Violence and Therapy in Murakami Haruki’s
Kafka on the Shore

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ABSTRACT
Popular Japanese author Murakami Haruki’s tenth novel, Kafka on the Shore, has been criticized by some for its overly therapeutic tone. This novel, these critics argue, fails to adequately address the central question of violence it raises and offers readers a false sense of psychological security. A more sympathetic reading of these therapeutic themes is possible, however, especially when the novel is situated within the wider historical context of its production. Employing both Jungian and Lacanian perspectives, this essay argues that the central protagonist’s journey in Kafka on the Shore, from fear to forgiveness, is a legitimate response to the anxieties of the age and is heroic in nature. Nevertheless, this psychological victory is complicated and even partially undermined by competing themes and narratives in the work. Kafka on the Shore is thus a less reassuring novel than critics suggest and offers a complex view of the possibilities and limitations inherent in a therapeutic approach to the problem of violence in contemporary Japan.

Keywords: Murakami Haruki, Kafka on the Shore, psychoanalytic readings

Introduction
While Murakami Haruki’s tenth novel, Umibe no Kafuka (Kafka on the Shore, 2002), was a commercial success in Japan and abroad, its critical response was mixed, with several critics in Japan dismissing it as a therapeutic work that fails to adequately address the central question of violence it raises. Kuroko Kazuo, for example, saw it as backing down from the kind of commitment Murakami advocated in his 1995 interview with Jungian psychologist Kawai Hayao, a commitment he saw later reflected in Murakami’s non-fictional works Andaguraundo アンダーグラウンド (Underground, 1997) and Yakusoku sareta basho de 約束された場所で (The Place that was Promised, 1998). Kuroko asserts:

The reason so many readers received “therapy” from this novel was undoubtedly its ability to suggest... in the most crucial part of the story, our ability to not face (to take flight from) the violence that symbolizes the reality we live in. Moreover, because of this, readers who have avoided facing the times must read the novel and feel relieved. In other words, Kafka on the Shore
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is a work that forgives readers—particularly young readers—for the self-deception that allows them to not fight against the (malice = violence) of these times. *Kafka on the Shore* is a story that accepts the kind of self-centred, self-deceiving lifestyle that says, regarding the violence arising in the various situations of everyday life, I will live and hope for my “personal security and safety,” and through this offers “therapy” to its readers.²

Similarly, Komori Yōichi questions *Kafka on the Shore*’s wide international success, which he sees less as a cause for celebration than as a dangerous sign of the times. Komori writes:

However, should we unreservedly celebrate this situation where *Kafka on the Shore* has become a best-seller even overseas, saying “finally Japanese literature has been recognized in the world” and “at long last, a world-class, universal Japanese novel has appeared.” I for one cannot take this position. Rather, the position running through this book is that in those countries where *Kafka on the Shore* has been accepted, it has been consumed as a commodity that brings “salvation,” “relief,” and “therapy,” and this in the face of a shared social pathology that has spread since September 11th, 2001 (911). This cannot be taken as a good thing.³

The general tone of these criticisms, it should be noted, is not new. Years earlier, Oe Kenzaburō described Murakami and Yoshimoto Banana, another popular contemporary Japanese author, as writers who “convey the experience of a youth politically uninvolved or disaffected, content to exist within a late adolescent or post-adolescent subculture.”⁴ Karatani Kojin also critiqued the way Murakami’s absurd fictional quests parodied the more serious commitments of Oe’s fiction.⁵ Murakami’s popularity is not in question here. Rather, what these critics condemn is his failure to offer a larger moral vision adequate to the challenges of the age. Instead, Murakami is seen as pampering to his readers with therapeutic themes that forgive them for refusing to grow up and confronting the real world challenges that are theirs.

But is *Kafka on the Shore* really as psychologically reassuring a novel as these critics suggest? A close reading of the work, I argue in this essay, challenges this claim. While there are undoubtedly therapeutic themes running through *Kafka on the Shore*, these are complicated by the structure of the novel that alternates by chapter between two different storylines. The first storyline featuring a young man named Kafka who is battling an Oedipal prophesy and trying to find forgiveness for the mother who abandoned him years earlier is perhaps susceptible to the

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¹ Murakami and Kawai 1996.
² Kuroko 2007: 243-44.
⁵ Karatani 1990: 90.