

**ETGAR KERET, HARUKI MURAKAMI AND WORLD LITERATURE:
THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSLATION**

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Introduction:

Etgar Keret's popularity is not limited to his home country, Israel. His works have been translated into more than 40 languages and are being read not only in Western countries but also in Asian countries like China, Taiwan and Korea. In my country, Japan, Keret's works became available in 2015, when the Japanese translation of *Suddenly a Knock on the Door* (*Totsuzen Nokku no Otoga*) was published.¹ In 2016, *The Seven Good Years*² (*Ano Subarashiki Nananenn*) was translated and published as Keret's second Japanese book. Both have been favorably reviewed and Keret is establishing his position among Japanese readers as one of the very few contemporary Israeli writers they know.

These translations have contributed to broadening the choice for ordinary Japanese readers who love reading foreign books, and provided them with good opportunities to learn about the author and his writings which emanate from a place quite unfamiliar to them. At the same time, however, in the field of academic research, where translated text is regarded as illegitimate and only used supplementally, these translations have contributed little. In literary studies, at least in Japan, Keret's works

¹ If we take publication in magazines into account, there had been some translated short stories before, like "Shoes (Kustsu)" and "Breaking Pig (Buta wo Waru)", but if we limit it to books, which are far more accessible, *Suddenly* was Keret's first introduction to Japanese readers.

² Etgar Keret. *The Seven Good Years*. (New York: Riverhead, 2015).

remain usable only for researchers who major in Hebrew or Israeli literature, who comprise, due to Japanese people's unfamiliarity with the language and the physical distance to the Middle East, quite a small number of readers. In my opinion, however, this situation is far from being fruitful. Venturing out of the comfortable territories of national or regional literature and reading the stuff outside of them can sometimes provide new and fresh perspectives. Furthermore, considering Keret's high popularity and worldwide readership, it is necessary to investigate how his works are accepted in other countries, and particularly, in other languages. His wide readership can be interpreted as an example of the phenomenon called "world literature" in which literature becomes globalized.

Keret's works share something of the tendency of a certain celebrated Japanese contemporary fiction writer whose language is also minor in this English-dominant world, but whose works are read worldwide thanks to the translations. A comparison between the two can provide us some new perspectives, and in that sense, it should be an encouragement to use translations for literary studies, as a way to bridge the two distinctive self-sufficient literary spheres. This paper will demonstrate how translations can be effective in literary studies, by pointing out how Keret can be compared with Haruki Murakami, and what kind of perspectives are afforded by the comparison.

Before entering the discussion, to make my own position as a reader of Keret's works clear, I'd like to start by sharing my own personal experience when I first came across one of Keret's stories in 2007. I found "Crazy Glue"³ in an American anthology, *Flash Fiction Forward*, published by an American publishing house, W. W. Norton, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, both of whom teach creative writing at

³ Etgar Keret. "Crazy Glue." In *Flash Fiction Forward*. James Thomas and Robert Shepard (Eds.). (New York: Norton, 2006), 149-151.

American universities. It is a story of a husband and his wife, who sticks her feet on the ceiling and hangs upside down. At first I didn't really get the point of the story because the text was written in a very plain style lacking details and therefore with a lot of gaps for the reader to fill in, leaving very much open to interpretation. Yet it was somehow funny and made me laugh, so I searched for the author's name on the internet, supposing he was an American. Judging from the fact that the piece was compiled in an anthology published in America, alongside stories by famous American authors such as Robert Coover, Lydia Davis, and John Updike, and edited by literary professors who taught at American universities, it was natural for me to suppose that this Etgar Keret was an American. But thanks to Wikipedia, I discovered that he was an Israeli and that the story was a translation from Hebrew, a language that I have never seen in print or heard spoken.

My research field is American literature and (unsurprisingly) I cannot read Hebrew, so I thought I would have no opportunity to write anything about his works or translate them into Japanese, and duly forgot about him. However, some years later his stories appeared in front of me again. I found "Cheesus Christ"⁴ in *McSweeney's 37*, an American literary quarterly. I thought the story tremendously funny and it made me laugh out loud again. I checked the author's name, which sounded vaguely familiar to me, and I found Keret's picture on Wikipedia again.

Now I was sure that he was *my* author, and ordered some of his collections. I liked them all, and I wondered why none of his works had been translated into Japanese. I was sure that Japanese readers would like his stories and so I started persuading a Japanese publishing house to publish translations of them. In the end, they located and approached one of the rare Hebrew-Japanese translators in Japan, and Keret's first

⁴ Etgar Keret. "Cheesus Christ." *McSweeney's 37* (2011), 75-78.

Japanese collection *Totsuzen Nokku no Otoga* (*Suddenly a Knock on the Door*) was published in 2015. In 2016, Keret's second book in Japan, *Ano Subarashiki Nananenn* (*The Seven Good Years*) was translated by me from English and published as the 20th sibling of the book that has made its appearance in the world.

As depicted in the story above, my encounters with Keret's stories were mediated by English translations from the beginning. I enjoyed them without feeling any hint that they were Israeli literature and without any knowledge of their original language and cultural background, even wrongly assuming them to be American. Even after learning that Keret was an Israeli and deciding to take up Hebrew, the language is still unfamiliar and unreadable for me, and I enjoy his stories only through English or Japanese translations.

