As a suburban municipality near a metropolis like Tokyo, his “town” is large

Relationship of Missing People: The Story of ‘Disappearance’ and ‘Links’]” *Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū* 43/4 (1998), 109. In discussion of the motif of disappearance in Murakami’s fiction, especially *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Nakamura further explains this idea of “media as a message in which the message content is nullified, that is, a pure signifier” (109).

⁴ Wada Atsuhiko, “‘Zō no shōmetsu’: zō wo meguru ‘dokusha’ no bōken 「象の消滅」：象をめぐる<読者>の冒険 [‘The Elephant Vanishes’: The ‘Reader’s’ Adventures concerning an Elephant]” *Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū* 43/4 (1998), 163.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶ Chiyoko Kawakami, “The Unfinished Cartography: Murakami Haruki and the Postmodern Cognitive Map,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 57/3 (2002), 310.

enough to have an increasing number of high-rise, expensive apartment buildings and urban facilities, such as a small-scale zoo, although the zoo has been closed due to financial difficulties. The story concerns, as the title literally indicates, the sudden disappearance of a very aged elephant, so old that no other zoos care to take it. The animal's physical existence, along with its old keeper, simply and mysteriously vanishes without leaving any trace from within a small enclosure allotted for it, reportedly sometime between early evening on the 17th of May and the following afternoon. Having paid attention to the animal since the zoo's closure, the narrator closely follows TV and magazine coverage of the aftermath and collects all the newspaper articles exclusively about the incident in scrapbooks. The public interest, however, dwindles in a week, and a few more months are enough to erase the memory from people's minds, except for his.

This account takes up the work's first half. Uncharacteristic of Murakami's regular writing, this section reveals social satire clearly targeted at hypocrisy and hardly disguised greed of the expanding city. The narrator's perusal of available information and his direct observation of certain events expose the town's budget-conscious partisan politics, entrepreneurship that pursues profits at minimal costs, and the media sensationalism that seeks to agitate the general population as well as the public opinion that easily sways to news frenzy. Although the narrator does not directly comment on them, he apparently does not approve of these social reactions, judging from the way he observes them in a detached, yet somewhat ridiculing way.

Otherwise, this portion of the story exhibits the Japanese writer's typical style and imagination à la Franz Kafka, particularly reminiscent of *The Metamorphosis* (1915) in terms of central non-human creatures. The Czech writer pioneered the textual reconfiguration of reality through presenting a grotesquely unreal situation in minute detail to the point of precluding disbelief and incredibility. It is a well-known fact that Murakami pays devout homage to Kafka, to the extent that one of his major novels is titled *Umibe no Kafuka* 海辺のカフカ [Kafka on the Shore] (2002) with the eponymous protagonist. In addition, known as highly shy of media exposure and publicity of award winning, Murakami nevertheless chose to receive in person the 2006 Kafka Prize in Prague, citing for the exceptional public appearance his great admiration of the Czech predecessor. As a result, Kafka's influence on Murakami's writing is manifest on a technical level, exemplified in the current case by the real-life-like news reporting surrounding the giant animal's mysterious disappearance. More

importantly, Kafka's fiction hints at a problem in society, which is too insidiously pervasive for people to recognize it. In order to bring the underlying issue to the forefront of the reader's awareness, the fiction shockingly destroys expectation of literary protocols and life's continuum with frightening imagination actualized in uncompromisingly daily normalcy, and this applies to Murakami's fiction as well.

There are at least three differences, however. First, compared with Gregor Samsa's sudden transformation into a large insect, for instance, the disappearance of an elephant might appear innocuous, even humorous. This is not to deny Kafka's sense of humor, but many of Murakami's oeuvres tend to exhibit relatively lighthearted humor unlike Kafka's that is often dark and abstruse. Second, what relates Murakami's fictional world to today's life is not only close attention to detail but also abundant references to consumer goods and popular items predominantly of Western culture, which saturate his characters' lives in their daily routines. Third, different from Kafka's fiction in which an individual faces an inexorable, incomprehensible system that rigidly constitutes the social fabric, Murakami's character one day finds him/herself somehow placed in an almost identical, yet somewhat altered reality. The nature of reality transmutes itself without any dramatic, telltale signs while the protagonist initially undergoes no internal or external transformation. *Ichi kyū hachi yon IQ84* (2009, 2010) offers a typical example. The short story at hand somehow throws the protagonist into a partially warped reality of a shrinking elephant.

These three points are conducive to some critics' denouncement of Murakami's fiction as frivolous and irrelevant to grave social issues.⁷ Still, in terms of foregrounding an unrecognized condition latent in familiar reality through effects of shock and humor, he follows in Kafka's steps. The question, then, is what he seeks to expose and make people realize from behind the façade of frivolity and inexplicable unreality in the midst of normalcy. It is not the social milieu that demand unconditional devotion at the sacrifice of individual self-integrity as in *The Metamorphosis*, nor the highly organized, rigid system of legal régime or bureaucratic authority that seeks its own end regardless of citizens' rights or interests as in *The Trial*

⁷ For summaries of sampled criticism, see Kawakami, "The Unfinished Cartography," 310–312, 320; Jay Rubin, "The Other World of Murakami Haruki," *Japan Quarterly* (1992), 499.

