

Homecoming, Exile and Bilingualism — Minae Mizumura's *I-Novel from Left to Right* —

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—水村美苗『私小説 from Left to Right』論—

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to read Minae Mizumura's novel *I-Novel from Left to Right* from the perspective of language and identity. Written in both English and Japanese, *I-Novel from Left to Right* conveys Mizumura's intense frustration with English and Japanese; she finds herself unable to identify with either language. Indeed, at the risk of losing a large number of Japanese readers, Mizumura's inclusion of English passages in the novel is intended to emphasize her predicament as a writer who both embraces and distances herself from these two languages.

要 旨

本稿の目的は水村美苗の小説『私小説 from Left to Right』を言語とアイデンティティの観点から論じることである。『私小説 from Left to Right』は日本語と英語の二言語で書かれており、二言語のどちらにも共感できない水村の深い疎外感が作品には色濃く現れている。水村は多くの日本人読者を失う代償を払って小説に英語を織り交ぜるのだが、それは日本語と英語の二言語を受け入れつつも距離を取らざるを得ない水村の作家としての苦境を表現しようとしたものである。

I

In a collection of essays entitled *Yagate Kanashiki Gaikokugo* (『やがて哀しき外国語』 [1994]), which roughly translates as *The Sad Foreign Language*, the novelist Haruki Murakami (村上春樹, 1949-) claims that what lies beneath a foreign language is nothing but pathos. This collection is based on Murakami's experience in the United States, where he taught Japanese literature at several universities. The strangeness of speaking English is brought home to him on various occasions: for example, when he has to take his malfunctioning car to the auto repair shop, he finds himself having to explain to the mechanic what is wrong with the car, while desperately trying to recall

the English word for 'windshield'. Confronted with such a pathetic situation, Murakami cannot help but ask what the point is of trying to communicate in a different tongue than his own; hence, his pessimistic, fatalistic attitude towards speaking a foreign language.¹⁾

Speaking a foreign language can, indeed, be an extremely complex and frustrating matter, which often requires us to endure painful experiences. We are what we speak, and the language in which we communicate is inextricably related to our identity. Of course, there is a more simplistic and optimistic perspective. Speaking English or any other foreign language can be extremely enjoyable; it enables us to communicate with many more people than we could if we remained monolingual; it is intellectually stimulating and makes us think critically about the ideas,

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norms and conventions of the communities in which we were brought up. Anybody who has read any works of foreign literature will agree that the experience is indeed eye-opening. Suddenly, a vast corpus of writings—which had been totally inaccessible before—has now become available, and we find ourselves vigorously exploring the new territory opened up by knowledge of this strange and exciting language. There are times when a piece simply takes our breath away; while at other times, we might be led into another dimension of our inner lives through exposure to a dazzling array of new vocabulary, rhetoric, and images.

As a prolific translator who has translated the novels of American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Carver, Murakami is, of course, well versed in English. Nevertheless, since his study of English has been largely oriented towards reading and translating, his skills in oral communication are—if we can trust his account of his own proficiency in English—quite unsatisfactory. While he might be able to manage daily life in Anglophone countries, he continues to encounter great difficulties from time to time, owing to the awkwardness with which he speaks English.

I began this article with Murakami's ambivalent attitude towards foreign languages, because it seems both to encapsulate the uneasy feeling one has in attempting to acquire a second language, and also to convey the despair and resignation inherent in communicating in a foreign tongue. However hard we might try, Murakami seems to suggest, there is always a vast chasm between one's mother tongue and a foreign language. Indeed, we may not be able to traverse this gulf, even if we live in a foreign country for many years. In that context, we would certainly improve our ability to communicate in the new language, but no matter how diligently and scrupulously we may practise, we are always subtly aware of the obstacles ahead.

