

Representing the Holocaust: Haruki Murakami's *Killing Commendatore* and "An Independent Organ"

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In Haruki Murakami's full-length work *Killing Commendatore* and his short story "An Independent Organ," we find material relating to the Treblinka concentration camp and Auschwitz concentration camp, respectively. This paper aims, while drawing on Georges Didi -Huberman's discussion of imagination, to consider representations of the Holocaust in these works of Murakami. I make the case that Murakami's references to the Holocaust in these works can provide a useful perspective for discussing Didi-Huberman's ideas regarding imagination.

French film director Claude Lanzmann, renowned for his Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985), states the following regarding representations of the Holocaust:

L'Holocauste est d'abord unique en ceci qu'il édifie autour de lui, en un cercle de flamme, la limite à ne pas franchir parce qu'un certain absolu d'horreur est intransmissible : prétendre le faire, c'est se rendre coupable de la transgression la plus grave. La fiction est une transgression, je pense profondément qu'il y a un interdit de la représentation.¹

Lanzmann says the representation of the Holocaust must not exceed the limit (la limite), and the representation itself should not be permitted. This is because absolute horror (*absolu d'horreur*) cannot be transmitted (*intransmissible*).

In the context of this paper, Lanzmann's statement can be understood to mean that we cannot comprehend "absolute horror," that representing such horror with images is to pretend that it is grasped, and that this should not be allowed.

If this is the case, how should we confront the tragedy of the Holocaust? In consideration of this point, I will refer to the ideas of the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. Didi-Huberman states the following regarding Auschwitz:

Pour savoir il faut s'imaginer. Nous devons tenter d'imaginer ce que fut l'enfer d'Auschwitz en été 1944.²

We find these words at the beginning of his work *Images malgré tout*. He claims that in order to know (*pour savoir*) the "hell" of Auschwitz, we (*nous*) must imagine (*imaginer*).

¹ Claude Lanzmann (1994, Mars 3) Holocauste, la représentation impossible. *le Monde*, p.7

² GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN(2003, p) *images malgré tout* :MINUIT, p.11

Didi-Huberman says that using four indistinct photographs left behind by a *sonderkommando* comprised of inmates, we must imagine the tragic events that occurred at Auschwitz. According to him, imagining Auschwitz based on fragmentary photographs is indispensable to know it.

Didi-Huberman's discussion of imagination provides us with a way to come closer to representing the Holocaust. In other words, even if it is impossible to represent the Holocaust, it is possible to imagine it.

I hold that the Holocaust materials fragmentarily incorporated into Murakami's *Killing Commendatore* and "An Independent Organ" are related to Didi-Huberman's ideas regarding imagination, and I will discuss it in what follows.

2

Murakami assigns Holocaust-related material an important position in the novel *Killing Commendatore*. This paper will consider the most representative example of this: the appearance of Samuel Willenberg's *Revolt in Treblinka*³ in the last chapter of *Killing Commendatore*'s "Part 1: The Idea Made Visible [*arawareru idea hen*]."⁴

Killing Commendatore was published in two volumes. Chapter 32, which appears as the last chapter of Part 1 when it is transitioning to Part 2, consists entirely of a quotation from Chapter 19 of Samuel Willenberg's *Revolt in Treblinka*, "Patrol." "Patrol" plays a very significant role as the bridge between Parts 1 and 2 of the novel.

Revolt in Treblinka is a memoir by one of the few remaining survivors of the Treblinka extermination camp about the situation in the camp and a revolt that occurred there. Chapter 19 is quoted in the novel because it is about a prisoner who draws portraits of German soldiers, and *Killing Commendatore*'s narrator is a portrait artist. However, rereading this chapter, we find that it also describes the situation surrounding the extermination camp:

Finding out that the world will not do anything no matter what happens in the camp, we were unable to have hope and fell into despair.