1. Keret and Murakami

As you can see from my experience, I encountered Keret's works neither in his native language, Hebrew, nor in my native language, Japanese, but through a foreign language, English. If there had been no English translation of his works, I would never have been able to read his strange and funny stories. This is very likely the case for most foreign readers whose first language is English too: they enjoy Keret's works in translation, not in the original. It is not only English readers that enjoy Keret's stories in translation: his stories have been translated into more than 40 languages, so it is safe to assume more readers enjoy Keret through translations than through the original Hebrew texts. Therefore, even when they read the same story, for example "Crazy Glue," since the translated texts in different languages are all variations of the original and are always slightly different from it, they are not, in a strict sense, reading the same work.

Another important thing is that Keret's stories read like American works. I had no sense of his being an Israeli. Having had no contact with Israeli language or culture, I could have little genuine sense of what Israeli literature would feel like, and therefore it is natural that I did not sense anything Israeli in them. However, what should be stressed is that they did not feel exotic to me at all. They read so American that I mistook them as having been written by an American author. The following quotation from the beginning of "Cheesus Christ" is a good example:

Have you ever wondered what word is most frequently uttered by people about to die a violent death? MIT carried out a comprehensive study of the question among heterogeneous communities in North America and discovered that the word is none other than *fuck*. Eight percent of those about to die say "What the fuck," 6 percent say only "Fuck," and there's another 2.8 percent that say "Fuck you," though in their case, of course, *you* is the last word, even if *fuck* overshadows it irrefutably. And what does Jeremy Kleinman say a minute before he checks out? He says, "Without cheese."⁵

It is difficult to imagine this piece, full of f-words and referring to MIT and their study "in North America," not being written by an American writer. Not only is it depicting a situation and statistic fact in the United States, what this text revolves around is the use of colloquial expressions in American slang. The last phrase referred to in this quotation as the final words uttered by some Jeremy Kleinman, "Without cheese," is so natural coming at the end of a series of words that it is difficult to imagine that this quotation is originally written in a different language and then translated into English.

⁵ Etgar Keret, "Cheesus Christ," 75.

This is far from being the only example which could be cited. Although it is true that some of Keret's stories clearly have Israeli, Jewish, and Middle-Eastern settings and sometimes depict typical Middle-Eastern material like a suicide bomb attack or compulsory military service, in Keret's most fantastic stories, such as "Hole in the Wall,"⁶ "Pipes,"⁷ "A Thought in the Shape of a Story"⁸ and "Lieland,"⁹ Israeliness, if it can be called such, does not necessarily play a significant role, remaining in the background. This is not to deny the Israeli aspects of Keret's stories. Rather, what is important is that readers can enjoy them without knowing anything about their regional background. In short, there might be significant Israeli aspects in Keret's stories which are invisible, or at least, inaccessible to foreign readers, but Keret's stories owe their interest to something universal rather than something specific to Israel, so that even foreign readers can enjoy them without understanding any of the specifically Israeli aspects.

On the surface level of the text, sometimes the names of people and places, which are important part of the exoticism we feel when we read foreign books, are replaceable with familiar local ones. As Jacob Silverman points out in his review of *Suddenly a Knock on the Door*, "it shies away... from the particularity of Israel life," and "there is no sense of place, hardly a touch of local color."¹⁰

In addition, some of Keret's stories are even set in America, like "Good Intentions,"¹¹ "More Life"¹² and "Cheesus Christ," and references to American pop

⁶ Etgar Keret. "Hole in the Wall." In *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God*. (New Milford: Toby, 2004), 11-13.

⁷ Etgar Keret. "Pipes." In *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God*, 87-89.

⁸ Etgar Keret. "A Thought in the Shape of a Story." In *The Nimrod Flipout*. (New York: FSG, 2006), 119-121.

⁹ Etgar Keret. "Lieland." In *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*. (New York: FSG, 2012), 9-19.

¹⁰ Jacob Silverman. "Why Flash Fiction is an Overrated Genre, and Why Etgar Keret is a Master of It." *Politico*. March 27, 2012.

<http://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2012/03/why-flash-fiction-is-an-overrated-genre-and-why-etgar-keret-is-a-master-of-it-067223>. Accessed June 5, 2017.

¹¹ Etgar Keret. "Good Intentions." In *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God*, 61-65.

culture are frequent: the boy protagonist of “Breaking Pig”¹³ wants a “Bart Simpson doll,” the female protagonist of “Black and Blue”¹⁴ reads Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* and watches the TV show *Lost* with her boyfriend, and the male narrator protagonist of “Through the Wall” thinks of “The Vision,” a member of Marvel’s Avengers, as his hero, to name but a few. On the other hand, Israeli pop culture is rarely referred to. This lack of local color and affinity to American culture can be interpreted as showing how dominant American “soft-power” is in our current world. However, Keret is not the only non-American writer who shares this tendency. For example, in Japan, we have some writers who belong to this family, and one of these, whose works, like Keret’s, are translated into many languages and read worldwide, is Haruki Murakami.