(1925) and *The Castle* (1926). Murakami hints at an even more indescribable or unspecific situation inherent in the very regular way we live our contemporary life that causes us unacknowledged anxiety.

The key lies in what truly differentiates this story. It is neither the absurdity of the elephant's putative escape, nor, as the narrator eventually reveals, the unreality of its gradual shrinkage. Murakami's fiction abounds in the sudden, inexplicable disappearance of characters and in the minimized size of beings, as used in such works like "TV People" and *IQ84*.⁸ In fact, "The Elephant Vanishes" is unusual and distinctive among Murakami's works in how its composition consists of equally divided, yet ill-connected halves. In the original Japanese publication of the book *The Second Bakery Attack*, the first section of "The Elephant Vanishes" has fourteen pages (35–48), followed by the second section of another fourteen pages (49–62), with the dividing middle coinciding with the folding between pages 48–49. In the English translation, the division between the two sections is patently marked with a blank line on page 318, and it also occurs in the middle of the story, if a half empty space of the first page is taken into consideration.⁹

As we have seen, the first section reveals the narrator carefully and persistently following the newspaper articles and TV reports that do not and cannot yield any conclusive evidence or statement about the missing elephant. The second part begins after a hiatus of a few months toward the end of September, when we find him at a business party as an able Public Relations worker for a major electronic appliance company, advertising a new set of coordinated kitchen products to women's magazines. He meets an editor, a woman five years younger, from one of those magazines. Both being single, young professionals in the prime of their lives, they find each other attractive and continue their dialogue at a cocktail bar after the party.

⁸ See a short list in Nakamura, "Yukue fumei no jinbutsu kankei," 107. Wada ("Zō no shōmetsu," 160) argues that we would be able to make "a quite lengthy, complicated list...of things lost" in Murakami's stories.

⁹ See Murakami Haruki, *Murakami Haruki zen sakuhin 1979–1989*, 8: *Tanpenshū III* [The Complete Works by Murakami Haruki 1979–1989, 8: The Collection of Short Stories III] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1991): 39–61. In the case of this 1991 edition that contains this short story, the second section is slightly longer, probably due to the transcription of the dialogue with which the second section abounds unlike the first.

In these somewhat informal circumstances, he inadvertently confides in her about his recent secret. Prompted by her, he reluctantly claims to have been the last witness of the animal and its keeper from a distance, hesitantly asserting that the elephant was physically shrinking before the lights were turned off in the house to close the view.

With the same number of pages, the two sections do not interrelate to each other in a meaningful way, except for the same narrator and the account of an improbable impossibility. The first section mainly consists of the protagonist's narration, and the second section of a dialogue between him and the editor. This might be construed as a narratological experimentation by the author who has tried various forms of fiction in terms of modes (realistic, imaginary, and mixed), voices (first and third-person narrations), and length (short, mid-sized, and long) during his writing career. He also experimented with alternate chapters, in which two unrelated plots unfold in parallel only to merge toward the end, in two of his major novels, *Sekai no owari to hādoboirudo wandārando* 世界の終わりとハードボイルド・ワンダーランド [Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World] (1985) and *IQ84*. The current case differs from this narrative technique, however. It also diverges from an ending that does not connect well with the preceding main body as in *Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi* 国境の南、太陽の西 [South of the Border, West of the Sun] (1992) and *Supūtoniku no koibito* スプートニクの恋人 [Sputnik Sweetheart] (1999). In these mid-sized novels, the male narrator-protagonist drags on with his daily routine without a resolution after a leading female character mysteriously disappears.

The sharp disaccord between the quantitatively perfect symmetry of two halves and their poorly matched, forcibly stitched contents makes “The Elephant Vanishes” at once unique and awkward as a text. On the one hand, the text divided exactly at the midpoint largely precludes a possibility of a mere chance. Although Saito Tomoya argues that the protagonist might be telling his entire narrative to the reader from the standpoint at its closure,¹⁰ he is hardly capable of, or inclined to provide such a carefully

¹⁰ Tomoya Saito, “‘Shutai’ eno kikyū: Murakami Haruki ‘Zō no shōmetsu’ ron <主体>への希求: 村上春樹「象の消滅」論 [A Longing for ‘the Subject’: On Murakami Haruki’s ‘Elephant Vanishes’]” in Baba Shigeyuki and Sano Masatoshi, eds., *Kyōshitsu’ no naka no Murakami Haruki* [Murakami Haruki in ‘The Classroom’] (Tokyo: Hitsuji shobō, 2011), 83, 91–92.

measured narration when he growingly fails to suppress mental disequilibrium. Rather, it suggests an incisive authorial intervention. On the other hand, the two sections not only do not interrelate well in content, but they are also structurally ill-fitted with each other. The first section can stand almost independently on its own as one of Murakami's uncanny short stories with a kind of closure that comes with people's faded interest in the elephant, whereas the second section topically depends on the first half for its unfolding, and the narrative remains open-ended without a resolution with regard to what becomes of the narrator. The text as a whole might give us the impression of an inadequately crafted, even ill-conceived composition.

