

Pasta and Loneliness: Reality, Hyperreality, and Communication in Haruki Murakami's "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman" and "The Year of Spaghetti"
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In the introduction to a 2002 interview with Haruki Murakami, the interviewers call the author's characters "questors seeking... a more active means of making sense of their lives and the bewildering quantity of hyperrealities around them" (Gregory 112). These Hyperrealities¹ are the result of individual perception and consciousness, and as such are utterly separate from one another and isolated from Reality.² In his short stories "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman" and "The Year of Spaghetti," Murakami explores the confusion, isolation, and loneliness that individual perception of reality can create, and offers communication through storytelling as a way to relieve loneliness and expand one's understanding of Reality.

The idea of truth or Reality as being unreachable is evident in "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman," which contains more confusion and questions in its text than assertion of concrete detail. For example, while riding the bus to the hospital with his cousin, the narrator wonders about the identities and intentions of the other passengers: "Most of the men had on thick mountain-climbing types of shirts... The strange thing, though, was that there wasn't any mountain-climbing route along this bus line. So where in the world could they have been going?" (Murakami 6). Here, the narrator's confusion is that of any human whose understanding of reality is limited to his own experiences.

Individual perception is not only lacking in knowledge of physical Reality, but it also contains an inherently incomplete picture of the Hyperrealities of others. Just as one may be fooled by surface appearances when gathering information on Reality, one's understanding of others is often based on superficial, unrevealing details. In "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman," the narrator overhears a couple "talking about a friend of theirs who had lung cancer... In a certain sense, the husband explained, you can see a person's whole life in the cancer they get" (Murakami 15). Here, the husband's insistence that he can "see" a whole person in one surface detail illustrates the deceitful nature of the senses and their failure to capture the inner lives of outside individuals.

Another result of the separation of Reality and Other from the individual Hyperreality is isolation, from which flows loneliness. Throughout "Blind Willow," the cousin is trying to connect with others, to get them into his head, figuratively and literally. He wants the doctors to figure out what's wrong with his ear and he wants to befriend his older cousin, the narrator. These two wishes meet symbolically near the end of the story when he asks the narrator to look into his ear:

...the human ear—its structure—is a pretty mysterious thing. With all these absurd twists and turns to it... Maybe evolution determined this weird shape was the optimum way... to protect what's inside.

Surrounded by this asymmetrical wall, the hole of the ear gapes open like the entrance to a dark, secret cave (17). Here, the "asymmetrical wall" of the ear represents the divisions between Hyperrealities that prevent one human being from fully com-

prehending the experiences of another. The phrase "to protect what's inside" touches on the idea that this division between Self/Other and Self/Reality is essential for the self's survival. But the most important part to note here is the description of the ear as a "dark, secret cave" (emphasis mine). Human beings are isolated from one another because their totality of experience, their whole "reality," is locked away inside the secret cave of their skull.

"The Year of Spaghetti" also explores this sense of being isolated in one's own head. In this story, the narrator's apartment—which he seems to never leave—is a symbol of his Hyperreality. Dining alone on an unchanging menu of spaghetti,³ the narrator fears that if he "were to turn [his] back, [his spaghetti] might well slip over the edge of the pot and vanish into the night," or that the girl who called him on the phone would "disappear forever, sucked into the four thirty p.m. shadows" after he hangs up on her (179-183). The fear that things "vanish," or cease to exist, outside the boundaries of one's perception is a solipsistic one; it is a fear of total isolation.

Are humans truly isolated, though? Not in Reality. Only in one's individual sense-perception is one truly isolated. Even the self-exiled and borderline solipsistic narrator of "The Year of Spaghetti" knows that there are others outside, and imagines that they will visit him. The narrator in "Blind Willow" also understands, on some level, that he shares a reality with other human beings: "Until the food was brought over, my cousin gazed silently out the window at the same scenery I'd been looking at" (Murakami 15). If human loneliness at the level of consciousness is an illusion created by individual perception of Reality, what can bridge the apparently impassable gap between Hyperrealities?

