

*Norwegian Wood* or:  
text of empty signs

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## Preliminary notes

In romanizing Japanese words, I have used standard transcriptions. This means when the last name of the protagonist in *Norwegian Wood* is written as と う る (Touru) in Japanese, I replaced the *ou* for an *ō*, which means the vowel is long and pronounced as *oo*. In writing first and last names, I used Japanese order, where the family (last) name comes first.

Abbreviations:

ES: *Empire of Signs*

NW: *Norwegian Wood*

In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention.  
There is no such country, there are no such people.  
- Oscar Wilde

Again and again I called out for Midori  
from the dead centre of this place that was no place.  
- *Norwegian Wood*

### Introduction

Murakami Haruki, probably today's most famous Japanese novelist, has written stories that are said to disregard his Japanese heritage. Fellow writer Ōe Kenzaburo once remarked, "Murakami writes in Japanese, but his writing is not really Japanese. If you translate it into American English, it can be read very naturally in New York" (Ōe and Ishiguro 118). Matthew C. Strecher states Murakami's prose style has a "strikingly international ambience", as opposed to Ōe's own "turgid" style that separates his works, Japanese 'high' art, from "those which any Japanese might read" (356). But can one say a novel disregards or defines determination by nationality? Is Murakami really holding on to a myth of an international Japan in his postmodern writing, as Ōe Kenzaburo and others seem to suggest? The scholarly debate on Murakami focuses on his (un)Japanese writing and on (the illusion of) a definable, demonstrable culture (either Western or Japanese) in his novels. Although some scholars argue for a redefinition of Murakami's works, focusing more on theme and style, standpoints are still taken either for or against an 'American' Murakami.

Treating Japanese culture as an invented reality in *Empire of Signs* (1970), Roland Barthes offers an alternative for such a definition. Writing and meaning in Barthes's utopian Japan have no beginning and end. Signs here are free-floating in the realm of Japanese culture and language. I propose to regard Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987) as a novel utterly empty of *meaningful* signs, from a post-structuralist, 'Barthesian' perspective. I argue that from this standpoint, Murakami's work is

appreciated at its most rewarding. Roland Barthes wrote a fictional account of Japan where he deliberately forms a system, taking whatever cultural traits suited him to describe how Japanese culture resists signs with an ultimate meaning. I show how Barthes's theories on the empty sign (taken from *Empire of Signs* but also from *A Lover's Discourse*, which he wrote in 1977) can be used to analyze *Norwegian Wood*.

*Norwegian Wood* is read by many far beyond Japan and Asia. It has been translated into at least 30 languages and a film based on the novel has been made by French/Vietnamese director Tran Anh Hung in 2010. Thus, the West has been incorporating Murakami's novels in the canon and bestseller-lists. Reading *Norwegian Wood* has brought many readers a recognizable experience while knowing nothing of the Japanese outset. The benefits of an analysis of the empty signs in *Norwegian Wood* become clear when I look further into the role the Orient still plays in the appreciation of Murakami in the West.

I show how the decentered nature of the protagonist's relationships and themes such as translation, silence and writing are empty in *Norwegian Wood*. I also argue that love in *Norwegian Wood* has no transcendental signified. Barthes's 'avowal of love' from *A Lover's Discourse* is another empty sign and *Norwegian Wood* represents that I-love-you has no meaning. To illustrate this I will use an example from the motion picture of *Norwegian Wood* and show how the director's interpretation of love completely differs from the empty sign in the novel. Finally, I will try to define a usable criticism on Murakami based on the theory of the empty sign. This will show how Japan and the Japanese are invented realities and of no importance in treating Murakami and *Norwegian Wood*. By using Roland Barthes as a critical framework for Murakami's novel, it becomes clear how a discussion based on Murakami's Japanese heritage is both unnecessary and fruitless.

### 1. *Norwegian Wood* and its empty signs

*Empire of Signs* is Barthes's attempt at creating a fictive nation, writing a system not of symbols, but rather to "search out [...] the very fissure of the symbolic" (ES 4). It is this system that he will call Japan, and while "leaving aside vast regions of darkness" (4) (like Japanese capitalism and new technology), Japan has given him "a

situation of writing” (4) and has provided him “flashes” (4) or moments, where subversion, a process of emptying occurs. Put differently, Barthes chooses to write about certain concepts in Japanese culture where discourse is completely different from the West; where it is about meaningless (empty) signs. Following Jacques Derrida’s theory on the play of meaning, Barthes presents to his reader a system where the ultimate transcendental sign is not searched after.

Derrida’s concept of *différance* has been of great importance for *Empire of Signs* and Barthes’s post-structuralist phase. According to Derrida in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), Western philosophy is based on a theory of presence of a metaphysical center, an essence, on which notions such as truth and divinity are found. This seeming stability pushes aside the *différance* inherent in language. *Différance* means a signified is always defined by other signifiers and their signifieds, like a word in a dictionary can only be described by other words. For Derrida, this infinite play of meaning eventually means a deconstruction for every discourse that claims truth. This is because if the transcendental signified, the signified that needs no other signifiers to define itself, does not exist, neither does a stable, centered meaning and therefore truth.