The topic of the elephant's disappearance, which is one of the only two elements bridging the two sections, provides a certain common thread in terms of economic expediency. Metaphorically speaking, the animal's existence is unwanted, and therefore it shrinks and disappears. The town's adoption and care of the otherwise helpless animal appears benevolently considerate enough, and the local citizenry, including the narrator, generally welcomes the notion of a town-owned elephant as their shared property. Yet the elephant's presence is actually not quite appreciated considering the costly way to keep it alive. The municipal administration would rather not suffer the infamy of elephant-killing nor incur tax revenue loss due to the hampered construction of a high-rise condominium on the former zoo site. As a political compromise for saving their face and money, the town takes over the elephant for free. The real estate developer pays for enclosing facilities and donates a small lot at the hilly outskirts where an old school gym is moved to shelter the animal. The elephant keeper is still paid by his previous employer, and the creature mainly feeds on schoolchildren's lunch leftovers.

The visitor also finds the animal solidly tied to the concrete base with an unbreakably thick and sturdy iron chain and fenced in with concrete and large iron bars about three meters high. Large and heavy as an elephant is, this is obviously an excessive security measure against the "feeble old thing" that is considered not "likely to pose a danger to anyone."¹¹ Nobody

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, all the references to this short story are to its translation: Murakami Haruki, "The Elephant Vanishes," in Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin, trans., *The Elephant Vanishes* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 310–311.

objects to this rather harsh treatment, however, and the aged creature is expected to pass away sooner than later. In fact, the municipal government anticipates “tak[ing] full possession of the land” upon the animal’s death that should occur in the near future.¹² As the narrator suspects some causality between people’s perception of the elephant and their swift consignment of its memory into oblivion, the creature’s abrupt disappearance amounts to no more than what is supposed to happen before long, actually rendering the whole process less troublesome or costly for those in charge by not leaving a huge carcass to dispose of. The incident is “convenient to all the sides...even their unspoken desire.”¹³ The old, quiet, reserved keeper with almost round, disproportionally large ears, whom alone the elephant trusts wholeheartedly and vice versa, symbolically stands for an extension of the animal and, as such, disappears with it.

In this case, the old elephant together with its keeper epitomizes uselessness as a being that proves totally inefficient in enhancing any social productivity. As the narrator observes, their disappearance has brought forth no change whatsoever in the workings of society. In Murakami’s fictional world, along with cats and sheep, elephants often appear, as illustrated by another short story titled “*Odoru kobito* 踊る小人 [The Dancing Dwarf]” (1984), in which a large factory complex manufactures a monthly set number of live copies of an elephant with a kind of biotechnology to meet popular demand. In *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* ねじまき鳥クロニクル [The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle] (1994–1995), thanks to their sheer size, two elephants are spared from the “liquidat[ion]” of supposedly threatening, large zoo animals by imperial Japanese troops in the Manchurian capital city of Hsin-ching at the end of World War II (409, 410).¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 311.

¹³ Wada, ““Zō no shōmetsu,”” 163.

¹⁴ All the references to this novel are to its translation in 1998. Hisai and Kuwa (112–135) trace Murakami’s use of elephants from his earliest novel through the 1980s with the viewpoint that he gave “a negative image as a sign” to the animals from the beginning (131). They, however, dismiss the two early short stories in which elephants play a crucial role, “The Elephant Vanishes” and “The Dancing Dwarf,” as unimportant and fail to discuss their significance; See Hisai Tsubaki and Kuwa Masato, *Zō ga heigen ni kaetta hi: kīwādo de yomu Murakami Haruki* [The Day the Elephant Went

In “The Elephant Vanishes,” however, even such a favorite creature is not immune from a fate that arrives without much delay once one is deemed useless and unneeded, analogous to what happens to “bears and tigers and leopards and wolves” in the Manchurian zoo (410), or to what ultimately befalls the protagonist of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Unlike those creatures, the old elephant apparently accepts its own extinction without resistance or even “gladly” into “a different, chilling kind of” dimension (326). Notwithstanding, the pivotal, normative concept here is efficiency, or, as Jean-François Lyotard’s puts it, “performativity—that is, the best possible input/output equation,”¹⁵ in the highly advanced stage of capitalism that always prescribes the social milieu of Murakami’s fiction. The “performativity” of a zoo animal is low to begin with, consisting in some vaguely aesthetic, sentimental value due to its exotic appeal. The “input/output equation” of the aged elephant in question is nil or minimal if any, perhaps except for the townspeople’s self-satisfaction for keeping the feeble creature alive, but their kind gesture thinly veils the underlying anticipation of its fast approaching demise. As Wada argues, we should sense “the presence of force that, innate to our own world, suppresses heterogeneous excess” (163).¹⁶

This point of efficiency in part helps to bring together the ill-related two sections of the story, for the narrator’s life as a PR official centers on it both in personal philosophy and for corporate success, illustrated by his dwelling use of *yōryōyoku* 要領よく [effectually] and *bengi-teki/sei* 便宜的/性 [convenient/convenience, expedient/expediency] in

Back to the Plain: Reading Murakami Haruki with Key Words] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1991).