Haruki Murakami was born in 1949, 18 years earlier than Keret, in Kyoto, Japan. He made his debut in 1979 at the age of 30, with his first novel *Kaze no Uta wo Kike (Hear the Wind Sing)*, the English translation of which was not published in America until August 2015, due to the author’s unwillingness to authorize it. With the publication of the succeeding two books, *Pinball, 1973* (1980) and *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), both of which share a character from *Hear the Wind Sing* called “the Rat,” and therefore comprise the *Trilogy of the Rat*, he became one of the leading writers in Japan. The huge commercial success of his fifth novel, *Norwegian Wood*, published in 1987, made him one of the most famous and popular writers in Japan.

Murakami’s works, which are full of references to Western, especially American, pop culture, appealed to Japanese youth in the 80s and 90s, when they felt everything American was cool and fashionable. For example, *Hear the Wind Sing* was full of the names of American musicians and songs, such as the Beach Boys’

¹² Etgar Keret. “More Life.” In *The Nimrod Flipout*, 73-77.

¹³ Etgar Keret. “Breaking Pig.” In *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God*, 23-25.

¹⁴ Etgar Keret. “Black and Blue.” In *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, 80-86.

“California Girls,” Elvis Presley and Marvin Gaye. On the other hand, especially in his earlier works, Murakami rarely referred to Japanese pop music, films, books, or fashion: Murakami’s characters never ate sushi, drank sake or watched Japanese TV shows. With his plain and crisp writing style, Murakami’s earlier stories were criticized as resembling translations from American fiction.¹⁵ Murakami’s domestic popularity owed much to his Westernization, Americanization, un-Japaneseness, and lack of Japanese local color.

Meanwhile, Murakami’s career as an international writer began with the publication of the translation of his third novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, in 1989 in the United States. It was well reviewed and he became increasingly popular in the States, too, which was very shocking for Japanese critics, who had been hesitant to admit literary value in Murakami’s works on the basis of their being too light in touch and lacking literary “depth.”¹⁶ Now his works are translated into many languages—more than 50 by some estimates—and are very popular in many Western countries including Great Britain, France, and Spain as well as in Asian countries like China, Korea and Taiwan. In 2009, he was awarded the Jerusalem Prize, for which Keret was a member of the jury, and made a speech about “Egg and Wall.”

Popularity on this scale has never been enjoyed by any other Japanese writer, and there is a difference between Murakami and other former Japanese writers like Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972), Jun’ichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965) and Yukio Mishima

¹⁵ For example, in the jury’s comments at awarding the Gunzo literary prize for a new author to Murakami’s *Hear the Wind Sing*, the fiction writer Saiichi Maruya duly points out that Murakami’s writing is “under the strong influence of contemporary American fiction” and that “he certainly has learned how to write from American writers like Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Richard Brautigan.” Another jury member, Toshio Shimao, also points out that “the plot, characters, and their behavior and conversations all felt like they were taking place somewhere in America.” (*Gunzo* 22 [June 1979], 114-119)

¹⁶ One of the harshest criticisms towards Murakami can be found in Miyoshi, who says that Murakami’s tales are “entirely easy read—a smooth, popular item of consumption.” He points out that readers are best advised not to take “a symbol-deciphering game” in Murakami’s tales too far, because “they might soon reach the limits,” and “only a very few would be silly enough to get interested in *deep* reading.” Masao Miyoshi. *Off Center* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 234. italics mine.

(1925-1970), who won some popularity abroad: they were accepted abroad partly—perhaps largely—because of their Japaneseness and exoticism, that is to say, through unconsciously fulfilling the Orientalist expectations of the West.¹⁷ In this sense, Murakami was totally different. What was new about Murakami's international success was that Murakami was not read as a "Japanese writer" but as a "writer." When they read Murakami, most readers abroad read his books as they would a book in their own language, with no expectation of anything typically Japanese or exotic. When a new Murakami book is published, many expectant readers queue at bookstores in New York and London to obtain their copies, not caring which country the author is from, or whether the text is a translation or not.¹⁸ As Inuhiko Yomota observes, "(i)n every society, his works are first accepted as texts that assuage the political disillusionment, romantic impulses, loneliness, and emptiness of readers. Only later do they realize that the author was born in Japan and the books are actually translations."¹⁹

2. Keret and Murakami as World Literature

Etgar Keret writes in Hebrew, which, according to Keret, is a unique language that "existed as a written language for two thousand years only to find itself 'defrosted' at an arbitrary historical point."²⁰ Unfortunately, any special qualities conferred upon his writing by the unique nature of Hebrew are inaccessible to most foreign readers who read Keret in translation. But the fact that his books are translated into more than

¹⁷ One typical example can be found in the simple fact that when he was awarded the Nobel prize in literature in 1968, Kawabata appeared in a Japanese traditional robe, delivered a speech titled "Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself," and attempted to perform his Japaneseness, being fully conscious of the nation and culture to which he belonged.

¹⁸ "Hundreds queue for new Murakami novel," *The Bookseller*. August 12, 2014.