In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes shows how Western notions of meaning are subverted in a culture outside this system. It is a novelistic, fragmented, disordered text, which is in line with the theory it represents. Each chapter is concerned with a different empty sign. In “The Unknown Language” (6), Barthes emphasizes that he doesn’t speak Japanese, which makes his experience in Japan devoid of communication; endless streams of words passing without starting off recognition. Not only in the Japanese language is this emptiness of meaning apparent to Barthes; he sees it in haiku poems, the Tokyo street plan and in *sukiyaki* (a Japanese cooking style). Japanese culture seems to be obsessed with the annihilation of a final meaning, its signs are utterly empty. European cities always have a full centre; this is a site of civilization, where power, money and spirituality are condensed and sought after. Tokyo offers a paradox; it is a city with its centre to one side, but this centre remains blank. The imperial palace is hidden behind trees and walls and the emperor never shows his face. Although it is one of the largest cities in the world, Tokyo evolves around an imaginary, empty centre. Also, the streets in Tokyo literally have no names; blocks

have numbers and streets are the empty space in between. The largest city in the world is practically unclassified and therefore, says Barthes, this city can only be known by walking, by sight, by experience. Every discovery of a street can vanish from memory and is therefore fragile; to visit a place for the first time is to begin to write it, to invent it, to make it exist in its writing (because it does not exist in its address). Writing about this empty centre, Barthes escapes the Western obsession for meaning while at the same time attempting a kind of pure writing; because while writing the empty signs of Japan, his own text remains empty as well. Tokyo streets have no names and thus, Barthes writes about the fact that these streets have no names. He is not searching for meaning in the fact that streets have no name; he deliberately avoids assigning meaning. Barthes's writing presents and represents its theory at the same time.

Japan is a real country with a real culture and most of its 'empty signs' still exist today. But Barthes is careful to point out that he is in no way writing about the real Japan. His Japan is one of his own invention, a fictive country to hold on to in order to write the possibility of empty signs. He is not implying he is writing *about* Japan. And it is precisely this that makes his analysis suitable to use as a framework for another fictive work on Japan and Japanese people: Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. The Barthesian framework, in both its presentation of a fictive Japan and its representation of empty signs, will provide a good evaluation of *Norwegian Wood*. This is because its representation of its own fictionality and the emptiness of its language are of the uttermost importance for an understanding of this work.

*Norwegian Wood* has been Murakami Haruki's best-selling book, but critics consider it as a strange detour from his usual other-worldly writing on parallel universes and unconscious wells (see for example Strecher 365-6). Tōru Watanabe lives in a time of political struggle and redefinition of his country's dark past. He is a student in 1960s Tokyo, when his classmates were barricading university halls, either to protest, or to revolutionize (university) regulations. A decade later, the Beatles' song 'Norwegian Wood' causes Watanabe to remember Naoko, his first love. During their student years, Naoko is emotionally very instable and detached from the real world. Her admission to a psychological clinic deepens Watanabe's loneliness and desperation during college. But then he meets Midori, who is Naoko's complete opposite.

Outgoing and spontaneous, she attracts him for being exactly what Naoko is not. According to Matthew Strecher this is Murakami's most realistic and formulaic novel, because unlike his other novels, *Norwegian Wood* doesn't contain magical elements and follows quite clear lines on the part of the psychological love story. Strecher says the postmodern character of *Norwegian Wood* makes it high and mass literature at once; it is slowly building up a conventional love story only to subvert it in the end (365-70).

Watanabe's love story is not a romantic fairytale where hero and heroine end up together and live happily ever after. This prince has two princesses: his first love who represents his past and the new, controversial love who represents his future. Watanabe's relationships are always made up of three people, in different constructions. He does not love one but two women. But also between his friend Nagasawa and Nagasawa's girlfriend Hatsumi, Watanabe keeps the peace and negotiates. Although technically he is not part of their relationship, he communicates and translates Hatsumi's feelings to Nagasawa and explains to Hatsumi that she will never be happy with Nagasawa. In fact, during a dinner between the three and his drinking night with Hatsumi, Watanabe is the centre of communication but is also outside the actual affair. To a certain extent this accounts for his affiliation with Reiko and Naoko as well. Together with Reiko, Naoko lives in a house belonging to the psychological clinic she and Reiko are admitted to. Being an outsider, someone who is not 'crazy' and coming, literally, from the world outside the sanatorium, he provides a different frame for Reiko and Naoko to interact with. Only when Reiko tells him her life story and how she ended up living in a psychological clinic for seven years does he realize he is an outsider who tries to love Naoko with feelings she cannot comprehend. He understands his friendship with Kizuki, his best friend who killed himself when they were seventeen, was never apart from Kizuki's love relationship with Naoko. And Watanabe's relationship with Naoko will never be without Kizuki in between them. For Kizuki and Naoko, "You were the link connecting us with the outside" (NW 169). Being inside and outside his friends' groups at the same time accounts for his loneliness when he lives in Tokyo. He is not actually part of Naoko's love or craziness, Nagasawa and Hatsumi's relationship or Reiko's life story.