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 46.

¹⁶ Wada, ““Zō no shōmetsu,”” 162–163. Through his Internet research of newspaper articles during the decade from late 1980s to late 1990s, Wada further argues that, apart from the difficulty in reproducing them, elephants in Japanese zoos “have become being eliminated due to their economic [in]efficiency...even better to disappear...for their excessive size” (162–163). Murakami makes this point even more apparent by having his elephant very old in the story, although this does not mean that old elephants are actually maltreated in Japanese zoos.

the second half.¹⁷ At the business party, he promotes a newly produced set of kitchen equipment, the important aspect of which, he stresses to the editor he has just met, is its impeccable coordination in color, design, and function. As the main selling point of the products, “[s]implicity, functionality, unity” in this context easily translate into efficiency or performativity (Complete Works 51). In order to enhance his sales pitch as instructed by the company, he insists on using the English word “kitchen” that presumably sounds more stylish and alluring than its Japanese counterpart. Although he privately admits that the kitchen needs a few other features than unity, he rejects them as unmarketable, extending the idea to “this pragmatic [*bengi-teki-na*] world of ours” in which “things you can’t sell don’t count for much” (320), and he concludes the argument by saying that everybody thinks the same, despite of the woman’s skepticism. By pursuing the way of the world as he understands it, the narrator greatly succeeds as a salesperson of kitchen appliances, even “in selling myself to” people (327).

Thus, the two divided halves are linked to each other through the notion of economic expediency. This, however, brings into light a few issues concerning the other common element, the narrator-protagonist. First, although he provides the narrating voice about his interest in the elephant and belief in efficiency, he scarcely tells us anything else about what constitutes his personal being, such as his upbringing and social activities, especially his inner thoughts and self-reflections. Second, it is incongruous for such an able professional like him to have exhibited “from the very outset” (310) a keen, constant interest in an old elephant, which, as a very embodiment of un-salability, should have nothing to do with him. Nonetheless, he regularly comes to see the animal on weekends, often from a rear hillside vantage point that he alone knows. When asked, he admits that he has liked elephants as far as he remembers, but he cannot provide a reason for his sustained, even unusual fascination with them. Lastly, for all his assertion of pragmatism and personal success in marketability and efficiency, we find him unsure of his mental equilibrium and unable to attune himself well to the external world at the end of the story. Altogether, these points put into question what kind of person he is, although he must appear like a normal resident of the town.

¹⁷ Murakami, *Murakami Haruki zen sakuhin*, 50–52, 60. All the translations from the Japanese edition (Complete Works 1979–1989, 8) are mine.

With regard to his unspecified internal life, there can be two possible explanations. He either carefully avoids divulging what ruminates in his mind or simply does not have much inner thought on a conscious level. The first possibility would render him a keenly self-conscious, grinning intellectual who knows what to reveal selectively from personal observations and experiences in order to conceal what privately matters most like his belief and emotions from anyone who has access to his narration. This is not very likely, however, considering the fact that the narrator does not address the reader. Apparently unaware of, or neglecting the presence of readership that follows his story, he keeps on telling his personal accounts that are devoid of internal deliberations in spite of good intellect, abilities, and certain knowledge at his disposal. We are then left with the alternative explanation.

As pointed out above, his professional belief in efficiency for economic advantage does not accord with his persistent interest in a senile animal. He even betrays such a close sense of affinity and sympathy with it as to personify the animal with *hitori* 一人 (Complete Works 41), a counter reserved for a human being, when it is left alone in the bankrupt zoo, while he does ridicule with emphatic dots the newspaper's usage of *hitogara* 人柄 about its "personal character" (Complete Works 48). He might be strongly fascinated by the elephant precisely because it represents an antipode of the performative value he ostensibly upholds, when he actually harbors an unacknowledged doubt and apprehension about the pursuit of efficiency that even commodifies him.¹⁸ He is, after all, no more than an able, yet little self-reflective salesperson. Complacent as he is about his marketing prowess, he nevertheless retains some humanly inefficient traits unstifled, unlike the Boss's precise, power-driven secretary in *Hitsuji wo meguru bōken* 羊をめぐる冒険 [A Wild Sheep Chase] (1982) who, devoid of emotional superfluity, purely incarnates efficiency in Murakami's entire fiction.