This point is cogently made by Minae Mizumura (水村美苗, 1951–), a writer whom I shall discuss in this paper. Mizumura was born in Tokyo, and was brought by her parents to America when she was twelve. She studied French literature, and earned her M. Phil. at Yale University. She went on to teach Japanese literature at Princeton, Michigan, and Stanford. Her first novel, *Zoku-Meian* (『続明暗』 [1990]), purports to be a sequel to Natsume Soseki's (夏目漱石, 1867–1916) unfinished novel *Meian* (『明暗』 [1916]). This was a very bold project, given that Soseki is considered one of the founders of modern Japanese literature, along with other colossal figures, such as Mori

Ogai (森鷗外, 1862–1922) and Tayama Katai (田山花袋, 1872–1930). So far, Mizumura has published three novels, each of which has won a prestigious literary prize in Japan.²⁾

In the first-person narrative novel, *I-Novel from Left to Right* (『私小説 from Left to Right』 [1995]), Mizumura vividly describes how the female protagonist, Minae (美苗), navigates American school life. Mizumura's preoccupation with the Japanese literary tradition is evident from the title itself: the 'I-novel' (*shi-shousetsu*)' is a genre of Japanese writing in which the author's personal experience is recounted, usually from the first-person perspective.³⁾ Narrated in an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical style, the 'I-novel' seeks to explore the self in a highly introspective fashion, and has been one of the dominant genres in Japanese literature since the introduction of the Western novel in the nineteenth century.

By including the word 'I-novel' in the title, Mizumura unmistakably aligns herself with the Japanese literary tradition. If the first part of the title announces Mizumura's gesture of reconciliation towards the Japanese literary establishment, the second part of the title, *from Left to Right*, signals her break with it. The Japanese traditional orthographical system requires the writer to write from top to bottom. Novels and other writings have traditionally been written vertically, but in *I-Novel from Left to Right*, Mizumura writes from left to right, following the Western orthographical system. Of course, the main reason for Mizumura's decision to write in this way was her desire for the Japanese sentences to connect seamlessly with the English sentences. As the reader will recall, Mizumura's novel is written in both Japanese and English, which is a major stylistic feature that we shall investigate later. However, as the discussion will try to show, what is at stake here is not only her formal and orthographical concern. Mizumura has adopted the Western writing convention, not only for the sake of the reader's and her own convenience, but also because she is attempting to highlight the enormous gap between the Japanese and Western cultural experiences.

II

Before we go on to explore the kinds of social and cultural experiences *I-Novel* enacts, it will be of use to summarise the novel's plot briefly. The protagonist and narrator, Minae (美苗), was brought to America by her parents when she was twelve. The novel tells how Minae comes to America rather reluctantly, although her parents are enthusiastic and optimistic

about settling there. She is not happy about this sudden change of circumstances, and it is only as a result of her frustrating, painstaking efforts that her English begins to improve. In addition to her poor English, she is quite an introspective character, and her life at school is inevitably lonely—she has very few friends to talk to and bide her time with.

The story is narrated during the period in which Minae is working to earn a Ph.D. in literature from Yale University. She has been living in America for twenty years, since junior high, without ever really having come to terms with the fact that she is in an English-speaking country. Indeed, she is far from proficient in English, and because she did not receive her higher education in Japan, she cannot identify fully with Japan and its cultural norms, either. However, she has always wanted to go back to Japan, so much so, that at some point, she begins to fantasize about it. Minae comes to form an idealized image about Japan by reading many, many old Japanese novels. Despite the fact that she is apparently pursuing what she enjoys at graduate school, her solitude and sense of dislocation remain enormous. Minae and her older sister, Nanae (奈苗), frequently have long telephone conversations in order to soothe their loneliness, and it is through one of these phone calls with her sister that the novel unfolds.

I-Novel from Left to Right had a tremendous impact on the Japanese literary scene, and was critically acclaimed, because it was both engaging to read and highly experimental. What is often regarded as innovative about this novel is that it is written in two languages; the foundation of the novel is Japanese, but English passages are frequently interspersed, particularly to capture conversations between Minae and her American friends. Of course, the concept of producing a literary work in more than two languages is not new in world literature. Not only do we have a large number of works written in plural languages, but there are also writers who write in their second tongue. One such writer that comes to mind is Vladimir Nabokov, who fluently spoke and wrote in Russian, French, and English. Others include the Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul, who originally came from Trinidad and Tobago, and the novelist Joseph Conrad, whose mother tongue was Polish, but who started to learn English in his twenties.⁴⁾ Mizumura's work belongs to this tradition of bilingual literature. However, it is, in a sense, both striking and shocking that Mizumura was bold enough to publish this novel, considering that Japan is a highly monolingual society. English is taught at every secondary school in Japan; however, since there are few opportunities to make contact with native English