Barthes writes about the traditional Japanese haiku as a supreme writing about the moment, as a poem without final meaning: “The haiku’s task is to achieve exemption from meaning within a *perfectly readerly discourse*. [...] it resists us, finally loses the adjectives which a moment before we had bestowed upon it, and enters into that *suspension of meaning*” (ES 81, emphasis added). I propose this effect accounts for *Norwegian Wood* as well. The protagonist’s friendships are decentered and therefore, Watanabe seems to be adrift, always in between. His loves have no definitive signified and his floating causes this infinite suspension of meaning. Watanabe’s being and not-being inside his own relationships makes it impossible for him and the reader to make them mean something. Still, this meaning is something readers tend to attribute to a ‘psychological’ novel. The word psychological in itself suggests a reader’s quest for emotions, identification and an ultimate recognizable truth, something comparable to reality. But what it denies is the fact that fiction “manifests what is supposed to be secret (‘feelings’, ‘situations’, ‘conflicts’), while concealing the very artifice of such manifestation” (ES 61, Barthes on Western theatre). ‘Feelings’ inside a novel are, in the world outside, fiction. In the Western love story, a conventional, teleological representation of friendship and love is always centered on that one and only true romantic goal. But this story usually hides the fact that it manifests only itself and not reality. For example, Hollywood’s movies make us believe that there is that one and only true love waiting for us somewhere *for real*.

*Norwegian Wood* destroys this misleading trick and points at its own artifice. This happens in two ways. *Norwegian Wood* resists the notion of that One True Love (more on *Norwegian Wood* and the representation of love in the next chapter) and points to its own manifestation as text because in it, “emotion no longer floods, no longer submerges, but becomes a reading” (ES 54, Barthes on *bunraku*, Japanese theatre). This reading informs us of our own involvement at attributing interpretation, the writing of the book happens in the reader’s head. A reader who cannot assign meaning will always float above the text and be aware of his own part in its writing, which makes it a more rewarding exercise to read a novel like *Norwegian Wood*. In his introduction to *Lectures on Literature* (1980), Vladimir Nabokov mentions, “this is the worst thing a reader can do, he identifies himself with a character in the book. This lowly variety is not the kind of imagination I would like readers to use. [...] the reader must know when and where to curb his imagination and this he does by trying

to get clear the specific world the author places at his disposal” (Nabokov 4). By this world he does not mean the imaginary world of “our own personal nature”, but the artistic world of “impersonal imagination” (4). Nabokov means a kind of artistic appreciation for the work, which cannot be achieved if the reader is too preoccupied with a personal, emotional reading. The artistic world in *Norwegian Wood* is the world of the empty sign, the suspension of meaning, for which an awareness makes a ‘good reader’ (Nabokov, “Good readers and good writers” 1-7).

Conveyance of thoughts, feelings, emotions and their translation into language is a theme in *Norwegian Wood* on several levels. Naoko’s emotional breakdown partly has to do with her inability to speak her mind, to get her thoughts across. In Murakami’s works, translation is not only the linguistic process his works undergo in so many countries. The actual redefinition Murakami proposes in many of his novels, and as I will show here for *Norwegian Wood*, is translation as a continuous communication process between sender and receiver, whether this is in a mutually spoken language or not.<sup>1</sup> Every communication is translation in *Norwegian Wood*. In this case it has to be understood as a mediation process for people in search of understanding each other. This is an infinite procedure, for communication is always a translation of one’s thoughts and feelings; first into language, then into another person’s paradigm. It is the attempt rather than the true conveyance of meaning in communication that accounts for a feeling of connection between two people. Derrida once stated, “we are all mediators, translators” (“An Interview with Derrida” 71). He also wrote a “Letter to a Japanese friend” (1983), where he tries to answer the problem of translating deconstruction into Japanese: “I do not believe that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text. And as

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<sup>1</sup> See Slocombe’s “Murakami and the Ethics of translation” for an analysis of other books by Murakami and translation as theme:

However familiar other people are, they are always in some way Other to the Self. Even if we manage to communicate briefly with the Other, it will soon change because "Body cells replace themselves every month. Even at this moment ... Most everything you think you know about me is only memories" (*A Wild Sheep Chase* 167). As time moves on, so do people, and understanding them at one point does not mean it will always remain so: we must always try to understand, because as soon as we stop, the world keeps on spinning us apart. Such difficulties in communication/translation are amplified when considering that sometimes people cannot bring forth the words that they mean because their feelings cannot be translated into "mere" language. Even if we allow that language dictates thought patterns, that consciousness without language is impossible, there are still moments when feelings cannot even be translated into consciousness (Slocombe 9).

“deconstruction” is a word, as I have just said, that is essentially replaceable in a chain of substitution, then that can also be done from one language to another.” (275). For Derrida, translation accounts as much for the word deconstruction in itself (because only substitutions can explain what deconstruction is not, which is the case with any other word in a given language) as for translating from one language to another. This is why translation is not an inferior event but rather an unbroken chain of signification in the process of communication.<sup>2</sup>

Translation causes problems for *Norwegian Wood*'s characters; connections are continuously shifting in the attempt at understanding each other.