Against his own reason, the narrator in "The Elephant Vanishes" has to feel, without realizing it, certain misgivings about the relentless

¹⁸ As Saito ("Shutai' eno kikyū," 86) argues, the narrator's meticulous attention to numbers, especially in the passage of time, might be "a manifestation of excessive attempt to adapt to 'reality' by [him] who holds 'incompatibility with reality' like harboring 'personal interest' in an elephant."

pursuit of efficiency, because that means to deprive him of any inefficient elements, including human attributes like desire for an interpersonal relationship. This is why he inexplicably feels most attracted to watching the elephant unreservedly interact with the keeper in the evening, especially as they show their mutual, brimming trust and affection in privacy. In his own case, he fails to bring the burgeoning acquaintance with the young editor to the next intimate stage when he inadvertently divulges the secret of the elephant vanishing, thereby stirring up the core of his insecurity that he is not well aware of. In his own words, he initially succeeds in adroitly “selling himself to” her with his professional refinement, and yet he is then unable to deal with the emergent inner demon that forms an integral part of what he has become, thanks to that excellent performativity. In the end, he loses interest in continuing the relationship, because he innately feels uncertain and futile about applying his philosophy to anything new that should matter in his private life.

In a rare, yet hesitant and passing self-analysis, he retrospectively ascribes the indiscreet mention of such “a topic the most improper” for the first date, which he immediately regrets, to an “unconscious” urge to tell someone about his secret (Complete Works 53). His psychological uneasiness also manifests itself in the fact that he picks up a smoking habit again after three years when the elephant disappears. He lights a cigarette at two strained moments during the conversation with her, once when she challenges him about his unhesitant assertion of the world’s expedient nature, which he immediately admits he does not entirely believe in. Then, aware that she detects “unnaturally distorted chilliness” in his initial attempt to steer their topic away from the elephant (Complete Works 53), he has recourse to another cigarette.

Encountering difficulties in understanding his elusive explanation, she rightly figures out that the problem lies not in her but in him while he still does not acknowledge the serious nature of his problem. The woman, who has already expressed her reservation about his unabashed advocacy for marketability, senses his unspoken trouble fermenting inside at the mention of the elephant and instinctively refrains from further personal involvement. As Murakami states, the female character in his fiction often functions as a medium through which “something happen[s]” and

“visions...are shown” to the male protagonist.¹⁹ She elicits a problem surrounding or inherent in her male counterpart so that he can finally become aware of the nature and gravity of the situation. In this case, the editor achieves the effect by insisting on hearing about the narrator’s secret of the vanished elephant.²⁰ Whether or not the male protagonist can make proper use of the opportunity to deal with his problem hinges on his willingness to accept, understand, and act on the revealed knowledge. This brings light to defining what kind of person our narrator-protagonist embodies.

Murakami’s first-person male narrators before the turn of the century tend to have employments that require certain intellectual finesse but do not produce anything tangible or lasting, such as regular or temporary jobs at an advertising agency or a law office. In a sense, these types of work are ideal in efficiency because they do not involve raw, physical materials, while labor outputs are thoroughly consumed at the moment of production. These professionals thrive on the forefront of informational, service-oriented economy, but they might share an uncertain basis of existence largely due to the very nature of their work. The narrator in “The Elephant Vanishes” belongs to this group.

The problem is that he does not make a conscious effort to closely examine and understand his own issues. In this respect, he resembles his counterparts in the sister short stories of the eighties. Struck by a painfully ravenous hunger, the narrator-protagonist in “A Second Bakery Attack,” who works for a law firm, is coerced into “attacking” a McDonald’s with his wife in the middle of the night without comprehending a fundamental

¹⁹ Murakami, “Haruki Murakami: The Art of Fiction CLXXXII,” *The Paris Review* 170 (2004), 133. See also Murakami, “Talks with Haruki Murakami,” in Vendela Vida, ed., *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers* (San Francisco: Believer Books, 2005), 247; and the beginning of his short story, “Rēdāhōzen レーダーホーゼン [Lederhosen]” (1985). As the author, Murakami even acknowledges indebtedness more to his female characters than to male ones for guiding him in fiction-writing in *Shokugyō toshite no shōsetsuka 職業としての小説家 [The Novelist as an Occupation]* (Tokyo: Switch Publishing, 2015), 232–235.

²⁰ In this respect, she functions like the female spousal figure in “The Second Bakery Attack.” See Masaki Mori, “A Bakery Attack Foiled Again,” *Japan Studies Review* 17 (2013): 38–42.

cause or a reason in him.²¹ In “TV People,” the narrator-protagonist, employed in the marketing department of a major electronics corporation, cannot deal with shrunken people intrusively carrying a TV set into segments of his private and public life. There is a crucial difference, however, between these main figures and the one seen in “The Elephant Vanishes.”