¹⁹ Inuhiko Yomota. "How to View the 'Haruki Boom.'" In *A Wild Haruki Chase: Reading Murakami Around the World*. The Japan Foundation. (Berkeley: Stone Bridge, 2008), 34.

²⁰ Rebecca Sacks. "Something Out of Something: Talking with Etgar Keret." *The Paris Review*. May 1, 2012.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/05/01/something-out-of-something-talking-with-etgar-keret/>. Accessed May 28, 2017.

40 languages and published is proof that most of his readers enjoy his stories without needing to respond to the uniqueness of the language, or often even to the context of Israeliness. In this sense, Keret and Murakami are representative of what is happening in the global reading world today: they are enjoyed without the context of a specific culture.

Two reviews by Japanese fiction writers quoted below are good examples of the foreign reception of Keret's work. The first one is by Yukiko Motoya, a female fiction writer who won the Akutagawa prize, the most well-known literary prize in Japan, in 2015:

In Etgar Keret's stories many characters appear in turn, staying for just a few pages, opening the zipper in the mouth of her lover, or finding that his dog is the only one who really loves him, or reincarnating into a guava. Each leaves without saying goodbye. Each of the episodes ends in an instant and that might stun you at first. However, when you gather all these short stories together they seem like fragments of your unconscious, and you will find yourself hearing something like a *continuo*, which is somehow familiar to you. We probably know what this *continuo* is, however far away the country where they are written may be.²¹

Here Motoya is summarizing the characteristics of Keret's stories and finds something she calls *continuo* that all these stories have in common, and claims that the *continuo* is something we all are familiar with. She knows that these stories are written by an Israeli writer but she tries to find the commonality rather than difference. She mentions that the author's home country, Israel, is far away from her, but does not

²¹ Yukiko Motoya. blurb. *Totsuzen Nokkuno Ootoga*. (Tokyo: Shincho Publishing, 2015). My translation, italics mine.

express any difficulty in understanding his works due to the distance and difference between them.

The other review is by Shin Fukunaga, a male experimental fiction writer. After observing that Keret's stories are filled with deaths, he continues:

What is interesting is that there is always "laughter" hidden behind these deaths. Death is always aiming at us, but laughter is scheming for the "death of death." That is the structure lurking behind these stories. Death and laughter, which are usually supposed to be incompatible, happen to coexist in Keret's stories, and that is the gist of this collection. All the way through these stories, humor works as the power to overcome sorrow.²²

Fukunaga perceptively identifies Keret's characteristic humor as "scheming for the death of death." It is again noteworthy that Fukunaga, in common with other critics, does not try to connect anything to Keret's nationality, ethnicity or the culture he belongs to. Both Motoya and Fukunaga do not even mention Keret's ethnic identity, Jewishness. This is arguably reasonable considering the fact that Jewishness is a quality quite unfamiliar to ordinary Japanese people. Both Motoya and Fukunaga recognize that Keret is a foreign author, but that seems to be the limit of their interest. Neither of them goes beyond that by trying to attribute something to his national identity.

Here Keret is, like Murakami, universalized, rather than particularized, and read as a "writer," not as an "Israeli writer," which means that we can find a common tendency in the acceptance of Keret and Murakami, the two contemporary writers who write in minor languages and are read worldwide through translations. However, if we

²² Shin Fukunaga. "Kanashimi o Norikoeru Chikara" (The Power to Overcome Sorrow). Review of *Suddenly a Knock on the Door*. *MinamiNipponShimbun* April 26, 2015, 8.

were to restrict our studies to original texts, as is usually recommended in academic literary studies, it would be difficult to compare these two writers who supposedly have something in common. Israelis who can read Japanese or Japanese who can read Hebrew can, of course, read Keret and Murakami in the original text, but because neither Hebrew nor Japanese is widely understood as a second language, such readers are quite rare.²³ But as long as you read English you can read both of them in English translation. Of course, minority language cultures should resist the global dominance of the English language and protect regional diversity. However, considering the relatively minor position of Hebrew and Japanese in the publishing world, it must be conceded that English translation is the only realistic means of giving vernacular works a significant audience, or allow Japanese or Israeli native speakers to compare important foreign works with works in their own languages. The English translation acts as an important, albeit imperfect, bridge for comparative criticism. And comparing such works can give us new perspectives that could not be enjoyed if we remained in the domain of national literatures, required by academic tradition to read texts in their original languages.

This is what David Damrosch claims in his monumental study *What is World Literature?* According to him, a work enters into world literature “by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin,”²⁴ and making a contrast to Robert Frost’s famous quote “poetry is what gets lost in translation,” he claims that “world literature is writing that gains in translation.”²⁵ Instead of worrying

²³ In addition, reflecting the minor position of these two languages, direct translation between them is very scarce. As seen in the chart of the number of translations between the two languages in Doron Cohen’s study, “Translation and Publishing of Japanese Literature in Hebrew: Tendencies and Episodes.” *The 5th CISMOR Conference on Jewish Studies* 6 (2012), 138-155, until 2012 only 83 Japanese books had been translated into Hebrew in total, and among writers who have more than one book translated, only three are living writers. Translation the other way is equally scarce. As of 2013, only 31 books had ever been translated from Hebrew into Japanese.