“I wondered if she was trying to convey something to me, something she could not put into words – something prior to words that she could not grasp within herself and which therefore had no hope of ever turning into words. Instead, she would fiddle with her hairslide, dab at the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief, or look into my eyes in that meaningless way. I wanted to hold her tight when she did these things, but I would hesitate and hold back. I was afraid I might hurt her. And so the two of us kept walking the streets of Tokyo, Naoko searching for words into space. (NW 36)

Naoko's condition has something to do with her inability to find the right words or a language for herself. Instead of talking, Watanabe and she walk through Tokyo in a desperate attempt at being together in another structure outside language. Emblematic for that meaninglessness are the Tokyo streets, which, as Barthes wrote, “have no names” and can only be known through experience. This is exactly what Watanabe and Naoko seem to be doing; trying to get to know the city and the Other by experience, because language fails to convey what they mean. It is the theme of

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<sup>2</sup> Reading literary works in translation (and then writing about them) is still under discussion. My own reading of *Norwegian Wood* is based on the English language version, translated by Jay Rubin from the original Japanese. Following Derrida's standpoint on the problem of translation, I do not think analyzing the Japanese version would have made any major difference. We are all translators, and therefore, I am as much a translator of *Norwegian Wood* as Jay Rubin is. I also think English is not at all a ‘wrong’ language for *Norwegian Wood*, even if it differs so much from Japanese in grammar and writing. Murakami himself speaks fluent English and is a major translator of, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's works in Japan. He writes his novels in English, after which he translates himself into Japanese (Rubin 491). Rubin's translation of *Norwegian Wood* is the first English translation Murakami has authorized for publication outside Japan. (Rubin in *Norwegian Wood*'s “Translator's Note” 389)

infinite translation and incomprehensibility of the Other which pervades the novel in the above and other passages accounting Watanabe's affiliation with Naoko.

But as time goes by, events turn into memories and start fading from the moment they are remembered. Where communication cannot be perfect because of its intrinsic translation process, memories are even more vague. Some ten years after his relationship with her, Watanabe tries to revive Naoko's image in his mind and to write his book on her, but "I realize that all I can place in the imperfect vessel of writing are imperfect memories and imperfect thoughts" (NW 10). Naoko asked him never to forget her, because she knew that his memories of her would start to fade eventually. Writing serves as a last hope for Watanabe to remember and to stay connected to Naoko even when she is long dead. And when Watanabe is on the verge of losing his connection with the outside, letters help him stay on firm ground.

So maybe writing is the only way to get through to someone who reads most of the time and easily loses connection with the outside. Midori writes Watanabe a letter:

I'm writing this letter to you while you're off buying drinks. This is the first time in my life I've ever written a letter to somebody sitting next to me on a bench, but I feel it's the only way I can get through to you. I mean, you're hardly listening to anything I say. Am I right? (NW 332)

Writing helps Watanabe comprehend and understand, but it is not a perfect method of reviving, of realism, of meaning. "Writing is after all, [...] an emptiness of language" (ES 4). The imperfect vessel of writing is however the only way of remembering, even if this remembrance is always incomplete and translated from another time and place. *Norwegian Wood* demonstrates how writing is ultimately unsatisfying, and by being a novel itself, it feels like it attacks its own format. Showing translation processes, the blankness of language and its own fictional grounds, *Norwegian Wood* enters into that realm of the empty sign.

*Bunraku* [...] exhibits simultaneously the art and the labor, reserving for each its own writing. The voice [...] is accompanied by a vast volume of *silence*, in which are inscribed, with all the more finesse, other features, other writings." (ES 54 emphasis added)

Here in *bunraku* (Japanese theatre), silence opens up possibilities of other writings. Other writings do not result in other meanings; as I have shown above, to read a book is to write it, because the book can only write itself for every reader individually. In *Norwegian Wood*, the voice is accompanied by a notion of the importance of silence. It is this silent discourse that is powerful for *Norwegian Wood*'s characters as well as for the reader of this novel.

Watanabe is in a desperate state after hearing of Naoko's breakdown. He becomes depressed and does not talk to anyone. He describes his situation as follows:

I spent three full days after that all but walking on the bottom of the sea. I could hardly hear what people said to me, and they had just as much trouble catching anything I had to say. My whole body felt enveloped in some kind of membrane, cutting off any direct contact between me and the outside world. I couldn't touch 'them', and 'they' couldn't touch me. I was utterly helpless, and as long as I remained in that state, 'they' were unable to reach out to me. (NW 325)

While trying to cope with his emotions he can't make contact with other people. Despair causes silence in *Norwegian Wood*; devastating moments show a complete withdrawal from the outside world and other people to make contact with. The protagonist is withdrawn into himself and stops all language to flow. After Naoko's death, the same disconnection happens: "But I never answered her. What could I have said? What good would it have done?" (NW 357) and "To Midori I wrote a short note: I couldn't say anything just yet" (NW 357). Whenever Watanabe's feelings are too much to handle for him, he stays silent. It seems as if he notices how his attempts at understanding the world are useless and he therefore stops trying at all.

But the same thing happened to Naoko; language and the inability to put her feelings into words caused Naoko to feel depressed and eventually to suicide. In other parts of *Norwegian Wood*, silence provides human connection when language fails. Silence here does not mean the complete abandonment of communication, which is the abandonment Watanabe and Naoko fall for at first. In *Norwegian Wood*, complete silence only worsens Watanabe's desperation. But the abandonment of communication does make him aware of the importance of his letters and his contact

with the outside world. The importance of silence as connection without being centered on language is especially vibrant in Watanabe's final telephone conversation with Midori. Here he seems 'to give in' to communication with an awareness that it is only the attempt at imperfect communication that gives him the connection he so long searched for: "Midori responded with a long, long silence [...]" (NW 386). The telephone line and Midori on the other end, saying nothing, is a perfect metaphor for 'silent connection'. Being silent together is another empty sign *Norwegian Wood* represents. When people are tired of searching for that untraceable meaningful sign in language, a silent discourse is all that is left. The connection is made without speech, without asserting meaning to it; it is a connection with an empty center.