Here, the author states that the world's disinterest drove prisoners into the depths of despair. In other words, *Revolt in Treblinka*'s "Patrol" chapter is about the world's disinterest in the Holocaust, and this disinterest appears to play an important role in *Killing Commendatore*.

Let us consider an interview of Murakami that followed the publication of *Killing Commendatore*. Murakami was asked, "Your book refers to an assassination plot connected to the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. Is there such a thing as 'just murder'?" He replies as follows:

A: I don't know. Interpreting history can be extremely difficult. Take the movie *The Battle of Algiers* from long ago, which depicted Algeria's war for independence against France. In the movie, setting

³ Samuel Willenberg, Yasuko Kondo(2015), *Revolt in Treblinka*, Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō.

⁴ Chapter 32 "His Specialized Skills Were Greatly Prized" (*Kare no senmonteki ginō wa ōini chōhō sareta*).

explosives targeting French soldiers was cheered as heroic actions of the anticolonial movement, but today this would be deemed terrorism. History is the collective memory of a nation, and I don't think I don't have responsibility just because I was born after the war. I'll continue to question this in my stories.⁵

Rephrasing and expanding on the above, we could say the following. History is memory of the past, and understandings of history change depending on how the past is remembered. For example, what is deemed heroic in the movie *The Battle of Algiers*, which depicts Algeria's war for independence, would be seen by us today as terrorism. In other words, Algeria's war for independence becomes one of two different histories depending on the era: "heroic acts" or "terrorism." Therefore, the issue arises of how those of us who are alive today understand history. Murakami states that he wants to continue to inquire into issues surrounding history through his stories.

In his novel *Killing Commendatore*, then, what kind of historical references can we find? At the beginning of Part 2 appears the following conversation between the narrator "I" and a girl Marie about the painting "Killing Commendatore" by Tomohiko Amada:

"Someone is killing someone. With a strong feeling.

[. . .]

"Are there times when it's right to kill someone?"

I thought about this. "I don't know. What's right and wrong changes depending on what standard you choose. For example, there are many people who think that killing by the death penalty is the right thing for society to do."

Or by assassination, I thought to myself.

Marie paused for a while and then said, "But even though this painting shows a person being killed with blood everywhere, it doesn't put you in a dark mood. This painting's trying to bring me somewhere else—somewhere different from standards of right and wrong." (33)

The idea of "not knowing what is right" recalls the aforementioned interview. However, here we should note that the existence of a place "different from standards of right and wrong" is suggested.

Through history, this novel investigates the issue of such a place. Next, let us consider how this issue is related to the world's "disinterest" in the Holocaust.

3

Here, I want to consider Murakami's short story "Independent Organ," relating it to the disinterest toward the Holocaust mentioned in *Revolt in Treblinka*. This story was included in Murakami's short story collection *Men Without Women*, which was released in 2014, three years before *Killing*

⁵ *Yomiuri Shimbun* April 2nd, 2017.

Commendatore.

It is the story of the love of an elite doctor named Tokai. Dr. Tokai, preferring to be single, had for a long time enjoyed casual romances. However, at one point he unexpectedly seriously falls for a married woman. However, after she leaves him, he refuses to eat and then dies of starvation.

The story's structure is somewhat complicated: The novelist narrator "I" is describing the death of Dr. Tokai. It is made even more complicated by the fact that the narrator only knew Dr. Tokai when he was healthy. The narrator hears about his weakening and death from his secretary, Goto.

At the beginning of this story, the narrator says the following to the reader:

I'd like to record everything that I learned about this man named Tokai. Most of it originated from things he told me directly, though certain parts are based on information that people close to him told me, people he trusted. Admittedly, a certain amount is also conjecture, based on my own observations of things I thought might be true. Like soft pâté nicely filling in the gaps between one fact and another. In other words, the portrait that follows is not based entirely on fact. As the writer of this account, I cannot recommend that the reader treat it like evidence submitted in a trial, or supporting documents for a business transaction (though what sort of business transaction this could possibly be, I haven't a clue).