In the other two stories, the unnamed protagonists at least realize, albeit vaguely, a serious problem latent in them through visualizing it with a metaphorical image. In “A Second Bakery Attack,” the protagonist introduces the image of an undersea dormant volcano to explain his mental situation under duress from the irrepressible hunger and his importunate wife; he then begins to feel the imagined volcano imminent with a devastating eruption due to the overly transparent water. After a few encounters with shrunken TV people just over one day, the protagonist in “TV People” has a vivid dream in which all his office colleagues in a business meeting are turned dead into stone statues, and he also finds himself losing his voice and getting petrified. This is actually what is about to befall him in real life at the end of the story. The two characters do not fully understand the significance of their respective images, but they at least know that they are confronted with a clear, highly symbolic visual representation of their underlying fear.

This is not the case with their counterpart in “The Elephant Vanishes.” He fails to visualize a problem either passively in a dream or by actively exerting imagination. The closest he can get to that state of visual realization takes place at the very end of the first section. Just before the break between the two halves, for a few months after the elephant’s disappearance, he often visits the empty enclosure that used to house the animal, only to find the place somewhat unnatural and desolate each time. Antithetical as the visits are to his belief in economic efficiency, he nevertheless repeats them, compelled by an incomprehensible drive from within. The very fact that he chooses to come back to see the empty space multiple times suggests its relevance to his hardly self-examined problem.

This scene of an unoccupied enclosure turns out highly significant in deciphering the story, especially considering how Murakami often gets

²¹ Concerning this character’s case, see Mori, “A Bakery Attack Foiled Again,” 29–50.

motivated to write a novel through conceiving an initial scene.²² He ascribes the inception of this story to his creative curiosity about an imagined “elephant house from which the elephant has disappeared.”²³ The bleak landscapes that give a sense of decay and desolation recur in his fiction. Examples include the aforementioned dream scene in “TV People” and the remote, hard-to-reach location in the midst of Hokkaido where the narrator-protagonist of *A Wild Sheep Chase* waits alone for an encounter with the unknown just before snow closes the passage out. In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, through a botched cerebral experiment, an almost deserted, walled town operates in the mind, separate from the surface consciousness, with an effect of making its inhabitants lose their memories. In each of these cases, the forlorn location corresponds to a mind in which humanness is somehow being impaired or endangered, while at the same time providing the protagonist with a rare, last chance to recognize and address his problem. The narrator in “TV People” realizes it but does not have time to deal with it. The one in *A Wild Sheep Chase* undergoes a reunion with his deceased friend from lingering teenage days only to go back to his regular life in the end, bereft of the last remnants of his youth as a result. The *Boku* 僕 [I] in “The End of the World” does figure out his problem and takes an action.

It is relevant to notice here that all the above-mentioned characters find themselves within some kind of enclosure, and the closed spaces can be their starting points for self-renewal, if they actually realize their situations and make efforts to get out of the impasse that is rather mental than spatial. In this respect, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* typifies a successful case. Its protagonist named Toru Okada repeatedly goes down into a dark, lifeless, closed space of a dry well for days. A crucial difference, however, is that he stays at the bottom of an empty well by his own will and embraces hours of physical duress each time, urged by a mounting sense of need to deal with a difficulty inherent in his life. As a

²² For instance, the short story “Nejimakidori to kayōbi no onnatachi ねじまき鳥と火曜日の女たち [The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday’s Women]” (1986) obviously paved the way for the much longer novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* that came out eight years later. See also Mori Mayumi.

²³ Hisai and Kuwa, *Zō ga heigen ni kaetta hi*, 129. They cite this remark from an interview with Murakami in the Japanese edition of the *Playboy* magazine (May 1986).

result of intense self-contemplation in subterranean utter darkness, he manages to commune with the spiritual essence of his lost wife and defeat his evil brother-in-law through a nonphysical channel before he emerges from the well for the last time, severely bruised and yet expectant for a new phase in his life.

This self-examination often accompanied by the act of symbolically passing into one's innermost psyche is also an important, recurring motif in Murakami's works. Toru Okada voluntarily goes down to the bottom of the dry well. The teenage protagonist in *Kafka on the Shore* encounters a rarefied locus of his unconscious, Oedipal desires when he ventures deep into the mythically impenetrable, dense forest of Shikoku. In *1Q84*, Aomame, the female protagonist whose orbit of action is separated from that of the male counterpart in alternate chapters, is finally reunited with her soul mate after her descent into another, parallel world of simulacrum. In fact, the importance of symbolic descent extends to, and stems from the author himself when he metaphorically compares his method of conceiving a novel to going down into a hidden, dark, underground area of the house at the risk of never returning or jeopardizing his sanity.²⁴