speakers, the Japanese speak notoriously awful and unintelligible English, to the extent that their English is often the target of ridicule. Perhaps one may recall here the lovingly cheerful and funny scene from the film *Lost in Translation*, directed by Sophia Coppola (2003), in which Coppola foregrounds the inability of the Japanese to distinguish the phonemes 'l' and 'r'; this inability is so famous that it now seems to have acquired legendary status. Even *New Scientist* discusses this phenomenon in an article about second-language acquisition. As the author of the article tries to explain why we cannot easily master a foreign language unless we start to acquire it at an early age—ideally before age seven—it presents a diagram showing the mechanism for distinguishing between 'l' and 'r' in both the English- and Japanese-speaking brains.⁵⁾

It is of course not that Japanese are lazy with regard to learning English; on the contrary, they are extremely enthusiastic and diligent in this matter. If you go to a bookshop in Japan, you will find countless English textbooks piled high, designed for readers of all ages and skill levels. However, for various reasons that will not be explored here, the Japanese are usually not very good at speaking English, and the general opinion, both within and beyond Japan, seems to confirm this. In this light, it is courageous and even foolhardy for Mizumura to have chosen to write her novel in this way, since she must have been aware of the possibility of losing many monolingual readers. Strange and paradoxical though Mizumura's enterprise may seem, it provides us with important insight into the issues surrounding language and identity.

It is interesting that Mizumura's *Shishousetsu* excludes those who cannot read English, considering that Mizumura suffered so much herself in acquiring the language, and is therefore aware of the daunting experience that this process presents. Throughout the novel, Mizumura repeatedly mentions the difficulty she had during her schooling in America. Right after she arrives in the United States, she often has to introduce herself, but has nothing to say other than, "I don't understand English," and, "My name is Minae".⁶⁾ This awkwardness with English soon causes her major problems: it is precisely because she cannot speak English that she has so few friends.

When I went to school, all the people around me were boys and girls who were already in puberty, which meant that mental life was getting more and more important to them, and what was being formed there was a mature society, which was ruthlessly stratified by the command of language. There I had to learn that those who could not

speak were not humans.⁷⁾

She cannot communicate with the other students at school, nor can she identify herself with the culture that they represent. She makes a couple of friends, but none of them seems to offer her the kind of close friendship that sensitive and unworldly teenagers crave. Lonely and miserable, she finds solace in reading old Japanese novels at home. She reads voraciously from Natsume Soseki, to Mori Ougai, to Higuchi Ichiyou (樋口一葉, 1872-96). As soon as she comes home from school, she leaps onto the sofa with Cracker Jacks and a Coke, and from these novels, she gradually builds an image of Japan as an ideal homeland—one that does not exist, except in those minds that yearn for their motherland from the outside:

Unwittingly, I replaced the gap between the idealised world and the reality which looked colourless compared with it, with the Pacific Ocean. And by doing so, I came to develop my longing for Japan more and more.

Moreover, the Japan I longed for was no longer the Japan I knew.

As I familiarised myself with mouldy volumes of modern Japanese literature, I, without realising, came not only to love Japan, but also to love the Japan which had existed before I was born.⁸⁾

Her obsession with Japan thus originates in her failure to come to terms with English and America, and her subsequent longing for her lost homeland. Bearing such a complicated identity in mind, it may be natural for her to employ two languages in the novel. Nonetheless, did she really have to exclude so many Japanese readers? She was warned against mixing Japanese and English by one of her teachers at university. After Minae tells him her resolution to go back to Japan after taking the viva, he—a professor of Japanese literature who knows Minae well—says to her, “Well, whatever you do, try not to mix up your Japanese with English,” to which Minae responds, “I’ll try not to.”⁹⁾

