

Weapon of Metaphorical Destruction: Fission and Fallout in Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

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The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle represents a formidable work of nuclear literature – despite not a single use of the word “nuclear.” From horrific sights witnessed on a clandestine mission behind enemy lines in pre-war Manchuria, to a procession of oddball personalities whose preoccupation with the occult borders on the bizarre in 1980s Tokyo, the story sears images into the minds of readers – images of the violent, the uncanny, and the otherworldly. Though the novel mostly avoids any direct confrontation with the atom bomb, Japanese author Haruki Murakami uses stylistic tools to fashion a figurative weapon of metaphorical destruction that shares much in common with its literal counterparts used in the Pacific theatre during World War II.

This unconventional way of reading *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* reclassifies the novel into a special category of nuclear literature that Daniel Cordle distinguishes from “genre fiction explicitly about nuclear war or its aftermath” (2). Such literary treatments of nuclear issues “reveal the nuclear context as part of the lived experience of ordinary life” (6). But unlike the examples that typify this category, “in which the threat of nuclear war provides an assumed, but largely suppressed, background to the central narrative concerns,” in Murakami’s novel it is the persistent psychological threat from a nuclear war in the characters’ past that places it within the genre of nuclear literature (Cordle 7).

Murakami is famously reserved and rarely expresses his personal opinion on issues, preferring instead to challenge social and political mores through the characters in his fiction. But the author asserted his own voice following the 2011 disaster that occurred when an earthquake and tsunami critically damaged a nuclear power reactor in Fukushima. In his acceptance speech for that year’s International Catalunya prize, Murakami characterized the Fukushima disaster as “the second major nuclear detriment that the Japanese people have experienced” (Flood). “This time it was not a bomb being dropped upon us, but a mistake committed by our very own hands,” said Murakami, erasing whatever distinctions people might have imagined between the significance of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima. The author declared that his country should have rejected nuclear energy after learning “just how badly radiation leaves scars on the world and human wellbeing” (Flood). This revealing statement reflects Murakami’s view that the effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki extend far beyond their historical ground zeros. The scars are not only physical but figurative, marking not only the victims but society as a whole. Going a step further, Murakami displays uncharacteristic disdain for individual politicians pushing the country to embrace nuclear power, calling them “evil dogs that carry the names of ‘efficiency’ and ‘convenience’” (Flood). This rare glimpse into Murakami’s personal perspective highlights his energetic engagement with nuclear themes, which had appeared not to figure in his novels.

The purpose of this article is to explore the manner in which Murakami shrouds undeniably scientific processes evoking nuclear physics and oncology, fission and radioactive fallout, within figurative language and other stylistic techniques throughout the novel. By deconstructing a series of particularly obscure passages, it is possible to demonstrate how *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* addresses the implications of an atomic world without dealing directly with the atomic bomb. Murakami covertly assembles a

recurring motif that runs throughout the story, harnessing oncological forces of decay and mutation consistent with exposure to radiation from a nuclear explosion, with dramatic repercussions for the development of characters, the unfolding of the narrative, and critical assessments of the novel.

1. Controlled Chaos

Prevailing popular and critical views characterize *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* as chaotic, aimless, or even unintentional. For instance, readers have no reason to suspect the novel's 1984 setting is of any particular significance, beyond perhaps that of a personal affinity, as Murakami revisits this year in a later novel, *IQ84*. However, from the perspective of a nuclear reading, the 1980s are noteworthy. The decade proceeds against the backdrop of the Cold War. Though the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long since been assigned to history, the nuclear threat to people's everyday lives now comes not only from the Soviets but also from sources much closer to people's everyday lives, as the Three Mile Island Accident so vividly demonstrated just a few years prior in 1979. Cordle affirms that "nuclear issues came strongly to the fore again in the 1980s," resulting in "a substantial body of literature, shaped by this nuclear consciousness" (6). His definitive work on this subject, *Late Cold War Literature and Culture*, seeks to address the deficiency in identifying and analyzing 1980s nuclear literature. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* escapes analysis as it is merely set in 1984, being published a decade later. But a novel that figures prominently in Cordle's analysis of the period was published in 1984, Maggie Gee's *The Burning Book*. He describes how the book is "haunted from the beginning by the atomic attacks upon Japan that, in the context of world-ending nuclear war, must be understood as a prelude to the Cold War's most terrible possible conclusion" (60). In light of this literary context, Murakami's decision to set the story in 1980s Tokyo gives readers ample reason to open themselves to nuclear considerations.

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle does not begin with atomic explosions. On the contrary, Murakami lulls readers by methodically describing the daily routine of the protagonist, Toru Okada. However, the character's mundane existence quickly escalates into what Paul Hutchison describes as a "confusing web of intrigue" (Hutchison 93). Readers first encounter the recently unemployed Toru preparing spaghetti and ironing clothes while waiting for his wife, Kumiko, to return home from work. Initially, "little mars this young Tokyo couple's life other than the disappearance of their cat" – a cat named conspicuously after Kumiko's older brother, Noburu Wataya (93). But the cat's disappearance is followed by the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of Kumiko. Toru's quest to find her comprises what Jeff Giles describes as the novel's "simple core story," though there is little about it that could be considered simple (87). In the course of his search, Toru falls into the company of mystics and clairvoyants, undergoes a series of dreamlike experiences, and finds new employment as a spiritual healer (Hutchison 93). This disruptive effect follows a well-established pattern in Murakami's work. Matthew Stretcher explains how "in virtually all of his fiction . . . a realistic narrative setting is created, then disrupted, sometimes mildly, sometimes violently, by the bizarre or the magical" (267). Similarly, Yokoo Kazuhiro states that Murakami explores "how the world, our insignificant daily lives, might or might not change after introducing one tiny vibration" (31-23).