It follows that facing the external void that interests him irresistibly must be the very situation in which the narrator-protagonist in "The Elephant Vanishes" could delve into the deeper realm of his mind to look for a cause of what has been unsettling him for a long time. Not daring or able to undertake such a close self-examination, however, he misses a precious opportunity to confront it. All he does is keep on gazing, and he does not undergo any transformation or take any action in the face of the closed blank space. Lacking in mental power or capacity beyond practical intellect, he is even less inclined, in contrast to the other protagonists, to expose himself to risky self-exploration, maintaining, instead, the status quo of the ever-growing applicability of efficiency as if mnemonically programmed. Thus, the story at the very end aptly shows him still observing

²⁴ See Murakami, "Haruki Murakami: écrire, c'est comme rêver éveillé [Haruki Murakami: Writing, It's like Dreaming Awake]" *Le Magazine Littéraire* 421 (2003), 99–100; "In Dreams Begins Responsibility" (2005), 558–559; *Hashiru koto ni tsuite kataru toki ni boku no kataru koto* (2007), 133–137, and *Shokugyō* (2015), 175–176.

the empty enclosure that looks even more desolate with the coming winter, which mirrors his own internal wastes.

In a metaphoric sense, the narrator-protagonist's humanity strongly corresponds to the ancient elephant in terms of inefficiency. Regarded as an unneeded, cumbersome burden, nominally receiving recognition for social decency, yet largely neglected, it is very much enfeebled while deprived of freedom by way of a thick chain of his purely utilitarian thinking.²⁵ This metaphorical affinity accounts for his otherwise inexplicable attraction to the animal from the onset. Without knowing it, he innately feels threatened by his own relentless pursuit of efficiency that sacrifices his human nature, and he finds an equivalent symbol of his endangered humanity in the aged elephant. According to the unnamed narrator-protagonist in *Notes from Underground* (1864) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whom Murakami admires as a novelist along with Kafka, what makes us human in the increasingly positivistic society is our willful desire for the irrational against our own calculated advantage. Murakami's narrator here opts for the irrational, the inefficient, which goes against his principle of numerable gains at the least costs possible. Unmeditated as his visits might be to the deserted elephant house, they are likely his last ditch attempt at holding onto his sense of humanity and his mind's stability.

His fundamental problem is threefold. First, placed outside of the enclosure, he is not at a right place to start with, because he cannot free himself when he is not confined, physically or symbolically. Metaphorically speaking, his humanity is, but that is not allowed autonomous agency unlike *Boku's* shadow in "The End of the World." The narrator has no power or opportunity to alter his own situation as a result. Instead, the elephant as his metaphorical correlative is in bondage. Second, with the elephant gone, he has even lost an object to correlate with, forced to live with the void left by the animal's physical disappearance outside and his consequently diminishing humanity inside. These two factors keep him in psychological suspense for months, until he is driven toward a mental breakdown when the precarious balance between his increasing business success and reduced humanness is finally tipped at the brink of collapse. Third, as discussed above, content with his rising professional fortune on the conscious level,

²⁵ To a certain extent, the metaphor might also apply to the humanities of today's academia for their institutional plight in such countries as Japan and the United States.

he is neither able nor willing, despite an indefinably palpable apprehension, to examine an underlying situation in order to get himself out of life's mounting crisis.

In this context, the blank space that separates the text's two sections indicates far more than a mere lapse of several months. Although, generally speaking, such an inserted passage of time might suggest a certain change happening in the story, the current case points to the narrator's stalemate in understanding and motivating himself toward a new direction. Textually, the blank space that follows the vacant enclosure on the page is a physical embodiment and a symbolic carryover of the spiritual stagnation. Of greater significance here, however, is the undeclared, yet irreconcilably sharp contrast between the character's incapability and irresolution for self-renewal and the author's decisive, if not deliberate intervention in incisively dividing the story in the very middle.

The exact division of two sections might be expected to separate one aspect of the narrator-protagonist's life from another. Indeed, we find the narrator in the first section meticulously tracing the social unfolding of the elephant incident all by himself, mostly in the private space of his apartment, while the second section presents him in his public function through his interaction with the magazine editor. The disconnect appears to ensure the private and public spheres of his life being set apart unequivocally as the narrator undoubtedly intends them not to affect each other. Like many of Murakami's protagonists in the 1980s, he is "not a 'self-closed' youth but an individual" who "tries to live through 'the advanced capitalistic society' all by himself...with complete 'autonomy.'"²⁶

In human terms, however, an attempt at such strict, clear-cut demarcation hardly succeeds, especially when one carries psychological uncertainty. Thus, far from being suppressed, the genuine concern that the narrator evinces about the elephant's fate in the first half resurfaces later when, against his best judgment and qualms, he confides the source of his insecurity to the female editor in spite of his professed rationalism of marketability. Therefore, an inefficient, yet essential element of human weakness links the two sharply divided halves different in nature, when the

²⁶ Kawamoto Saburo, "Kono karappo no sekai no naka de: Murakami Haruki ron この空っぽの世界のなかで: 村上春樹論 [In This Empty World: On Murakami Haruki]" in Komata Tomoshi, ed., *Nihon bungaku kenkyū ronbun shūsei* 46 (Tokyo: Wakakusa shobō, 1998), 15.

narrator is not in a mental state to address his trouble with such decisiveness. It is the authorial design that creates an awkward text with irrationality unpreventably spilling over the borderline of geometric partition, and the resulting story indicates the predicament of postindustrial people who are expected to live as efficiently as possible even to the detriment of their overall integrity as human beings.