I do not mean to argue that the bilingual tactics she employs in the novel are a complete failure. The presence of English sentences certainly contributes vivacity to her representation of the atmosphere of conversations conducted in English, and by juxtaposing Japanese and English passages, Mizumura succeeds in describing her circumstances in a way that would have been impossible if she had written only in Japanese. Moreover, Mizumura is often cunning and generous enough to summarise English passages in Japanese

right after the English text appears. Therefore, even if some readers cannot understand the English passages, they could simply ignore them and concentrate only on the Japanese parts without missing much of the storyline. Even so, it would not be difficult to imagine that many readers might see Mizumura’s bilingual style as rather haughty and unsympathetic, and chose not to pick up the book at all. Mizumura might have expected such a reception among Japanese readers. So, why did she write in Japanese and English at all?

III

Here, another bilingual writer, Franz Kafka, presents us with a good analogy. Born into a German-speaking Jewish family, he wrote his works in German, although he was able to speak Czech as a result of his father’s diligent tuition. We find Kafka writing in his diaries about the act of writing. Pursuing his career as a writer writing in German, he faces enormous difficulty. His plight is well summarised when he describes the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in a language other than German, and the impossibility of writing in German. The French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, and the psychoanalyst, Félix Guattari, discuss these three impossibilities in an essay.¹⁰⁾

The impossibility of not writing [is] because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature... The impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality. And the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a “paper language” or an artificial language; this is all the more true for the Jews who are simultaneously a part of this minority and excluded from it, like “gypsies who have stolen a German child from its crib.” In short, Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses.¹¹⁾

Of course, Kafka’s and Mizumura’s contexts as writers are radically different: Mizumura does not live with ‘an oppressive minority’, nor does she find herself in a situation in which she has to express herself in English. However, Kafka and Mizumura do have a lot in common, because just as Kafka was obliged to

write in German, which he did not feel quite comfortable about, Mizumura also finds it hard to identify herself with Japanese, and to dissociate herself completely from English. In her novel, Mizumura says that she has lived for nearly twenty years solely to escape from English.¹²⁾ However, elsewhere, she talks about how artificial and unusual was the way in which she had learned Japanese, too. By reading a plethora of Japanese novels, she became familiar with difficult words—such as ‘tsutsumotase’ (美人局), which refers to a man who makes his wife or lover seduce somebody else and then afterwards threatens and extorts money from him (in other words, a con artist)—but she does not learn how the Japanese word for ‘corporation’ is written in Chinese characters until she is twenty,¹³⁾ which would never have occurred if she had been brought up in Japan. Both Kafka and Mizumura are trapped, so to speak, by ‘artificial’ languages; they feel uneasy and uncomfortable with tongues from which they cannot really escape in order to describe their own fundamental predicament as writers.

Mizumura could have written the novel in either her mother tongue or in English, entirely, if she had desired to, but she chose not to. By choosing to write mainly in Japanese, she was not able to reach a wider audience, which would have been possible if she had written in English. Then, by choosing to insert English passages into her novel, she lost a large number of Japanese readers, who would have liked to see her write only in Japanese. She makes this sacrifice precisely because she feels uncomfortable with both languages, and because neither language can adequately represent her identity.

It is true that she resorts to English for the sake of vividly conjuring up those scenes and dialogues that took place in English. We will also have to take into account that the choice to speak a particular language is intimately related to one’s psychological experience: if you are multilingual and experience a certain event in a certain language, you will retain the memory of the event in the language that you used during the event. So, even if a writer composes his or her work in a particular language, it does not necessarily mean that he or she feels particularly attached to it or is self-conscious about the choice of that language.¹⁴⁾ However, the use of Japanese and English in *I-Novel* is, of course, not at all arbitrary. In her novel, Mizumura constantly refers to the difficulty she has with writing both in Japanese and English, a fact that probably points towards the difficulty she has had in finding her own voice. *I-Novel from Left to Right* thus illustrates Mizumura’s perpetual struggle with Japanese and English.