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, such a vibration emanates from the split between Toru and Kumiko, which triggers the simple core story to mushroom into an epic novel spanning three books, which comprise "a giant, metaphysical detective story about love, pain, war, reality and history" (Giles 87). The narrative fissures into

multiple historical settings, taking readers on "detours into the history of Japan's occupation of Manchuria" (Hutchison 93). Even the novel form itself begins to unravel, transformed into newspaper clippings, computer files, and first-hand accounts told from the perspectives of different characters. This chaotic combination of settings, characters, and formats sets up an explosive confrontation between Toru and Noburu Wataya (not the cat but the brother-in-law) with "Kumiko's soul in the balance," a surreal climax that eludes interpretation (93). As Giles pointedly states, "Toru's cat comes back. Reality as we know it never does" (87).

Therefore, it is understandable that some critics, such as Michiko Kakutani, consider *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* a "fragmentary and chaotic book" (n.p.). She accuses it of a "refusal to closure" that "feels less like an artistic choice than simple laziness" (n.p.). Jamie James is somewhat more forgiving, citing *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* for what he perceives as an otherwise brilliant book's lack of finesse. "Who reads Kafka for the tight construction?" he asks (n.p.). James ultimately characterizes Murakami as a "novelist-juggler" who has "tossed so many balls into the air that he inevitably misses a few on the way down" (n.p.). Even Giles, despite calling the novel "magnificent," concedes that it is "epically weird and miles too long" (87). Hutchison decides that *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* "labors diligently toward some larger message but fails in the attempt" (93). Such accusations raise the question: is there a method to the novel's myriad settings, characters, and formats, or is Murakami leading readers, as the title of another of his novels has it, on a wild sheep chase?

Murakami makes it clear that he understands what constitutes "a badly written novel" (*Wind-Up* 181). Possessing Toru's thoughts, he shares readers' frustrations with "so-called art films . . . movies that never explained what was going on" (380). Such astonishingly direct commentary on the part of the author can hardly be considered "simple laziness" as Kakutani puts it (n.p.). The reality is that *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is not connected by a singular historical setting or single character point of view; rather, it is connected by a recurring motif, which Murakami precision-engineers using stylistic tools to craft figurative language and vivid imagery.

Take for example Toru's trek to the vacant Miyawaki house, where he searches for his cat. A series of similes and metaphors compare the alleyway to being "like some kind of abandoned canal," the Miyawaki house to a "freighter caught on a reef," and the lawn to a "sea" of grass (*Wind-Up* 59). The repeated use of maritime metaphorical language throughout the passage indicates intentionality on the part of the author. This imagery is not coincidental; on the contrary, it echoes an earlier admonition from the oracle, Mr. Honda, that Toru could "experience real suffering in connection with water" (51). The foreboding water imagery foreshadows Toru's entombment at the bottom of a well located on the Miyawaki property. This example illustrates how imagery that may have otherwise seemed irrelevant to the overall narrative actually serves to connect and reinforce a recurring motif of death throughout the novel.

Such subtle yet unmistakable use of imagery runs throughout *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and interconnects its various historical settings, characters, and formats. Far from tossing balls in the air, such passages demonstrate how Murakami uses figurative language to build recurring motifs. These are not unlike the "interlocking system of myths" shared by two of the novel's characters, Nutmeg and Cinnamon, which form a fictional counterpart to *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* on Cinnamon's computer (444). In the story, Toru is able to access Cinnamon's files using clues from these stories. In much the same way, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is held together by a continuous interaction between multiple historical settings, character points of view, and media formats that beckon readers to peer deeper into the novel's most puzzling passages.

2. Recurring Motif

The novel's most puzzling passages are those that deal with an obscure phenomenon experienced by no fewer than four characters: Toru, the protagonist; Creta, a clairvoyant who aids Toru's search for his missing wife; May, a high-school dropout who Toru encounters on his way to the well; and Lieutenant Mamiya, a veteran of Japan's invasion of Manchuria who shares his experience with Toru. That these experiences are related is not immediately apparent as they are scattered among the novel's various historical settings and expressed in different imagery reflecting the perception of each character. Yet the experiences are so pivotal to the development of these characters that no scholarly treatment of the text can overlook their implications. A careful inspection of Murakami's precise use of figurative language in these passages reveals that the characters' experiences share a common set of characteristics, which comprise a recurring motif that echoes a nuclear explosion.

First, each experience begins with a split or tearing apart. This fission-like event is synonymous with the splitting of atoms at the core of a nuclear device and comes about as the product of a violent physical or mental trauma. The most graphic depiction of such an experience comes from Creta. She describes the pain of her trauma – a sexual and spiritual "defilement" at the hands of Noboru Wataya – as if her "physical self were splitting in two from the inside out" (301). May describes this tearing apart in a simile that is less graphic but no less significant, "like this thing inside me was growing, like the roots of a tree in a pot, and when it got big enough it would break me apart" (320). Toru talks about the tension as "a fierce and wordless tug-of-war" occurring within him (231).

