

ALLISON ATWILL

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Acrylic on birch panel with gold leaf, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

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A Conversation with Translator Philip Gabriel

Murakami, Found in Translation

Haruki Murakami, the Japanese writer referred to by the *New York Times* as a “global imaginative force,” depends on several translators to bring his work to the English-speaking world. One of these, Philip Gabriel, is professor of Japanese literature at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The author of *Spirit Matters: The Transcendent in Modern Japanese Literature* and *Mad Wives and Island Dreams: Shimao Toshio and the Margins of Japanese Literature*, he has translated contemporary Japanese writers such as Masahiko Shimada, Senji Kuroi, and Nobel laureate Kenzaburō Ōe.

Gabriel discovered Murakami’s work in the mid-eighties, while living and teaching in Japan. “I loved his light touch, his humor, his often quirky take on life, as well as the touch of nostalgia for the past that often appeared in these early works,” he explained to Knopf editor Gary Fisketjon and fellow translator Jay Rubin in a roundtable discussion on Murakami. Later, Howard Junker, founder of the literary journal *ZYZZYVA*, asked Gabriel for one of his Murakami translations; “*The Kangaroo Communique*” was published in the fall of 1988, the first of Murakami’s stories to be published in the U.S. In 1992, the *New Yorker* came to Gabriel for his translation of “Barn Burning,” and shortly thereafter he was translating Murakami’s novels *South of*

the *Border*, *West of the Sun* and *Sputnik Sweetheart* as well as some nonfiction that became part of the book *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*. Since that time, Gabriel has gone on to translate Kafka on the Shore (for which he was awarded the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize), *1Q84* (Book 3), *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (with Jay Rubin), and Murakami’s recent novel, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*.

Literary translation is an exhausting process. Gabriel sets his goal at four pages a day. What he likes best is polishing the developing draft, going over it again and again before going back to compare it once again against the original.

Murakami himself speaks of finding his voice in Japanese by writing first in English, then translating it back into his native language. (He is the Japanese translator of writers such as Raymond Carver and J. D. Salinger.) According to Sam Anderson in the *New York Times*, “You could even say that translation is the organizing principle of Murakami’s work: that his stories are not only translated but are about translation. The signature pleasure of a Murakami plot,” Anderson says, “is watching a very ordinary situation ... turn suddenly extraordinary ... watching a character, in other words, being dropped from a position of existential fluency into something completely foreign and then being forced to mediate, awkwardly, between those two realities. A Murakami character is always, in a sense, translating between radically different worlds: mundane and bizarre, natural and supernatural, country and city, male and female, overground and underground. His entire oeuvre, in other words, is the act of translation dramatized.”

Once, while translating a quote from Pushkin’s poem Eugene Onegin that appears in Murakami’s *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Gabriel had a mini-revelation. He reviewed a number of reputable translations from the original Russian in English—no point in translating it from Japanese. He found four versions of these lines from Onegin:

1. He had no urge to rummage / in the chronological dust.
2. He lacked the slightest predilection / for raking up historic dust.
3. He lacked the yen to go out poking / Into the dusty lives of yore—