IV

It would be fitting to conclude this article with a short poem, *tanka* (短歌), written by the Japanese poet and literary critic Takuboku Ishikawa (石川啄木, 1886–1912), as the piece evocatively describes the incurable yearning for one’s homeland:

Furusatono namari natsukashi teishabano hitogominonakani sowo kikiniyuku
 (ふるさとの訛りなつかし停車場の人ごみの中に
 そを聴きにゆく)

This short poem roughly translates as “I miss the accent of my hometown so much that I’m heading for the train station to hear it among the crowd”. Even if we are not informed of the circumstances in which Ishikawa wrote this poem, we can vividly imagine the scene it describes. There are a number of ways to interpret the poem; the poet is tired from his day’s work, or maybe he is disappointed that what he has written could not gain public recognition. Filled with inertia and bitter disappointment, he wanders through the ever-crowded streets in Tokyo. He longs to hear the dialect of his hometown and be comforted by it. It is not certain whether the poet, on his way to the station, was walking absent-mindedly or vigorously; it could be a combination of both. Even after arriving at the station, there seem to be several possibilities. What did he see there? Did he manage to find anyone speaking in his local accent (“*hurusato no namari*”) on the platforms and find solace and strength for tomorrow? Or was he a little disappointed, finding the dialect not as soothing as he had expected? This *tanka* presents us with these questions, which are basically insoluble. Indeed, it is all the more attractive and haunting precisely because these questions are unanswerable and open to discussion. In spite of many such hermeneutic possibilities, however, the poem perhaps intimates that it is precisely because we cannot really possess our mother tongue that we yearn for it so much; if it was ours, or belonged to us at all, then it would be unnecessary and impossible for us to feel such an enduring passion for it. *I-Novel from Left to Right* was perhaps motivated by Mizumura’s own experience of this longing, and her own frustration at the impossibility of belonging either to Japanese or English. By putting pen to her thoughts about this impossibility, Mizumura grapples with her predicament in her own singular way.¹⁵⁾

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Notes

- 1) See Haruki Murakami, *Yagate Kanashiki Gaikokugo* [『やがて哀しき外国語』] (Tokyo: Kodansya, 1994), pp. 175-6, 284-6.
- 2) In order of publication: *Zoku-Meian* (1990), *I-Novel from Left to Right* (『私小説 from Left to Right』 [1995]), and *Honkaku Shosetsu* (『本格小説』 [2002]).
- 3) The Western equivalent for this notion will probably be the German term *Ich-Roman*.
- 4) Tomonori Tsuchida and Etsuko Aoyagi, *Practising Literary Theories: Narrative, Identity and Border-Crossing* (Tokyo: Sin'yo-sya, 2001), pp. 226-7, n. 2.
- 5) Laura Spinney, 'Tongue Tied', *New Scientist*, 24 July 1999, 38-41.
- 6) Minae Mizumura, *I-Novel from Left to Right* (Tokyo: Shincho-Sha, 1995), p. 193.
- 7) Ibid. p. 194. 「学校に行けば回りはすでに思春期に入り精神世界の比重が増えてきた少年少女ばかりで、そこに形成されつつあったのは、言語を操る能力で過酷に階層化される大人の社会だった。私はそこで言葉のできない人間は人間ではないということを学んでいかにざるをえなかった。」 All the translations from the Japanese in this paper are my own.
- 8) Ibid. pp. 130-31. 「形象化された世界と、それに比べれば色あせて見えるよりほかのない現実との間に横たわる溝を、いつのまにか太平洋にすりかえてしまっていたのであった。そしてそうすることによって、ますます日本を恋うる気持ちを膨らましていったのであった。
しかもそのうち私の恋うる日本は私の知っている日本ですらなくなっていったのである。
黴の匂いの舞い立つ日本近代文学全集に親しむうちに、私はいつのまにか、たんに日本を恋うるだけではなく、私自身生を受ける前の日本を恋うるようになっていったのであった。」
- 9) Ibid. p. 382.
- 10) I owe this reference to Tsuchida and Aoyagi, pp. 228-33.
- 11) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*, 30 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 16-17.
- 12) *I-Novel*, p. 351.
- 13) Ibid. p. 130.
- 14) See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 121.
- 15) An earlier version of this article was presented in February 2006 at the Hughes Hall Literary Seminar, University of Cambridge. I thank the participants for their many insightful questions.

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