Second, each experience is followed by a duplication or separation of the character's mind and body, mimicking the process of nuclear transmutation following a fission event in which core materials transform themselves into new chemical elements. Creta describes having an out-of-body experience in which she finds herself "watching from some vantage point as [her] body was being cut open" (301). May speaks of her own shadow as that of another person, which "belonged to a much more mature woman . . . just stretched out longer, with a different shape" (594). Toru says, "There were two of me now . . . I had split in two" (336). Lieutenant Mamiya also experiences a kind of duplication as he returns home to confront his own grave, having been missing and presumed dead (166, 170).

Third, each experience yields a new form of matter, similar to the way radioactivity from a nuclear event can disrupt cellular regeneration, causing cancerous mutations. Creta says that, "Out from between the two cleanly split halves of my physical self came crawling a thing" (201). May describes it as a "gooshy white thing like a lump of fat" (320-321). Lieutenant Mamiya glimpses "something . . . trying to take shape" (208). Toru also alludes to such an experience when he is physically joined with Creta "as if something inside her, something special inside her, were slowly working its way through [his] organ" (190).

Fourth, each experience results in an emptiness and sense of loss in the same way a chain reaction releases an enormous amount of energy that leads to unstoppable devastation and profound loss. Creta reveals that "Everything came gushing out . . . Things both tangible and intangible" (302). To May, the world "looks totally empty . . . The only thing that isn't fake is that gooshy thing" (323). Lieutenant Mamiya expresses his own loss using vivid, nuclear imagery that now seems all too obvious: "Not one thing was left. They had all been burned to ashes in that fierce light. The heat emitted by that revelation or grace had seared away the very core of the life that made

me the person I was" (*Wind-Up* 209). The lieutenant regards life after the encounter as "nothing but a hollow, empty shell" (309). Toru refers to himself as "a vacant room" (238).

While the varied imagery in these passages obscures the commonalities between different characters' accounts, further contributing to the complexity and fragmentation of the novel, the figurative language they use describes the same phenomenon, comprising a motif that occurs throughout the novel. What Creta calls "being cut open," Toru describes as a "tug-of-war" (301, 231). What May describes as a "gooshy white thing," Kumiko calls an "incompressible something" (320, 602). What Toru calls "a vacant room," Lieutenant Mamiya describes as a "hollow, empty shell" (238, 309). Becoming attuned to this motif equips readers with the literary equivalent of a Geiger counter with which to detect other occurrences. For instance, Nutmeg's mother feels "like an empty shell" after escaping Manchuria (471). Nutmeg's son, Cinnamon, discovers a duplicate of himself sleeping in his bed after a nightmarish experience (420). Understanding this phenomenon is also essential to unraveling the central mystery of the disappearance of Kumiko. She describes being harmed by her brother using language reminiscent of imagery used by other characters, saying, "he may have opened some kind of drawer inside me, taken out some kind of incomprehensible something" (602).

The mysterious "something" connects the novel's disparate historical settings, characters, and formats. But nowhere in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is this "something" named. It is never explained, though it dominates the development of every major character, and its effects are felt everywhere. Similarly, the atomic bombs used by the United States in World War II receive only passing references in the novel. Lieutenant Mamiya, a native of Hiroshima, reveals that his family was lost in the blast, and Nutmeg remembers how "Nagasaki had been incinerated by a single atomic bomb" (170, 414). Other references are barely noticeable, such as when readers are told that "a chunk of cloud shaped like a fist appeared out of nowhere and hid the sun for a time" (404). Though the word "nuclear" never occurs in the text, readers can clearly pick up on the evidence of a nuclear explosion radiating throughout the novel. It is the "something" Lieutenant Mamiya describes as "the shadow in a solar eclipse," which "begins to emerge, black, in the light" (208). He can never quite make out its form, because "the moment before it takes full shape, it dissolves and melts once again into the light" (208). It is as if Murakami intentionally keeps the "something" out of sight, like a light so bright it cannot be observed directly.

Murakami's insistence on abstracting nuclear themes in the shroud of "something" exhibits the same subdued quality as the nuclear literature in which Cordle finds "flashes of Cold War and nuclear concerns," despite infrequently being interpreted as overtly nuclear (2). According to Cordle, "these less obviously nuclear texts more accurately demonstrate the tensions of the decade, for they show how nuclear issues (particularly, but not exclusively, the threat of nuclear war) were part of the warp and weft of everyday experience. They were not always at the forefront of people's minds, but they haunted the 1980s, periodically flickering through the preoccupations of everyday life to assert their presence" (2). In this way, the "something" encountered throughout *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* behaves like the novel's eponymous wind-up bird, which is occasionally heard but never seen (*Wind-Up* 57).

Murakami's ability to shroud the sublime in obscurity is matched only by his ability to adorn ordinary objects with the marvelous. Elsewhere, he uses figurative language to elevate the significance of ordinary items, portraying a baseball bat as a

"protective talisman" and a hotel corridor as "the depths of the labyrinth" (549, 570). Bruce Hollard Rogers, elaborating on the characteristics of magical realism in literature, provides an intriguing explanation, explaining that "magical realists write the ordinary as miraculous;" they also write "the miraculous as ordinary." The manner in which Murakami minimizes the mushroom cloud is certainly no less bizarre than the peculiar experiences he spends so much time detailing throughout the novel – and readers should assume it is no less intentional. In a novel that aspires to historical record by incorporating detailed accounts by military personnel, presenting fictional news reports from the media, and even assuming the title of "Chronicle," the author's restraint to avoid addressing the atomic bomb directly is conspicuous to say the least. Therefore, the reader's response to the obscurity surrounding the "something" should not be to dismiss the novel as fragmentary, chaotic, or worse, lazy. Rather, Murakami's ambiguity should assure readers that there are multiple layers of connections to be explored.