The titles of the original Japanese text and its English translation implicitly happen to stand for different aspects of this short story. The noun-phrased Japanese title, 象の消滅, which literally means the extinction of an elephant, addresses a definite, “too complete” (321, 326), irreversible state of non-being as the animal has already ceased to exist terminally before the story begins to delineate its circumstances. In contrast, the verbal English title not only denotes an active process of the elephant’s gradual disappearance in the narrator’s account but also alludes to the ensuing change in him as his anxiety progressively develops, ultimately leaving him in a habitually dazed condition of skewed perception and judgment. Even when he finally suspects a cause in himself, he nevertheless does not dare to examine it. The text ends without suggesting any means by which he might elude an impending mental breakdown amidst his rising marketing success. He still comes to see the vacant enclosure covered with dead weed in the imminent winter without expecting any possibility of its former occupants’ return.

When he delivered an acceptance speech for the Catalonia International Prize on June 9, 2011, Murakami rhetorically posed a question about the cause of the nuclear reactor meltdowns that had taken place in Fukushima, Japan three months earlier. The inhabitants in nearby towns were forced to flee, and the immediate areas have remained deserted since. Rather than ascribing the disaster to natural forces, he found a ready answer in the post-WWII pursuit of “efficiency” for a supposedly secure, inexpensive source of energy by the collective will of corporations, the government, and ultimately the people, including himself, who consumed that supply of power in comfort and, as such, became “at once victims and victimizers” of the disaster.²⁷ This is a recent example of the deep-rooted

²⁷ Murakami, “Katarūnya kokusai-shō spīchi genkō zenbun” (2011). See also Murakami, *Shokugyō* (2015), 202–204, 212.

distrust of “the system” that he has sustained and expressed for decades,²⁸ at least since the days of student demonstrations in the late sixties.

As Chiyoko Kawakami argues, the target of his critique might not be easily identifiable as “a unified ideological entity” of the authoritative institution like a reactionary government as it used to be with writers of older generations.²⁹ It is largely because he is fundamentally opposed to an amorphous, immense complex of desire for power, sociopolitical control over individuality, and an ever more “efficient” flow of capital that, if left unchecked, seeks to exploit individuals to their detriment. This “system” might likely include those very individuals as unknowing accomplices, illustrating one aspect of Jamesonian postmodernity where all resistance is “somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it.”³⁰ In his personal life, Murakami appears to exemplify the condition when, unlike his poverty-stricken younger days, he has fulfilled the desire of possessing or consuming certain objects, such as an impressive collection of CDs and records, as well as other luxury items, along with a prospering writing career. Unlike characters of his making who unquestioningly embrace overflowing consumables or “the trivia of contemporary urban life,”³¹ he has consciously (almost inveterately) kept the critical “distance from it” in another part of his mind, and that critical gaze manifests itself in many of his writings. Murakami might not appear to “confront the age directly” according to Saburo Kawamoto, but this does not mean that he “quietly accepts the system...with all its contradictions,”³² as we have seen “The Elephant Vanishes” demonstrate. While containing

²⁸ For typical examples, see Murakami, “The Novelist in Wartime” (2009) and *Shokugyō* (2015), 97, 200–202. The narrator’s unwillingness and inability to reflect on the cause of his own predicament coincidentally prefigures Japan’s gradual resumption of nuclear power generation just a few years after the earthquake-caused tsunami destroyed the nuclear plant.

²⁹ Kawakami, “The Unfinished Cartography,” 310.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 49. See also Saburo Kawamoto, “Kono karappo no sekai,” 22.

³¹ Rubin, “The Other World,” 494; See also Kawakami, “The Unfinished Cartography,” 320–323.

³² Kawamoto, “Kono karappo no sekai,” 19–20.

such contradictions, his overall stance as a novelist continues to problematize them, especially in the fiction he creates. Although deviating from what Fredric Jameson speculates, his unwavering critical stance reveals innate, quiet, yet inextinguishable rage against “the system” in postmodern reality.

In the style of apparent irrelevance and lighthearted playfulness with no straightforward meaning, Murakami touches upon vaguely felt dangers latent in an individual’s life of today’s society. In Lyotard’s terms, he “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” by “invent[ing] allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.”³³ As Jameson phrases more specifically, on the other hand, the Japanese writer has created a story that is “‘irrational’ in the older sense of ‘incomprehensible’” in an age that almost precludes such irrationality, pointing to the “enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions.”³⁴

³³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

³⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 268, 38.

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