Murakami's answer is communication through narrative. In many of his stories, including "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman," storytelling is a key theme. In "Blind Willow," the narrator remarks that his late friend "really knew how to tell a story" (12). The way that the mind creates memory and Hyperreality is similar to the way one creates a story, i.e., by choosing and including relevant experiences/details to create coherent meaning. What is "relevant" is different depending on the individual mind doing the work of narration-creation. The similarity between memory/Hyperreality and fantasy is noted in "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman" as the narrator observes his environment: "I felt like I'd seen this scene, many years before. A broad swath of lawn, two girls slurping up orange juice... But it was an illusion. It was vivid enough, an intense sense of the real, but an illusion nonetheless. I'd never been to this hospital in my life" (10).

If such an "illusion" is upheld long enough, it can become part of the upholder's Hyperreality and identity, a part of her self-narrative, just as real as any sensory information. This is what happens when the narrator of "The Year of Spaghetti" lies to the girl on the phone: "I said I'm cooking spaghetti," I lied... But that lie was already a part of me—so much so that, at that moment at least, it didn't feel like a lie at all... I went ahead and filled an imaginary pot with water, lit

¹In this paper, "Hyperreality" is that which is perceived as real, but is potentially unreal, or an approximation of reality. Human perception, then, is suspect since sensory information in the brain is presented to consciousness as real but is actually contained entirely within the brain itself. Any individual's perception of Reality can be called "Hyperrealistic."

²This paper uses the term "Reality" or "the Real" to represent the opposite of Hyperreality, that is, the physical universe as it exists outside human senses and perceptions. This is similar to the idea of the Other, those consciousnesses that lie outside one's own, and are therefore unreachable.

³The passage "I'd gather up the trampled-down shadows of time... toss them into the boiling water" suggests the spaghetti is more than pasta (179). The act of cooking spaghetti in this story represents the way in which one's consciousness takes in information from Reality (buys the pasta), interprets it according to the individual's psyche (cooks the pasta), and incorporates it into one's Hyperreality (eats the pasta). The end result (cooked pasta) is self-narrative, discussed below.

an imaginary stove with an imaginary match" (181). The narrator in "Blind Willow" is constantly seeking more information about his situation, except when he is remembering the afternoon spent with his late friend and his friend's girlfriend. Then the details become concrete, down to the brand of cigarettes they smoke (11). Unnecessary or confusing details are omitted, leaving only a narrative of past events that can be comprehended within the limitations of human perception, an approximation of Reality in prose, a Hyperreality unto itself.

Self-narration on its own does not, however, address the human need for communication and expansion of awareness beyond one's own experience. Stories are for telling, and self-realities can be exchanged between people, being comprehensive and comprehensible packets of meaning and experience, through language. In this way, human beings can share in one another's Hyperrealities, adding them to their own individual pictures of Reality. This gives the feeling that one is closer to a more cohesive picture of reality, which is probably as close as one can get to Reality via limited human perception. A collection of many viewpoints will always reveal more information than a solo narrative. Because everyone interprets Reality differently, everyone will pull different meanings and experiences from the infinite Real. If everyone had the same experience, communication wouldn't be necessary, and there would be no cure for isolation. This is why the narrator of "The Year of Spaghetti" is so lonely: he has constructed his narrative (cooked his spaghetti), but he does not use it for communication. If he shared his spaghetti, he would not be so alone.

In Murakami's stories, human beings' limited perception cannot comprehend all of Reality. There is too much information, and most of it is outside of the range of one's senses. Therefore, the fiction that is individual Hyperreality is necessary and is no impediment to gaining some understanding of Reality. According to Murakami's texts, the key is communication, the exchange of fictions, of self-narratives, in order to breach the divide between individual minds. In this way, storytelling serves as a defense against isolation, loneliness, and the solipsistic misery they produce. As "Mr. Clean," a character in Murakami's "A Folklore for My Generation," says, "it's a wonderful thing to be able to tell stories to other people" (Murakami 67).

Bibliography

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