The peculiar characteristics of this phenomenon – the full picture of which remains out-of-sight despite appearing in different forms, to different characters, at different places and times in history – is consistent with Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects. Such objects occupy a spatial and temporal plane higher than ordinary objects that language is accustomed to describing. Morton describes hyperobjects as "nonlocal," equally possible of manifesting in Tokyo as in Manchuria (1). Kerry Brougner illustrates the nonlocal quality associated with something of "incomprehensible scale" using the example of Godzilla (13). In practical terms, Godzilla's enormous scale prompted filmmakers of the period to depict the creature "through mostly awkwardly spliced together montage" (13). It is not by chance that this product of post-war Japanese theatre resembles the nonlocal nature of a nuclear explosion, like those that devastated Japan in World War II. Jane Caputi equates Godzilla along with other "giant insect/space invader/human mutation science fiction films of the 1950s as metaphorical expressions of nuclear anxiety," a view she attributes to Susan Sontag (59). Sontag herself makes the cause of such cultural expressions in literature and film clear, saying "One gets the feeling that a mass trauma exists over the use of nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear wars" (220).

The nonlocal nature of nuclear trauma is not limited to the arts. Grace Halden recounts how journalists covering the Three Mile Island Accident struggled to depict the disaster for television without a mushroom cloud upon which to train their cameras. In the absence of direct visual stimuli, "the news reflected on earlier moments such as Windscale, the Urals, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki to help narrate and pictorialize the event" (n.p.). The difficulty of depicting a single nuclear event suggests that every mushroom cloud and meltdown are merely manifestations of a single hyperobject that exists across past, present, and future. Morton defines hyperobjects as involving "profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to," equally possible of occurring in 1945 as 1984 (1). He uses the fact that plutonium has a half-life of 24,100 years to illustrate why hyperobjects must be measured not in human ages but geological epochs, not in individual lifespans but entire generations, not in stories but chronicles (121).

Hyperobjects' inconceivable magnitudes present a challenge to filmmakers, journalists, and novelists. John Canaday addresses the challenge of representing the "immensity" of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in language: "The fullness of an individual victim's experience is beyond our representational reach; multiply that by hundreds of thousands, string it out over years, over decades, in all its agonizing shadings: the task is beyond us" (*Nuclear Future* 10). It is for this reason that nuclear

weapons invite metaphors, from "mushroom" clouds, which they most certainly are not, to "meltdowns," which is to say the least. Like directors attempting to depict a gigantic monster on screen, or journalists trying to display the Three Mile Island Accident for television audiences, language can merely piece together fragments from various manifestations of the hyperobject, each unnamed "something" throughout the novel. Canaday cautions against using metaphorical language to describe nuclear weapons directly. The mechanics of a metaphor are made up of an unfamiliar object, event, or idea (the tenor) and something familiar (the vehicle), linked together through language to convey greater understanding (*Nuclear Future* 15). But the fullness of society's nuclear trauma is difficult, if not impossible, for human beings to comprehend and for language to express. Few people have experienced a nuclear explosion and lived to tell about it. For this reason, "nuclear weapons tend . . . to swallow the metaphorical vehicles applied to them, as a black hole swallows light" (*Nuclear Future* 22). Canaday concludes that the only way to keep the bomb from becoming an "indiscriminate and insatiable symbolic reservoir" is to ground nuclear metaphor in narratives, especially those from authoritative sources such as eyewitnesses (*Nuclear Future* 23). Murakami seems to understand this predicament innately, couching his treatment of nuclear issues in the narratives of characters and even incorporating fictionalized versions for first-hand accounts from the war. The vehicles of his metaphors are varied: for Creta, it is her "physical self . . . splitting"; for May, it is "the roots of a tree" breaking apart the pot; for Toru, it is a "a fierce and wordless tug-of-war" (*Wind-Up* 301, 320, 231). These vehicles all point back to the same tenor: the splitting of an atom. But Murakami resists identifying it as such, being content to describe it in the vaguest and most abstract of terms. He not only uses metaphors to convey destruction; he destroys metaphors to preserve the nuclear scar upon society.

3. Nuclear Fission

The inventors of the atom bomb would likely have understood Murakami's symbolic weapon of metaphorical destruction, appreciating its figurative language and imagery in place of fissile materials and explosive charges. Canaday recounts how the Manhattan Project scientists "turned again and again to literature – for its metaphors, for the context and tradition it offered, for a sense of continuity to counterbalance the pervasive strangeness in their lives at Los Alamos, and for its ability to represent the social meanings of their work" (*Nuclear Muse* 19, 20). However, in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, that inter-disciplinary pursuit of meaning is reversed. Rather than assigning literary meaning to the atomic bomb, it is the atomic bomb that sheds light on the experiences of Murakami's characters. For example, May speaks of a "core" within every person, which "becomes like a heat source that runs each person from the inside" (322). Elsewhere, Toru tells readers of a "center" that is surrounded by a "circle," which comprises a "chain of cause and effect I could not comprehend" (498). This imagery of a core or center, surrounded by a complex circle radiating heat, begins to give shape to the ambiguous "something."