## 2. *Norwegian Wood* and its lover's discourse

In 1977, Barthes published *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. This text is compiled of fragments of the lover's discourse, such as 'Disaster', 'Feast' and 'Jealousy'. Each chapter concerns one of these fragments and relates how the discourse of the lover is fictional and mythological in its nature. The subject 'I' in this text is presented as a fictional character, speaking the discourse of his love to the silent Other whom he loves. This Other however, does not answer. The discourse of this lover is of an "extreme solitude" (preface); in fact, the discourse of the Lover has nothing to do with a real Other, but with an imaginary, fabricated other. This other is fabricated with fragments, intertextually compiled out of discourses from Plato to Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Barthes's lover is a reader of signs, a character who assigns meaning to an imaginary discourse of the Other (imaginary because the Other is inherently different to the Self). But *A Lover's Discourse* is a text of a two-sided nature. Even though the reader might identify with the discourse of love that is presented through the lover's eyes and recognize figures like 'Jealousy' and 'Pleasure', the reader identifies with the implicit critique of this myth as well. This is because the lover in Barthes' text is continuously aware of the fictional nature of his discourse. One fragment I want to discuss in relation to *Norwegian Wood* is "I-love-you":

je-t'-aime / I-love-you

The figure refers not to the declaration of love, to the avowal, but to the repeated utterance of the love cry.

1. Once the first avowal has been made, "I love you" has no meaning whatever; it merely repeats in an enigmatic mode -so blank does it appear- the old message (which may not have been transmitted in these words). I repeat it exclusive of any pertinence; it comes out of the language, it divagates-where? [...]

Those who seek the proffering of the word (lyric poets, liars, wanderers) are subjects of Expenditure: they spend the word, as if it were impertinent (base) that it be recovered somewhere; they are at the extreme limit of language, where language itself (and who else would do so in its place?) recognizes that it is without backing or guarantee, working without a net. (147-54)

In my opinion this fragment discusses a similar loss of meaning through and because of language (concerning the discourse of the 'I' speaking, the lover) as is presented in *Norwegian Wood*. Although Barthes wrote *A Lover's Discourse* some years later, he discusses the same problems with regard to discourse and language as he did in *Empire of Signs*. He writes that through over-use of a prefabricated sentence, the words I-love-you become clichéd and lose their meaning. When we say I-love-you, we feel as if we are expressing an individual, honest emotion. In fact, I-love-you has been expressed so many times and especially in movies, literature and music, we are merely repeating a grammatical construction that is fabricated for us and which is probably even the biggest cliché of all times. This is why Barthes states that I-love-you does not mean more than the actual avowal, that it only exists in language. Following Barthes, I would like to read I-love-you as an overfed sign which, from the moment we use it, starts to lose its meaning as an emotional expression.

This sign shifts from full to emptiness in *Norwegian Wood*. To explain this, *Norwegian Wood's* motion picture serves as an example. The movie depicts the love signs once again in a clichéd, full manner, while Murakami so clearly writes the emptiness of this sign in his novel. *Norwegian Wood's* motion picture sticks to the novel's events, characters and setting. The roles are played by Japanese actors but the director is the French/Vietnamese Tran Anh Hung, who doesn't speak Japanese. *Norwegian Wood* appeared in cinemas all over the world in 2010 and received mixed reviews. In one scene, Watanabe visits Naoko in the psychological clinic for the first time. At night she gets out of bed to kiss him. She stays quiet and seems to want more,

but then she asks Watanabe, “Watashi no koto suki?” The subtitles translate this as: “Do you love me?” A point to note here is that the Japanese use of “I love you” slightly differs from the English use. In the above sentence, *suki* can be freely translated as either ‘love’ or ‘like’. When one wants to say “I like to read” in Japanese, for example, one would similarly say, “Yomu koto ga *suki* desu”. Watanabe answers Naoko: “Suki da yo. Totemo suki da yo.” Which is translated as: “Yes, I love you. I love you very much.”

In the novel, Naoko and Watanabe never express their love in such a way to each other. Watanabe tells Reiko he loves Naoko and he notes she never loved him. But in the final scene of the motion picture, Watanabe phones Midori (in a situation comparable to the novel). He tells her he wants to be with her and that he wants to see her. After which she stays silent for a while. In the movie, Watanabe adds: “Aishiteru”. *Ai* is yet another word for love, this time concerning only romantic love.<sup>3</sup> Explained to me by a Japanese native speaker, *aishiteru* is the ‘heavier’ version of *suki*. *Aishiteru* is more serious and rare. Figuratively speaking, the Japanese would use this word on their wedding day and never again. Now, this is a culturally embedded, complex situation. I’m sure many Japanese will disagree and use *aishiteru* more often. One thing that is certain is that the Japanese language offers two different words to say ‘I love you’. Depending on context, the meaning of *suki* shifts. The director of *Norwegian Wood* chose to let Watanabe use the love expression to both his ‘girlfriends’ but to let him use these two different words. Whether this is a conscious decision or not, it has implications for the love sign in the movie.