²⁴ David Damrosch. *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

about the incompetency of the use of translation, Damrosch emphasizes the advantages translation can bring us, and therefore claims that world literature is “not a set of canon of texts but a mode of reading,” and that “works become world literature by being received *into* the space of foreign culture.”²⁶ The expression “world literature” used to refer to “a set of canon of texts” that represented various national literatures from all over the world from all periods of human history. Contrary to this definition, Damrosch claims that world literature is “a mode of reading,” that is to say, how we read various texts from different times and places, possibly, through translation. And with this perspective, we can juxtapose texts from different nationalities and languages.

This concept of world literature is very effective when we think of Keret and Murakami. Although both of them are widely read in many cultures, as long as we stay in each national literature where understanding of the original language, culture and history behind it are essential, we cannot compare them. However, if we read them as world literature and juxtapose them as something similar but from different cultures, we can gain new perspectives.

3. Possible Readings

Both Keret and Murakami have won worldwide readerships, and they have some tendencies in common. As pointed out earlier, their works are not read as specific to their home countries but rather as something universal. In his second book on world literature, *How to Read World Literature*, Damrosch writes about contemporary world literature under globalization and introduces two modes: delocalized mode and glocal mode. According to Damrosch, after 19th century realism, which required readers to have literacy in the local culture behind the works, in the 20th century, writers like

²⁶ Ibid., 283.

Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett began to set their stories in “mysterious, emblematic locales,” that could be anywhere.²⁷ These are the writers who wrote in “delocalized” mode, and Keret and Murakami could be categorized in this family.

Moreover, it is not difficult to point out the similarities between Keret and Murakami, though the length of their works and type of humor are quite different. Both are easy and fun to read and bring readers somewhere they didn't expect to be at the beginning of the story, and in the end leave them quite uncertain about what they have just read actually means. Both depict an absurd and surreal world and can be categorized as “magical realistic,” or postmodern writers. Murakami's short stories like “Dabchick”²⁸ “The Little Green Monster”²⁹ and “Super-Frog Saves Tokyo,”³⁰ in which an unrealistic creature has a job interview, tries to confess his love to a human lady, or tries to stop an earthquake from hitting Tokyo by fighting against Worm, are good examples of the surrealism in his works. Keret's “Unzipping,”³¹ in which another guy appears when a girl unzips the mouth of her boyfriend, “Bottle,”³² in which a drunk man puts the protagonist's friend into a beer bottle, and “Halibut,” in which a raw fish on the dish served at a restaurant talks human language, belong to this line. They are all deadpan magical realism.

In addition to this magical realistic tendency, there are three more common characteristics Keret and Murakami might share, and applying what one learns from reading one to the other might cast new light on the reading of the other. These characteristics are:

²⁷ David Damrosch. *How to Read World Literature*. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 108.

²⁸ Haruki Murakami. *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*. (New York: Vintage, 2006), 105-111.

²⁹ Haruki Murakami. *Elephant Vanishes*. (New York: Vintage, 1993), 151-156.

³⁰ Haruki Murakami. *After the Quake*. (New York: Vintage, 2002), 91-114.

³¹ Etgar Keret. “Unzipping.” In *Suddenly, a Knock on the Door*, 51-53.

³² Etgar Keret. “Bottle.” In *The Nimrod Flipout*, 109-111

a. Simple writing styles and newness in their national literary traditions.

Both Keret and Murakami write in simple and plain language. As for Keret, though I cannot tell how plain his Hebrew is, judging from the length of the sentences in the English translation, we can safely assume he writes in a plain style. We could point out that characters in their stories are always flat. Lacking the depth of “normal” human beings, they are like comic book characters. Their psychology is rarely depicted and readers have to guess their feelings from their actions: for example, the male protagonist of Keret’s “An Exclusive,”³³ who is dumped by his girlfriend after telling her he wished for a motorcycle on a falling star, whacks a serial killer or a terrorist in the head with a hammer much to his readers surprise, without betraying any emotion:

And then I saw him step off the sidewalk onto the road, trying to walk around me very, very slowly. I watched him, half aware of the sledgehammer in my hand, a five-kilo sledgehammer. I took a step toward him and whacked him on the head. (21)

Murakami’s characters are emotionless, too, and accept every strange thing that happens around them. This is a consequence of both writers’ simple writing styles, which shy away from detail. As a result, their texts are full of gaps for readers to fill. At the same time, both writers are regarded as new and different from their predecessors in their national literatures. Is there any connection between Keret’s writing style and his newness? I ask this because in Murakami’s case, there clearly is. When he first tried to write a novel, after writing in longhand and finding he was unable to achieve a satisfactory result, Murakami claims that he typed the first part in English and then translated it into Japanese himself. This is different from Beckett’s or Nabokov’s cases, who wrote or translated their own works into different languages which they were

³³ Etgar Keret. “An Exclusive.” In *The Girl on the Fridge*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 19-27.

fluent in. In contrast to them, Murakami dared to write in a language he did not have a good command of, as seen in the quotation below:

Needless to say, my ability in English composition didn't amount to much. My vocabulary was severely limited, as was my command of English syntax. I could only write in simple, short sentences. That meant that, however complex and numerous the thoughts running around my head might be, I couldn't even attempt to set them down as they came to me. The language had to be simple, my ideas expressed in an easy-to-understand way, the descriptions stripped of all extraneous fat, the form made compact, and everything arranged to fit a container of limited size. The result was a rough, uncultivated kind of prose.³⁴

In another place Murakami explains that he chose this procedure because he wanted to get rid of something that inevitably comes as part and parcel of his native tongue, like the reality of his daily life. As a result, Murakami's writing style became very simple, flat and neutral. Accordingly, although *Hear the Wind Sing* is set in the town of Kobe, there is almost no mention of actual place names, and people don't speak the local dialect which in reality is quite common there. Therefore it was natural that his writing reads like "translationese." His willingness to move away from the genealogy of Japanese literature is also found in his mention of a writer named Derek Hartfield, as seen in the quotation below:

I learned a lot of what I know about writing from Derek Hartfield.

Almost everything, in fact. Unfortunately, as a writer, Hartfield

³⁴ Haruki Murakami. "The Birth of My Kitchen-Table Fiction: An Introduction to Two Short Novels." In *Wind/Pinball* (New York: Knopf, 2015), xiii.

was sterile in the full sense of the word. One has only to read some of his stuff to see that. His prose is mangled, his stories slapdash, his themes juvenile. Yet he was a fighter as few are, a man who used words as weapon. In my opinion, when it comes to sheer combativeness he should be ranked right up there with the giants of his day, Hemingway and Fitzgerald.³⁵

Murakami is an earnest reader of American literature and he has even translated and published several works, such as *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and all the short stories of Raymond Carver into Japanese. Here in his very first story, Murakami made his narrator protagonist, who we can safely identify as Murakami himself, reveal that the biggest influence on his development as a writer was an American writer named Derek Hartfield. We should note here that Murakami is so eager to put himself into the genealogy of non-Japanese writers, that he invents a fictional model. Derek Hartfield does not exist.

In Murakami's case his writing style had a lot to do with his newness, and it was intentional. Does the same apply to Keret, who writes using colloquial Hebrew, and who has been called "the new voice of Israel"?³⁶ Contrary to his predecessors in Israeli literature, Keret does not write about typically Israeli concerns directly, and is not like a "lighthouse showing the people where to go," to use the metaphor he employs to describe the predecessors of his national literature who are regarded as leaders of its population.³⁷ This attitude reminds us of Murakami's intentional falling out of national

³⁵ Haruki Murakami. *Hear the Wind Sing*. In *Wind/Pinball*, 5.

³⁶ It is also suggestive that Keret is called "the new voice of Israel," when we recall that Murakami was also cynically called one of "the new voices of Japan" along with Banana Yoshimoto, by Masao Miyoshi, who tries to downgrade Murakami in an effort to praise Oe. (Masao Miyoshi, "Kenzaburo Oe: The Man Who Talks With the Trees." *Los Angeles Times*. October 19, 1994).

³⁷ Etgar Keret. Interview. Radio Feltrinelli. September 17, 2012. Podcast.

literary tradition. If these two writers' plain style, which inevitably shies away from describing details that are necessary to represent a certain locale, is a means to move away from the tradition of their national literatures, it might be a source of their "delocal" tendency to depict mysterious, emblematic locales that could be anywhere. The criticism is often made that with globalization the distinctive and unique qualities of English are eliminated and the language is reduced to "its least common denominator." The implication is that there is a "dumbing down"—a loss of the potential in the language for richness and precision. But when we read Keret and Murakami in their plain English, it is possible to say that there is a value in this plainness, and that this is another distinct and equally valid kind of English, which is different and independent from any kind of previous local English.

b. The meanings of "the other worlds"

Keret and Murakami's magical realism brings their readers somewhere different from our reality, and sometimes to "the other worlds," which are not necessarily simply the world after death. In Murakami's case, examples of these other worlds include the ending of *Pinball, 1973*, where the protagonist talks with a pinball machine, or the "Sheepman," a mysterious unhuman figure who appears in *Wildsheep Chase* wearing a sheep-like costume. Keret's other worlds have more variations: there is the world which is accessed through pipes and only misfits in this world can arrive, and in *Kneller's Happy Camper*³⁸, the other world is one in which only those who have committed suicide live with their deformed bodies, and another one is the world depicted in "Lieland," where your lies exist. This affinity to "other worlds" is common to both Keret and Murakami. How can we explain this shared tendency?

³⁸ Etgar Keret. "Kneller's Happy Camper." In *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God*, 91-130.

Some critics discuss Murakami's other world in relation to Carl Jung's collective unconscious.³⁹ However, from the beginning of his career, as suggested earlier, Murakami wanted to belong to the literary tradition of "the other world," the United States, and he tried to connect himself to the literary tradition of somewhere other than his own place. When Murakami made his debut with *Hear the Wind Sing* in 1979, some critics pointed out the influence of Kurt Vonnegut Jr., who is Keret's favorite too, in his style of writing.⁴⁰ As Murakami himself explained, the main body of his reading had been American literature rather than Japanese. Thus, in a sense, Murakami is a writer who tried to write American literature in Japan and in Japanese.