In the original Japanese, the word translated into English as "core" is *kaku* (核). As in English, this Japanese word can also be translated as "nuclear" (Kawamoto 868). For example, in a social context, *kaku-kazoku* (核家族) means nuclear family. In a biological context, *kaku-san* (核酸) means nucleic acid (868). And in the context of physics, *kaku-heiki* (核兵器) means a nuclear weapon (868). This same word appears in the original Japanese version of Lieutenant Mamiya's encounter with the "intense light" that "burned up the very core of [his] life, until there was nothing left," where the

term Murakami uses for "very core of my life" is *seimei no kaku* (生命の核) (*Nejimakitori kuronikuru* 369).

Another reference to a "core" appears as Toru tells Kumiko that he is "getting close to the core, to that place where the core of things is located" (491). He eventually finds this core when he stumbles upon a reference to Noboru Wataya's ancestor in a history book about Manchuria, which causes him to realize how seemingly unrelated people and events in the novel are joined (497).

These "clients" and I were joined . . . Cinnamon's grandfather . . . and I were also joined . . . Cinnamon's grandfather and Lieutenant Mamiya were joined . . . Lieutenant Mamiya and the clairvoyant Mr. Honda were joined . . . and Kumiko and I had been introduced to Mr. Honda by Noboru Wataya's family. Lieutenant Mamiya and I were joined . . . All of these were linked as in a circle, at the center of which stood prewar Manchuria . . . But why Kumiko and I should have been drawn into this historical chain of cause and effect I could not comprehend. All of these events had occurred long before Kumiko and I were born. (497-498)

The "core" for which Toru is searching corresponds here to the "center of which stood prewar Manchuria" (498). It is the point where Toru expects to "reconnect" with Kumiko, where the novel's disparate historical settings and characters come together (491). In much the same way as May uses the tip of her finger to "draw an odd diagram of uncertain shape," Toru's wandering thoughts in this passage diagram the internal workings of an atomic bomb (21). In particular, the story's intertwined historical settings and characters reflect design characteristics of an implosion-type plutonium bomb, the kind employed by the U.S. in its attack on Nagasaki. In contrast to a uranium gun-type bomb like the one used in the attack on Hiroshima, an implosion-type bomb relies on "multipoint detonation" (Hoddeson 171-172). This is achieved by placing conventional explosives around the outside of a sphere – not unlike the way Toru imagines the people in his life "linked as if in a circle" (498). Such a design applies pressure on the core by creating a "symmetrical shockwave around a hollow, spherical mass of plutonium" (*Nuclear Muse* 22). The implosion results in the triggering of a fission event in the center of the circle, splitting the atom. In a similar fashion, the sudden split between Toru and Kumiko is both the product of and the catalyst behind the "historical chain of cause and effect" that precedes and follows (498). The tangle of connections between various characters, times, and places in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, which may otherwise frustrate attempts to make sense of the novel, sets up a metaphorical powder keg that functions to ignite and sustain a chain reaction.

Within the core, or nucleus, of an atom, the relationship between positively charged protons and negatively charged electrons resembles that of the novel's protagonist, Toru, and antagonist, Noboru Wataya. Murakami makes Toru's elemental opposition to his brother-in-law evident by repeatedly portraying Noboru Wataya as a disease. Toru describes Noboru Wataya's "malignant" eyes (79). He compares Noboru Wataya's presence with "a persistent low-grade fever" (80). He sees Noboru Wataya everywhere, even as he flips through the pages of a magazine in "a doctor's waiting room" (80). Noboru Wataya seems to be the only force that can draw out contempt from the otherwise peaceable protagonist. "Let's face it," Toru admits, "I hated the guy" (80).

Murakami's use of stylistic tools to create vivid imagery reinforces these characters' profound antagonism. Not only does Noboru Wataya share his name with

Toru's cat, Toru Okada shares his given name with the protagonist in Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood*, Toru Watanabe. So already readers will presume these names have significance for Murakami. The surname of Toru in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Okada (岡田), contains the kanji *oka* (岡), which denotes a hill. In contrast, the antagonist's surname, Wataya (綿谷), contains the kanji *tani* (谷), which denotes a valley. These characters' surnames are simultaneously united and divided: united by their geological referents, divided by the contrasting imagery of hill and valley. Creta, who has the conspicuous habit of referring to Toru by his surname, reflects this opposition when she tells Toru that "Noboru Wataya is a person who belongs to a world that is the exact opposite of yours . . . In a world where you are losing everything, Mr. Okada, Noboru Wataya is gaining everything. In a world where you are rejected, he is accepted. And the opposite is just as true" (312). The spatial dimension to their opposition, contained in the imagery of hill and valley, reflects the admonition from Mr. Honda, who tells Toru, "When you're supposed to go up, find the highest tower and climb to the top. When you're supposed to go down, find the deepest well and go down to the bottom" (51). Interestingly, it is the hill, Mr. Okada, who finds himself at the bottom of a well, while the valley, Mr. Wataya, seems to be on top of the world.