The avowal in *Norwegian Wood*’s motion picture is part of an international movie discourse. It reminds a movie watcher of Hollywood’s styled, catchy romances, where to say I-love-you is the ultimate happy ending of a romantic story. This is what makes the first avowal in *Norwegian Wood*’s movie a myth and a cliché; in its own

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of *suki* depends on the context in which it is used. *Ai* on the other hand is only used to express love. The dictionary entries for *suki* and *ai* show this: *suki*: 好き 1. *n.* fondness; love. 2. *adj.* favorite; fond. 3. *vb.* like; love, and *ai*: 愛 *n.* love (*Langenscheidt’s Pocket Japanese Dictionary*). Ikegami Yoshihiko has an interesting view on Japanese as a context-based language: “This, in other words, means that the text of the Japanese language tends to merge very much with the context in which it is used: the ‘text’ is not clearly articulated in contrast to the ‘context’. It is probably a corollary of this that anything like the idea of language as embodying ‘logos’ or absolute truth has been rather alienated in this culture” (Ikegami 17).

discourse, that of international cinema, the expression has been over- and misused too many times and does not mean anything outside language. Even though the director seems to have wanted to add additional weight to Watanabe's second expression of love to Midori by using *aishiteru*, it seems wholly misplaced and insincere. Where the subversion of the classic, standard love story is so apparent in *Norwegian Wood* (Watanabe does not have One True Love), its movie shapes it into a conventional, orderly love story where Watanabe is not 'allowed' to love two women at the same time. Only after Naoko's death can he 'truly love' Midori, the final expression of *aishiteru* seems to suggest. Although Watanabe's love avowal changes in form, from *suki* to *aishiteru*, its imposed meaning does not decline. This makes it not an empty sign but rather an attempt at two meaningful love signs, which, as Barthes wrote, do not exist.

The novel represents difficulties in utterance and the conveyance of feelings through a (silent) discourse of empty signs, as I have shown in the above chapter. The expression 'I love you' is once again an empty sign and a matter of silent discourse in the novel:

'How much do you love me?' Midori asked. 'Enough to melt all the tigers in the world to butter,' I said. (NW 349)

Here, *Norwegian Wood* completely subverts the 'holy' expression, it mocks its weighty, supposed meaning. It answers the locution with a nonsensical, mystifying sentence, instead of the standard procedure of saying the exact same thing back. Midori asks whether he loves her, but what can he possibly say back to 'prove' to her that he loves her? He knows the mere sentence will not mean anything, his love cannot be explained in language. After Naoko dies, he calls Midori. What joins them is not the declaration of love, but the silence.

### 3. Japan as text

*Norwegian Wood* being a novel of empty signs on several levels is not only a theoretical handstand. As I will show here, the Barthesian critical framework provides a better evaluation of *Norwegian Wood*'s qualities as a multi-faceted novel and leads

away from unnecessary, fictional claims about its ‘nationality’. The value of this perspective will be clear after I’ve shown how this works.

Unfortunately and especially in the case of Japan and Murakami, the misleading claim of representing the reality of the Japanese people is daily employed, for example in the media. I have attached a newspaper article (refer to page 22) that appeared in *De Volkskrant* a few days after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster hit Japan in March 2011. This article is a telling example of contemporary image fabrication in the Netherlands. It is titled “Tokyo impatiently waits for [nuclear] cloud to arrive” (these and following translations are my own) and in a big font is ‘De Japanners’ (‘The Japanese’), which is a much-used Dutch word to refer to the Japanese people as a limited entity (with perhaps a slightly negative tone). The journalist asks himself why the Japanese react so calmly: “Is it cool-headedness, naïveté, a lack of critical awareness, postmodern nonchalance?” He then goes on to compare the Japanese reaction with the American one on the military base in Tokyo where, “unrest grows”. An imaginary opposition between the Japanese and the Americans is created in this article and sustained by the notion that these cultures are definable, which is then limited to a few remarks on their qualities such as ‘calm’ versus ‘agitated’. The article is accompanied by an advertisement for Murakami’s most recent novel *Iq84* (2009). Thus, Murakami is represented here as the embodiment of ‘Japan’ and ‘the Japanese’.

In an answer to the media attention Japan gained after the disasters, two professors of Japanese language and culture from Leiden University wrote an article on the risks of a one-sided representation of Japan and the Japanese in the Dutch press:

At least two misconceptions attract attention regarding news coverage: 1. the Japanese are all the same, or there exists ‘one national character’ and 2. everybody in the world should react as ‘the Dutch’ would. [...] Believe it or not, but Japan is a complex society that changes, just like every complex society. The idea that there is only one pattern in which ‘the Japanese’ react to the world is in fact a painful acknowledgement of our incapability to accept that the world is diverse and the Netherlands not the criterion for all social and psychological behavior. What complicates the case is that Japan is a society with a long history as ‘object of exoticism’; that is, Japan is an image of being ‘Other’. The opera and movie-success of *Madame Butterfly*, *the Cruel Asian* or *The Stoic*

*Japanese* illustrates the long-term appeal of a Japan that should be the opposite of Western codes. It only distracts when someone tries to explain how reality is somewhat more complex and nuanced (Smits & Cwiertka, translation my own).

The above examples of works of art like *Madame Butterfly* that represent a one-sided image of a diverse and complex culture, is a problem that still pervades newspapers, television and even scholarly debates. The incapability of recognizing a fictional nature in every art form is one of its many causes.