The narrator states that while what he will describe is a fact, his description is not entirely objective. This long message to readers—unusual for a short story—is somewhat strange. One wonders whether it is necessary; readers are not normally interested in whether a short story is true.

If this is the case, what is the meaning of the narrator's message to the readers? The key to answering this lies in the statement, "a certain amount is also conjecture, based on my own observations of things I thought might be true." In other words, the narrator's "conjecture" is included in his portrait of Tokai. Taking this into account, we could say the following. This story describes the death of Dr. Tokai, which is a fact. However, Dr. Tokai himself has not said anything about why he died, and the narrator can only imagine the reason for his death. Therefore, in this short story the narrator conjectures about the cause of Dr. Tokai's death. This premise is what is being carefully stated at the story's beginning.

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Next, let us consider how Dr. Tokai's death is narrated in the story. His secretary Goto states the following on the subject:

Goto went on. "Medically speaking, the direct cause of death was heart failure. His heart lost the strength to pump blood. But I think his death was brought on because he was in love. To use the old term, he was indeed 'lovesick'.

His death is said to be a result of lovesickness. However, Dr. Tokai only looked at Goto's face when

he was dying: “He just silently stared at me with his big eyes, his face like a mask.” In fact, another possibility regarding the cause of his death is suggested. Dr. Tokai had stated the following about his romance with the woman:

But as our relationship progressed, I fell deeply in love with her, and I couldn’t turn back. And recently I’ve often started to wonder: Who in the world am I?

He said that by falling in love, he began to doubt who he was. However, normally this question about one’s identity is not directly related to “love.” The narrator thus asks about the reason that he came to have this doubt, and Dr. Tokai responds as follows:

I think it’s because of a book I read a while ago about the Nazi concentration camps. There was a story about a doctor of internal medicine who was sent to Auschwitz during the war.

Dr. Tokai says that he began to wonder “Who in the world am I?” because of a book about Auschwitz that he had read. Furthermore, he states, “If the time and place had been different, I might very well have suffered the same terrible fate.” Imagining that he was a prisoner at the camp, he began to doubt his existential value.

However, the narrator does not tell Dr. Tokai’s death in terms of its relationship to Auschwitz. The narrator only conjectures that his death was due to a broken heart. The short story only mentions briefly that Dr. Tokai imagined Auschwitz.

The narrator probably could not tell Dr. Tokai’s death in terms of Auschwitz because he was unable to imagine the relationship between the two. In other words, the doctor’s death not being told in relation to Auschwitz in the story is a problem originating in the narrator. He was unable to understand Dr. Tokai’s suffering. Dr. Tokai died in solitude, not being understood by anyone. This solitude of Dr. Tokai might recall the despair of Treblinka concentration camp prisoners told earlier.

However, we should note that at the end of this short story another possibility is suggested: that the narrator changes. The narrator finishes writing his story about Dr. Tokai, and time shifts from the past back to the present. In closing, the narrator states the following:

I have no way of knowing, of course, what Dr. Tokai thought, what sort of notions went through his head, as he teetered on the edge of his chosen death. But within the depth of his pain and suffering, if only for a short time, his mind became clear enough to leave instructions to leave me his unused squash racket. Maybe he was trying to send me some sort of message. Perhaps as he hovered near death he’d finally found something close to an answer to the question *Who am I?* And he wanted to let me know. I have a feeling that’s the case.

While Dr. Tokai left his squash racket for the narrator, he was unable to use it because it reminded him

of the doctor's gaunt body. However, the narrator thinks that via the squash racket, Dr. Tokai was sending him an answer to the question of "Who am I?"

As I mentioned, this question arose when the doctor was imagining Auschwitz. Thus, the narrator probably realized the relationship between the doctor's death and Auschwitz. By telling this death, the narrator was seemingly able to stand "somewhere different" than he had previously. Dr. Tokai died in solitude, without being understood by anyone. However, it appears that the narrator changed into a subject that could imagine Dr. Tokai's solitude and despair.