This opposition between protagonist and antagonist is a consistent thread throughout the novel, weaving together Manchuria and Tokyo, 1945 and 1984. It acts in the same way as the electromagnetic forces in the nucleus of an atom, which cause unlike charges to attract rather than repel, forever binding opposing forces ("What Keeps the Nucleus Together?"). So it is fitting that the language Toru uses to describe Noboru Wataya's political aims as well as the defilement he inflicts on Creta and Kumiko is eerily well-suited to describe the devastation of a nuclear detonation: "its final effect is to destroy and obliterate people on a massive scale" (*Wind-Up* 579). In contrast, the relationship between Toru and Kumiko, which was at one time a romantic attraction, is responsible for the fission that tears the story apart, reflecting how electromagnetic forces in the nucleus of an atom cause like charges to repel ("What Keeps the Nucleus Together?"). The novel's most literal fusion of opposites, death and birth, is Kumiko's aborted pregnancy. It is strongly suggested that this is what triggers the split between her and Toru in the first place. That is the instant they began keeping secrets from each other, allowing the unnamed "something" to come between them, as Kumiko confesses to Toru that "there's something else, something you don't know about, something I can't put into words just yet" (*Wind-Up* 332). In the same way, Murakami describes the effects of a fission event in vivid detail without ever putting it into words.

First, Toru mentions a flash of light several times during his dreamlike experiences. He theorizes that "a white flash" might have been the "the glint of a sharp blade," describes the waiter's tray reflecting the light of a ceiling fixture as "a bright flash," and remembers "the violent white gleam of some knifelike thing" (191, 243, 565). Morton considers the flash of a nuclear detonation as "the most uncanny aspect of the bomb" (50). In a nuclear detonation, light itself takes on hyperobject qualities as "light ceases to be a neutral, transparent medium in which everything is illuminated, and becomes a potent force" (50). There is little mistaking the association being made by Murakami between a flash of light and a nuclear blast when Toru considers how the Earth "could be blown away tomorrow by a momentary flash" (*Wind-Up* 249).

Next, the novel depicts a Japanese soldier's skin being stripped from his body, a gruesome act reminiscent of the searing heat and radiation from a nuclear blast. Traumatized by what he has witnessed, Lieutenant Mamiya struggles to get the image out of his mind. "Again and again I watched them peel the skin off and turn him into a

lump of flesh. I could hear his heartrending screams" (171). Toru too recalls the "sizzle of flesh" along with sounds of screaming during a bizarre magic trick (239).

Finally, the novel alludes to the residual effects of nuclear radiation. Speaking of the mysterious treatment she provides for her clients, Nutmeg recounts with medical precision that, "within a few days (usually, from three to ten days), each 'something' would start up again, advancing and retreating over the short span but growing unmistakably larger over time – like cancer cells" (459). May talks about her "gooshy white thing" like a tumor, describing how it is "taking [her] over, eating [her] up" (321). Several characters also voice their concern over a suspicious mark on Toru's cheek, and May asks him if he has seen a doctor about it (344, 323). Such recurrences of the nuclear motif demonstrate that Murakami is not merely concealing a nuclear bomb in the pages of his novel, he is engineering the entire chronicle to mimic the explosive effects of such a device. The author's use of stylistic tools, figurative language, and imagery are all components of a symbolic detonation, which has repercussions for the development of the characters and the unfolding of the novel itself.

4. Oncological Fallout

One of the most baffling characteristics of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is the frequent overlap of the nuclear bomb motif, and its associations to death and destruction, with the birth motif, and its associations to life and growth. Understanding how this dual (or, perhaps, dueling) imagery interacts is necessary to uncovering the full extent of the novel's nuclear representations.

It has already been discussed how Murakami fills Toru's trek to the vacant Miyawaki house with vivid water imagery to foreshadow Toru's entrapment at the bottom of a well, referencing Mr. Honda's admonition that Toru could "experience real suffering in connection with water" (51). This passage begins ominously, drawing on larger themes of death and destruction throughout the novel. But later, when Toru emerges from that very same well, Murakami uses simile to describe the 30-year-old feeling "as if [he] had reverted to being a helpless little child" (*Wind-Up* 269). The author also uses personification to describe how every bone and joint "creaked and cried out," recalling scenes of labor and delivery (270). Language impregnates the passage with birth imagery as Toru takes his first breath amid the "cries" of insects and the "naked" moonlight, sucking air "deep into [his] lungs over and over" (271). After Toru returns home, the first thing he eats is cereal – with "milk" (272).

This is not the only instance of death overlapping with birth. Murakami juxtaposes death and birth imagery throughout the novel with imagery that is as conspicuous as it is unsettling. Creta describes her defilement at the hands of Noboru Wataya as both a death and a birth, feeling like "a dead person watching her own autopsy" while at the same time recounting the emergence of something "as wet and slippery as a newborn baby" (301). May's gooshy white thing may just as readily be compared to a tumor as to a fetus (321). Similarly, the mark on Toru's cheek can be seen as either a sign of skin cancer or a birthmark. Though the discoloration is of concern to some, it nevertheless appears after Toru's figurative rebirth from the well and is elsewhere closely linked to birth, its shape and size being compared to an "infant's palm" (286). When a fellow soldier describes a similar mark on Nutmeg's father's cheek, he imagines that it had "been there since birth" (400).

Murakami reserves one of the most conspicuous juxtapositions of life and death for Nutmeg's account of people's reactions to the end of the war: "They remained in a state of total abstraction, the spike of a long and twisted nightmare thrust unmercifully into . . . their wombs" (413). It is no coincidence that in the very same passage she

makes it a point to add that, just six days earlier, "the nearby city of Nagasaki had been incinerated by a single atomic bomb" (414).