In the first chapter of *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes is careful to point at how his treatment of Japanese cultural traits is a fictional account of a fictional country; this makes *Empire of Signs* a novelistic text that should be treated as completely detached from reality. According to Barthes, literature always lies and writing can never be truthful. Therefore, when one writes about Japan, one is always, inherently, writing a fictional Japan. Barthes notes, “hence the Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as ‘realities’ to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence – to me the Orient is a matter of indifference” (ES 3). The Orient does not exist in his text, because it manifests its own fictional nature and therefore the constructed nature of the Orient as well. This is quite a baffling introduction to a book that came out eight years before Edward W. Said’s famous *Orientalism* (1978). According to Barthes, Western discourse not only seeks a representation of an ultimate truth or reality, but also a representation of the ‘real’ Orient. This is a practice he deliberately avoids by using his own theory of the inherent meaninglessness of language and the empty sign; by manifesting its own fictional, meaningless nature, his Orient becomes a fictional matter as well.

This has obvious implications for my analysis of *Norwegian Wood* as a novel of empty signs. If *Norwegian Wood* manifests the empty sign and its own artifice, it also empties its own cultural origin. Japan is of no importance in the appreciation of *Norwegian Wood*, or rather; it does not even exist. In an essay titled *The Decay of Lying* (1889) by Oscar Wilde, a dialogue between a man and a woman leads her to comment on the appreciation of Japanese works of art:

No great artist ever sees things as they really are. [...] Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? [...] In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. [...] The fact is that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of Art, and Art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth. (Wilde)

Wilde is writing here that something as complex and diverse as a country and its people cannot be represented in art. As I mentioned in the introduction, in Japanese literary circles Murakami's postmodern writing style is presented as opposed to Ōe Kenzaburo's avant-gardism, in which he experiments with formal or 'beautiful' Japanese language; Ōe's works are regarded 'high' literature in Japan precisely because of the traditional appreciation of a 'unique' and 'Japanese' aesthetic. When asked about his "not really Japanese writing-style", Murakami answers, "I wanted to change Japanese literature from the inside, not the outside. So I basically made up my own rules. [...] I don't like such traditional forms of writing; it may sound beautiful, but it may not communicate. Besides, who knows what beauty is? So in my writing, I've tried to change that. I like to write more freely, so I use a lot of long and peculiar metaphors that seem fresh to me" (Gregory et al. 115). This comment brings to mind his use of the empty love sign in *Norwegian Wood*, where "tigers melt to butter"; a fresh metaphor, freed from any notion of a 'high Japanese aesthetic'.

When Ōe remarks that Murakami's writing is not really Japanese, he implicitly says that only his own embellished style can be real Japanese literature. Also, when scholars discuss Murakami's "international language" and his allusions to American culture, they all forget the fact that in Murakami's novels, nationality plays no part. Therefore it is a futile and pointless exercise to try to determine whether Murakami is a Japanese writer, an American writer, or both. Matthew R. Chozick argues "The distinction between the Occident and the Orient dissolves" (62) in Murakami's works because it resists definition; it is 'foreign' to both Americans and Japanese. I argue that this 'foreignness' has nothing to do with *real* Japanese or American readers; those definitions are a fabrication, a name, for an infinitely versatile group of people language cannot hope to cover. This is exactly the mistake Ōe makes when he says Murakami's writing is not really Japanese. He assumes that 'Japanese' literature is

defined by the nationality and the writing-style of its novelists. Precisely because *Norwegian Wood* continuously manifests its own deceit as a realistic novel written in the limited sphere of language, the text completely resists any notion of a real Japan and a definable, common writing style. In *Norwegian Wood*, Japan is an empire of empty signs and hereby denies Orient and Occident. This, I believe, is *Norwegian Wood's* strongest point. It does not define itself by its Japanese heritage and therefore, the diverse and complex society Smits and Cwiertka are writing of is acknowledged.

### Conclusion

In showing how the empty sign pervades *Norwegian Wood* on several levels and how it connects its themes and characters, I have tried to exemplify the fruitfulness of a Barthesian perspective on this particular Murakami novel. *Norwegian Wood* uses translation, silence, love and relationships as manifestations of emptiness that infinitely suspend meaning. This makes it a text without an ultimate signified, which is exactly what Barthes tries to achieve in *Empire of Signs*. Its fragmented pattern, its distinct and seemingly incomplete chapters and its manifestation of its own artifice are the attempts at a writing where emptying of meaning occurs. To read is to begin to write it, because without ultimate meaning, a text must be written and interpreted by nothing else but each individual reader. Thus, *Norwegian Wood's* reader is not able to assign meaning to the text and will always float above it, only to be aware of his or her own part in its writing. The importance lies in the *attempt* at reading and understanding *Norwegian Wood*, rather than a psychological search for the truth about real life.

*Norwegian Woods* points at how every communication is translation by showing its characters struggling to convey emotions to each other. This makes the text itself a translation between writer and reader as well; it does not matter whether the text is read in Japanese or in English, it will always be in translation. Writing is therefore an imperfect protégé but still, it is the only way of remembering. Watanabe must write down what happened in his student years in order to remember bits and parts of Naoko and Midori. *Norwegian Wood* demonstrates how writing is ultimately unsatisfying also by being a written text itself. Although complete silence stops all communication, a silent and empty discourse is the framework in which *Norwegian Wood's* characters move. Love is an empty sign as well; *Norwegian Wood* does not

force meaning on 'the loved one'. It rather subverts the notion of love as ultimate goal that can give life meaning. It mocks the avowal and uses it ironically, leaving the reader to add his or her own interpretation of (Watanabe's) love. The love sign is utterly empty and can thus be created by the reader.