At the same time, Japanese critics have always had difficulty in containing Murakami in the history of Japanese literature. First they found that Murakami's writing was too "light touch" to be read as serious literary work, and the typical antipathy to Murakami can be found in a speech given by Kenzaburo Oe, a Japanese Nobel laureate, in 1986:

Amidst such a trend, Murakami Haruki, a writer born after the war, is said to be attracting new readers to *junbungaku*. It is clear, however, that Murakami's target lies outside the sphere of *junbungaku*, and that is exactly where he is trying to establish his place. It is generally believed that there is nothing that directly links Murakami with postwar literature of the 1946-1970 period.⁴¹

Junbungaku literally translates as "pure-literature," and in this speech, which he began by claiming that "Japanese literature is decaying," Oe names Murakami as a popular

³⁹ For example, see Matthew Carl Strecher, *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁴⁰ See footnote 15.

⁴¹ Kenzaburo Oe. "Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's Dilemma." *Postmodernism and Japan*. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (Eds.). (Durham: Duke UP, 1989), 200.

writer—being such was rare for *junbungaku* writers like Oe—who cannot be categorized as writing pure, and therefore serious, Japanese literature.

Murakami's position in national literatures has always been ambiguous between his home country and the country by which he wanted to be culturally adopted: he belongs to two traditions at the same time and yet cannot claim either as his own. It is not a wild guess to suppose that the duality of Murakami's identity is the source of his depicting "other worlds" so often.

Just as if he were repeating the estrangement that Murakami suffered, Keret was also criticized by a predecessor in his national literature, A.B. Yehoshua, one of the leading writers of Israel, for his lack of (ostensible) political commitment.⁴² Keret himself is conscious of the distinction made between his writing and that of the epic, nationalist fiction that depicts the major political issues facing Israel, and he is critical of the attitude of writers who make this distinction for its self-righteousness and lack of self-criticism. Judging from his claim that he has "more in common with this Jewish literature (like Kafka and Isaac Bebel) than I do with Israeli literature," and that "American writers like Nathan [Englander], or [Jonathan] Safran-Foer, or Todd [Hasak-Lowy] are closer in some respects to my mindset," it is clear that Keret belongs to the Jewish tradition rather than to Israeli tradition.⁴³ Keret even says he feels as if he were a "Jew in the Diaspora in Israel," showing sympathy toward Jewish writers in the Diaspora, and emphasizing the advantage of being in such condition. Living in the state of Diaspora, he has the advantage of "being an insider and outsider at the same time." This sense of dislocation can be found even in his first story, "Pipes," in which the protagonist, reflecting his feeling of being out of place, ends up arriving in heaven, or

⁴² Etgar Keret. Interview by Ben Naparstek. *Tikkun* 20.5 (2005), 70-71.

⁴³ Etgar Keret. Interview by Adam Rovner. "Etgar Keret on Tradition, Translation, and Alien Toasters." *Words without Borders*. 12 Mar. 2009. <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/interviews-etgar-keret-on-tradition-translation-and-alien-toasters> Accessed June 2, 2017.

“the other world,” to which only misfits in this world can get in their own unique way, such as the protagonist’s going through a huge pipe.

Both Murakami and Keret have difficulty in being positioned as worthy successors to their national literary traditions, and they both have another line of tradition to which they think they belong. Therefore, it may be possible to explain their “other worlds” in relation to this kind of duality and ambivalence toward their homes or identities.

c. Americanism, postcolonial mimicry and literature in the age of globalization

As I mentioned before, Murakami’s earlier works were full of references to American pop culture and some of Keret’s stories can be read as if they were written by an American writer. As for Murakami’s works, Rebecca Suter points out that we can find in Murakami “mimicry of the colonized,”⁴⁴ which is inevitably accompanied by mockery toward the colonizer, as theorized by Homi Bhabha: not a passive imitation of Western models, but a parodic incorporation that transforms the original and ends up destabilizing it.⁴⁵ After the occupation that followed World War II, Japan earnestly followed America as a model to imitate, and the influence of American pop culture has been very strong there. Murakami’s works, which ostensibly read like American fiction, can be viewed as a case of mimicry of the colonizing American culture by the colonized. Does this apply to Keret, whose works sometimes sit comfortably in American literary magazines, too? For example, “Goodeed,” which appeared on *McSweeney’s* No. 48, depicts housewives in America who feel good by giving homeless people huge amounts of money and even invent an app to locate nearby homeless for people who want to enjoy the gratitude of the needy. After giving

⁴⁴ Rebecca Suter. *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and the United States*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

⁴⁵ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994).

inappropriately large amounts of money to homeless people, Dara and her rich housewife friends expected a pay-off:

They wanted the look, maybe even the hug—if it felt natural—from a man whose life they'd rescued from the sewer. Or, if not rescued, then upgraded significantly. They wanted to see him cry or thank Jesus for sending them to him, as if they were saints and not just very rich women.⁴⁶

Can this be read as mockery of American hypocrisy in Americans' promotion of the virtue of charity? If so, we might be able to consider the relationship between America and Israel in the context of cultural colonization and find something parallel between the U.S.-Israel relationship and the U.S.-Japan relationship.