Comparing Nutmeg's account to Murakami's reflection on his own birth in the author's 2004 compilation of birthday tales by twelve authors, *Birthday Stories*, reveals interesting parallels:

I was given life in this world on January 12, 1949, which means I belong to the baby-boom generation. The Second World War had at last come to an end, and those who had managed to survive looked around them, took a deep breath, got married and started making children one after another. During the next four or five years, the world's population expanded – indeed, exploded, in a way never seen before. I was one of the nameless, numberless children produced during that period. (*Birthday Stories* 1)

The sense of resignation Murakami recalls in those who "took a deep breath, got married and started making children" corresponds with the "state of total abstraction" described by Nutmeg (*Birthday Stories* 1, *Wind-Up* 413). Caputi refers to this phenomenon as "psychic numbing," which can alternatively be described as "death in life" (61). "For the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," writes Caputi, "such numbing was a necessary defense mechanism as no one could have responded with full emotions to the devastation around them and remained sane" (61). It would seem that the only appropriate response to such an extraordinary event is a completely ordinary response, as the conspicuous absence of direct imagery to depict the atomic bomb in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* attests. As victims attempt to restore normalcy to their lives, Murakami cannot help but to allude to the enduring devastation through his choice of words, describing how the world's population "exploded, in a way never seen before" – ensuring readers will never see the term "Baby Boom" in the same way again (*Birthday Stories* 1).

The atomic-induced catatonic state Murakami describes is not confined to one time or space; it reflects the characteristics of a hyperobject. Nutmeg's mother's womb has significance beyond the line of succession that produces Nutmeg. When he describes "the spike of a long and twisted nightmare thrust unmercifully into . . . their wombs," Murakami makes Nutmeg's mother's womb a symbolic surrogate of the non-local, world-historical nature of the atom bomb as a hyperobject (*Wind-Up* 414). Within her womb resides the radioactivity and responsibility for humanity's greatest act of destruction, being passed down to successive generations – a chronicle written in society's collective DNA.

The frequent overlap of death and birth imagery in the novel is not a repudiation of the nuclear motif but a validation. Marshall McLuhan famously observed that "womb, tomb, and comfort have always been interchangeable symbols" (101). Indeed, the same force of division, which equates to the splitting of the atom in the world of physics, equates to the division of cells in the world of biology, linking contrasting imagery of death and destruction with that of birth and growth in an uncanny fashion. By fusing the atomic bomb motif and the birth motif, sometimes even within the same metaphor, Murakami builds a model for the transformation of his characters in which birth and death are both present. As when Toru accesses Cinnamon's computer, these two motifs in tandem provide the pair of passwords needed to access an important discovery about character transformation locked away in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

Toru, following his figurative rebirth after being entombed at the bottom of the well, finds himself transformed from an unambitious, harmless, and passive protagonist

to the point where he is unable to stop himself from smashing another man's head against the floor (*Wind-Up* 336). The character foresees this mitosis earlier in the novel, describing his body in suspiciously scientific language as "a rearrangement of the signs known as chromosomes," and speculating that "If the signs were rearranged yet again, I would find myself inside a wholly different body than before" (231). Something is rearranging these characters' chromosomes, something awful and traumatic, capable of tremendous power on a molecular level, thrust unmercifully into the very essence of their beings. Like radioactive material wreaking havoc, Murakami rewrites the DNA of these characters through the traumatic events they experience.

This model of transformation, fusing life and death imagery, demonstrates a remarkably scientific vision for the development of the novel's characters. During the detonation of an atomic bomb, a fissile material such as plutonium is split into new chemical elements as its subatomic particles are rearranged. This process, known as nuclear transmutation, results in "the transformation of one nuclide into another . . . in a nuclear reaction or a process of radioactivity" (Considine 3715-3716). When high-energy particles from such a fission event come in contact with flesh, the ionizing radiation can damage living tissue as unstable atoms decay to become different kinds of atoms (World Nuclear Association n.p.). The nature of radioactive fallout from a nuclear explosion corresponds with the spatial displacement and temporal detachment of a hyperobject and further illustrates the persistence of the nuclear motif in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Morton uses the examples of Chernobyl and Fukushima to describe how nuclear radiation "floated in air currents across Europe and the Pacific," despite being unseen (38). "Days, weeks, months, or years later, some humans die of radiation sickness," despite time having passed (38).

Such a process of nuclear transmutation is at work in the characters of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Sometimes these transformations represent a decay: a near-death experience robs Creta of the ability to feel any pain, the accident that kills May's boyfriend causes her to withdraw from school and society, and the encounter at the bottom of the well leaves Lieutenant Mamiya "lost forever" (167). At other times, these transformations represent a mutation: Creta's defilement by Noboru Wataya restores her ability to feel pain, and kissing Toru's mark allows May to find the place where she belongs (463). Like cells undergoing mitosis, the characters split in two – with a cancerous twist. May is figuratively duplicated when she notices that her shadow appears to belong to someone else, "a much more mature woman" (594). Lieutenant Mamiya is duplicated when he confronts his own grave (170). Toru is duplicated when he learns of the unnamed assailant matching his description but armed with a baseball bat (568). Cinnamon is duplicated when he discovers himself sleeping in his bed, after which time he feels as if he has been put into a "new container," one that no longer has the ability to speak (421). Even the cat returns, as if from the grave, but Toru can tell that its tail is not the same (536). In each case, something goes tragically wrong during the process of duplication, resulting in a change or mutation, a form of new birth in which death is present.