All of this provides a fruitful framework to work with when analyzing, discussing and appreciating Murakami in the West. The idea of Japan, the Japanese and Murakami as their spokesman is a created image. By analyzing *Norwegian Wood* as an empty sign, one resists the idea of a real Japan in Murakami's works. The possibility of an infinitely shifting meaning, an awareness of the attempt at communication and knowing that literature refers only to other literature, provides both Barthes and Murakami with a perfect writing situation: "If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object [...] It is this system which I shall call: Japan." (ES 3)

Reizigers op een station in het centrum van Tokio.

REPORTAGE INWONERS BEGINNEN DE STAD TE VERLATEN OF SLAAN MASSAAL VOORRADEN IN

# Tokio wacht wolven onrustig af

Van onze correspondent  
**Hans Moleman**

**TOKIO** 'Ben ik bang voor een nucleaire ramp? Ja, ik ben ongerust dat er meer fout gaat in die kapotte centrale in Fukushima. Maar moet je dan meteen vluchten? Mijn flat in Tokio ligt er meer dan 200 kilometer vandaan.'

In Tokio is verhoogde radioactiviteit gemeten. Precieze cijfers worden niet bekendgemaakt, maar het stadsbestuur bezweert dat de volksgezondheid niet in gevaar is.

Ondanks de sussende woorden van de gemeente hebben de eerste inwoners Tokio al verlaten. Op de treinstations en vliegvelden staan drommen mensen te wachten, met grote koffers en hun kinderen dicht tegen zich aan, in de hoop een trein naar het zuiden te kunnen pakken. Toeristen breken hun vakantieavonden vroegtijdig af. Internationale bedrijven

sluiten hun deuren en verplaatsen kantooractiviteiten.

Veel inwoners slaan massaal voedsel, water, mondkapjes en noodvoorraden in, uit angst dat ze binnen afzienbare tijd hun huis niet meer uit kunnen. Overlevingspakketten zijn in alle supermarkten uitverkocht en buiten de winkels kronkelen lange rijen mensen die nog eten en drinken willen hamsteren. Veel meer dan brood en noedels is er niet meer te koop.

Toch blijft Akito rustig na het slechte nieuws van dinsdag. De oude kerncentrale van Fukushima is levensgevaarlijk geworden, er zijn weer twee explosies geweest, even is er al een levensgevaarlijke dosis straling gelekt.

Het kan erger worden, waarschuwt premier Naoto Kan op de televisie. Japan moet na de dubbele klap van de aardbeving en de tsunami van vrijdag rekening houden met een forse nucleaire ramp als de oververhitte

gebrek aan kritische zin, postmoderne nonchalance? Akito lacht een beetje om zo'n vraag, en laat het antwoord schieten.

Ook elders in de stad zijn er nog inwoners die zich geen zorgen lijken te maken. Middelbare scholieren zitten met elkaar te kletsen en te lachen bij de McDonalds, lopen moeders met kindwagens op straat en keuvelen bejaarden bij het ruinhokje met de buren.

Het komt misschien ook doordat de tv-beelden nog veelal gewijd zijn aan de door de tsunami verwoeste dorpen en stadjes aan de noordoostkust. Maar de tv biedt ook panels deskundigen die met schetsen en grafieken proberen uit te leggen wat er lekt en kraakt in de gedoemde centrales.

Op de Amerikaanse militaire bases rond Tokio groeit de onrust. De baai van Tokio is de thuishaven van de Zevende Vloot, en even buiten de stad

ligt de grote base voor de transpacific Airlift Commando. De commando's worden bevestigd door de rechtstreekse berichten van Amerikaanse militairen die worden uitgelegd door de Amerikaanse militairen. We zijn velen die doen wat ze kunnen om de verliezen te steunen.

Uit de zaal klinken vragen. De Amerikaanse militairen, kunnen de verliezen worden teruggevoerd? En, wil een Amerikaanse militairen weten, wat doet zelf als de kerncentrale die hier weggaat

“

We zijn veilig hier. De Japanners doen wat ze kunnen

Commandant van de Amerikaanse Yokota Airbase bij Tokio

reactoren in Fukushima niet bedwongen worden.

Techmici van de Tokyo Electric Power Company werken er al dagen hard aan, bijgestaan door Japanse en inmiddels ook Amerikaanse experts, maar niets lijkt te lukken. Dinsdag liep de lekkage goed af, omdat de meeste radioactieve stoom en stof door de wind over zee werd verspreid. Maar de kans dat het echt fout gaat, lijkt met de dag groter te worden.

Akito weet het, zegt hij. Hij volgt het nieuws op de voet op zijn mobiele telefoon, hij is niet dom. Als jonge accountant werkt hij bij een grote firma in het centrum van Tokio. Maar het slechte nieuws lijkt van hem af te glijden - alsof de ernst ervan niet helemaal tot hem doordringt. Alsof het moderne Japan, de derde economie ter wereld, thuisbasis van wereldmerken als Toyota, Honda en Sony, ongenaakbaar is.

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