This perspective would be quite important, for Fredric Jameson writes of globalization's influence on peripheral cultures:

...there is still, in many parts of the world, the instinctive desire to be read by the West and in particular in the United States and in the English language: to be read and to be seen and observed by this particular Big Other.⁴⁷

If this is true, in order to prevent being simply consumed as commodities by this "Big Other," some subversive opportunities are important for non-American writers like Keret and Murakami.

What we need to think about, however, is no longer only the relationship between one minor culture and one hegemonic power. In the quotation above, Jameson identifies the "Big Other," by which minor cultures want to be read and recognized,

⁴⁶ Etgar Keret. "Goodeed." *McSweeney's* 48 (2014), 190.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson. "New Literary History after the End of the New." *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008), 377.

with “the West,” “the United States,” and “the English language,” but in this age of globalization, the hegemonic power is not limited to a single country or culture. With the acceleration of global capitalism which goes along with the transaction of consumer goods, resources and information across the boundaries between nation-states, we are living in the age of globalization, and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt called the power that works over nation-states and by nature erases the national sovereignties, “Empire,” which is totally different from the nation-state empire of the 19th century which colonized other countries and enlarged its power.⁴⁸ Under the hegemony of this new “Empire,” even America cannot be an exception.

Reiichi Miura takes this perspective in his reading of Murakami and argues that Murakami’s Americanness depicts globalization in a different way. He writes, quoting Hardt and Negri: “(t)he United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperial project,”⁴⁹ and “what Murakami has been trying to describe in his works should be seen as the ‘irresistible and irreversible globalization’ by Empire.”⁵⁰ For Miura, Murakami’s Americanness is not a choice but “(h)e is rather compelled to relate what he relates.”⁵¹ With the help of the ideological frame of “Empire,” Murakami can be read as a typical example of literature as a product of globalization, rather than as colonized minority literature.

This also applies to Keret, whose works read like American works and frequently refer to American, which is to say, global, pop culture. Murakami and Keret, two writers whose works are translated and sold worldwide, embody the way in which

⁴⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

⁴⁹ Ibid. xiii-xiv.

⁵⁰ Reiichi Miura. “On the Globalization of Literature: Haruki Murakami, Tim O’Brien, and Raymond Carver.” *Electronic Book Review* 7 Dec. 2003. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/internetnation/bungaku>

⁵¹ Ibid.

literary works are now transacted, how they are read and what kind of reality they depict, in this age of globalization.

At the beginning of this paper, I wrote about how the original text is granted a privileged status in traditional literary studies. This attitude is based on the belief that the author's own countrymen's evaluation of his work must be the most correct one and therefore that reading the original text is essential. However, as in the case of Murakami and Keret, given the current waning of nation-states and distinction between them, and given the appearance of a global reading community which reads them in translation, with more people reading their works and appreciating them in translations than in the original text, can we still insist on the original being more important or more authentic?⁵² Both Murakami and Keret's readership have the potential of overturning our belief in the priority of texts which we have never doubted before.

Actually, Keret's *The Seven Good Years*, a collection of nonfictional essays, is controversial on this point. Although it is not literary "fiction," and therefore may be a little different from the case of fictional works, the book does not exist in an original Hebrew edition. All 20 editions in the world are translations. Although each piece was originally written in Hebrew by Keret, it was then translated and published in different English media, and text of this book consists of these translated essays. So the definitive edition is the English edition, and all the other editions are translations from this edition, which means they are not one, but two steps away from the original text. This book is a good example to keep in mind when we are considering the issue of the priority of texts: we usually never doubt the priority of original text over the translated

⁵² As for the argument here, I owe quite a lot to Miura. Some of Murakami's works are retranslated from English and in Germany caused a controversy regarding which text is authentic. As for retranslation, although admitting that the direct translation is desirable, Murakami still accepts retranslation for the sake of speed. "Say I'm writing a book, and 15 years later it shows up translated into Norwegian, I would be glad for that, of course, but I would be *really* pleased if it came out just two or three years after I wrote it, even if the translation were a little off. Of course, accuracy is important, but speed is another thing you can't ignore." (in Jay Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*. [London: Harvill, 2002], 280)

editions, but when there is no original text available, and yet readers around the world enjoy and appreciate each translated edition, how do we determine which text is legitimate? When we don't have the original text, is it still meaningful to insist on the legitimacy of the original and the inferiority of the translation? How can we determine which edition has greater authenticity and authority?

Conclusion

I listed three possible readings that the comparison between Keret and Murakami can bring to us. These are, for the moment, offered as ideas for further study. I hope that a fuller discussion and a properly-supported conclusion will be offered in a future paper. However, at least, I hope I have shown that their similarity provides us some new perspectives on literature as it is, and as it should be, and perspectives which are not available if we stay rigidly in the compartmentalized environment of national literatures. What makes these discussions possible is the juxtaposition of these two contemporary writers, and the strategy of reading them as "world literature." And what makes that possible is translation.