The subatomic forces involved in fission, and the molecular forces involved in mitosis, which Murakami harnesses as a model for the transformation of characters, is also decaying and mutating the story as it unfolds – multiplying the sense of fragmentation that readers experience. The book's central narrative, which focuses on Toru, begins to mutate as the radioactive stories of unstable elements like Creta and Lieutenant Mamiya work their way into the body of the text. What begins as dialogue, fitting neatly within the confines of the narrative, starts to alter how the story develops, eventually growing to consume entire chapters. No longer is the story set in 1980s

Toyko but, instead, in Manchuria. No longer is the novel narrated from the perspective of Toru but, instead, from the perspectives of Creta, Lieutenant Mamiya, May, and Nutmeg's father. No longer is the book even a book but, instead, a letter, a newspaper clipping, and finally a computer file.

The mutation spreads slowly at first. Book 1 contains Creta and Lieutenant Mamiya's stories (chapters 8, 12, and 13). Book 2 contains a letter from Kumiko (chapter 11) and the continuation of Creta's story (chapters 11 and 13). Book 3 begins with an explosion: the "chunk of cloud shaped like a fist" that appears out of nowhere (404). From this point forward an acute growth of malignant story cells begins taking over the central narrative. In the third chapter of Book 3, Murakami introduces an entirely new character, Cinnamon. Chapter 5 is the first of six letters from May (the others being chapters 10, 15, 18, 28, and 36). Chapters 7, 12, and 21 are presented as articles from the newspaper. Chapter 9 is dedicated exclusively to stories from Nutmeg's childhood. Chapter 11 is the continuation of Cinnamon's story. Chapters 26 and 38 are formatted as files from Cinnamon's computer. And chapter 32 is one last letter from Lieutenant Mamiya.

In total, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* contains more than a dozen chapters presented in a completely different format than the central narrative, in addition to numerous long passages contained in other chapters. What is most disorienting about the novel's third book is that the protagonist with whom readers have grown accustomed, Toru, is no longer present in the same way as he is throughout the novel's first and second books. Ultimately, the effect on readers is much the same as the unnamed something's effect on Creta, May, Lieutenant Mamiya, Toru and others in the novel: a sense of loss. Just as "the very large finitude of hyperobjects forces humans to coexist with a strange future, a future 'without us,'" so does Murakami demonstrate how a chronicle is always greater than any one character, place, or time (Morton 94).

5. Conclusion

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, nuclear fission and the fallout that follows provides a model for transformation of a story's characters and the format of a novel itself. The tight construction that so many critics seek is not absent but rather operating on the atomic level of Murakami's vivid and varied imagery. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is undeniably a fragmented novel, split among various times, locations, and characters. But instead of the chaos that some critics see, readers will perceive in the novel's structure something closer to a controlled explosion, an exploitation of forces by the author that, despite their destructive effect, are nevertheless intentional, giving birth to new interpretative possibilities.

In an atom's core, the strong nuclear force that pulls all things together works alongside the weak nuclear force that tears all things apart. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Toru, Kumiko, and Noboru Wataya perfectly act out these electromagnetic forces, attracting and repelling, holding together and splitting apart. The changes that Toru undergoes, his metaphorical rebirth – a spatial act of climbing upward from the well, fulfilling the altitudinal destiny in his name – causes a realignment between himself and Noboru Wataya and himself and Kumiko. So it is no surprise that the story surrounding these three characters is torn asunder, its form fragmented, the face of its narrative altered beyond recognition. The result is a patchwork of media that propagate throughout the novel in the same way Noboru Wataya's power spreads, "through television and the other media" (*Wind-Up* 579).

Canaday argues that the world's nuclear powers continue building and maintaining atomic weapons today precisely for symbolic ends: "atomic weapons are

useful because of the stories people tell about them, the fears those stories inspire, and the actions by which people respond to those fears" (*Nuclear Muse* 6). Jan Barry also observes the multimedia fallout from nuclear weapons, affirming that "the American imagination of nuclear holocaust has been greatly shaped by novelists, filmmakers and journalists" (85). This leads Canaday to conclude that "literary analysis can play an important role in our understanding of atomic weapons and even in our decisions regarding their proper and improper uses (*Nuclear Muse* 225). Such an understanding should also lead Murakami's readers to approach *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* differently.

The symbolic power of the atom bomb should not be considered mere collateral damage; it is such a device's primary function. Neither should the use of nuclear weapons in World War II be considered a mere historical event to be catalogued; it is an enduring phenomenon to be chronicled. By addressing the atom bomb indirectly – deploying metaphors and similes, figurative language and fragmented text – Murakami helps readers confront the incomprehensible on the plane of the unconscious, where the destructive power of such weapons is most real. In the novel, Noboru Wataya seeks to draw out something that exists within society, "something that the great mass of people keep hidden in the darkness of the unconscious" (*Wind-Up* 579). Murakami's response to the non-fictional Noboru Watayas of the world – not a cat but those "evil dogs that carry the names of 'efficiency' and 'convenience'" – is a novel that transforms characters and the text itself to induce a cathartic confrontation with the violence of which humankind is capable (Flood). The result is a work that is at times disorienting and yet also, critically, disarming.

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