Confronting the Void: Camus's Absurdism and the Existential Crisis in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract

This paper reads Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987) through Albert Camus's theory of the absurd as set out in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). The paper argues that the novel dramatizes the central Camusian problem: how do we go on living when life offers no clear reason to do so? It traces how three characters Watanabe, Naoko, and Kizuki respond to the silence of the world in ways that mirror the choices Camus identifies as philosophical suicide, physical suicide, and the revolt that keeps the absurd alive. By drawing on direct quotations from both texts, the paper shows that Murakami's characters do not simply endure grief; they enact, in literary form, the philosophical dilemma that Camus insists is the only truly serious philosophical question.

Keywords: Absurdism, Camus, Murakami, existentialism, revolt, suicide, grief, postmodern

Albert Camus opens *The Myth of Sisyphus* with one of the boldest claims in all of philosophy: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging

whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (3). This striking declaration is not merely provocative. It is a map. For Camus, every other philosophical question whether the universe has three dimensions, whether there is a God, whether history has a direction is secondary to the question of whether a person should continue to live. Everything else, he says, "comes afterwards" (3).

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood,* published in Japan in 1987 and translated into English by Jay Rubin in 2000, begins in a similar place. The narrator, Toru Watanabe, is a 37-year-old man on a plane when he hears the Beatles song "Norwegian Wood" and is immediately swept back to a period in his late teens when the people he loved most either died by suicide or were consumed by mental illness. The novel is the story of that time: of Watanabe's effort to keep living in a world that kept taking people away from him. The book never names Camus. It does not need to. The question it circles again and again is the same one Camus poses: what do we do with the fact that life seems to have no answer for our longing?

This paper argues that *Norwegian Wood* can be read as a sustained literary exploration of the absurd in the Camusian sense. Three characters in the novel Watanabe, Naoko, and Kizuki each represent a different response to the confrontation between human longing and the silence of the world. Kizuki chooses what Camus calls physical suicide. Naoko also ultimately chooses death. Watanabe, by contrast, chooses what Camus calls revolt: the refusal to escape, the decision to keep the absurd alive by living fully within it. By reading the novel against *The Myth of Sisyphus*, this paper shows how Murakami's fiction gives dramatic form to the philosophical stakes that Camus sets out.

Camus's theory of the absurd rests on a distinction between three elements. The first is the human desire for clarity, reason, and meaning. The second is the world's refusal to provide

any of these things. The third is the absurd itself, which is not the world alone, nor the human being alone, but the confrontation between the two. As Camus writes:

> The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it. The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable. (28)

What Camus emphasizes here is that the absurd is not simply sadness or confusion. It is a specific relationship a "confrontation" and an "encounter." The human being longs for meaning. The world stays silent. The space between that longing and that silence is where the absurd lives.

This confrontation can make itself felt in small, ordinary moments. Camus describes how a person can walk down a street and suddenly feel the weight of mechanical routine pressing down on them. He writes of how "one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement" (13). The daily cycle "Rising, street-car, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, street-car, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday" goes on without meaning until, suddenly, it cannot (13). When that moment comes, a person faces a choice. They can go back to the routine without question. They can seek an escape through religion or ideology, which Camus calls "philosophical suicide." Or they can stay in the absurd, acknowledge it fully, and continue to live anyway. This last option is what Camus calls revolt.

From revolt follow two further consequences. The first is freedom: the absurd person, no longer bound to a future that may or may not come, is released into the present moment. The

second is passion: the desire to live as fully as possible within the limits of a life without eternal meaning. Together, revolt, freedom, and passion form what Camus calls the three consequences of the absurd. He describes them plainly: "Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion" (64). These three are not escapes from the absurd. They are ways of living inside it.

Camus also makes clear what the absurd does *not* allow. It does not allow suicide as a solution, because suicide ends the confrontation instead of sustaining it. It does not allow the "leap" of religious faith, which resolves the tension by pretending it does not exist. "Living is keeping the absurd alive," he writes, and "keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it" (54). To turn away from the absurd whether by dying or by believing is to abandon the only honest relationship a person can have with the world.

Norwegian Wood begins with death and never really leaves it. The novel opens with Watanabe thinking back on Kizuki, his best friend who died at seventeen by suicide. Kizuki's death is described simply. After a perfectly ordinary afternoon playing pool, "He died that night in his garage. He led a rubber hose from the exhaust pipe of his N-360 to a window, taped over the gap in the window, and revved the engine" (Murakami 18). There is no warning. There is no explanation. One moment Kizuki is alive and talking; the next he is not. This is the absurd in its most direct form: the sudden, total silence of the world. Watanabe's response to this death is one of the most philosophically important moments in the novel. He describes how his understanding of death shifts entirely after Kizuki dies:

> Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life. It's a cliché translated into words, but at the time I felt it not as words but as that knot of air inside me. Death

> exists in a paperweight, in four red and white balls on a pool table and we go on living and breathing it into our lungs like fine dust. (Murakami 19)

This passage is central to the novel's relationship with absurdist thought. Watanabe does not arrive at the comfortable idea that death gives life meaning. He arrives at something harder: that death is *inside* life. It is not waiting at the end of the road. It is already here, in every object and every moment. This is very close to Camus's claim that the absurd is not a feature of the world or of the human mind, but of the confrontation between the two. Once a person truly sees that confrontation, they cannot unsee it.

The novel's world is saturated with this awareness. Naoko tells Watanabe about a mysterious well hidden in a meadow, a well that can swallow a person whole if they are not careful. She describes what it would be like to fall in: "You die there in this place, little by little, all by yourself" (Murakami 5). The well is an image of the absurd: invisible, dangerous, always present just beneath the surface of ordinary life. Naoko and Watanabe walk carefully around it, but both know it is there. The well functions as a symbolic representation of what Camus calls the human condition the knowledge that we are always close to a void we cannot see.

Even the structure of the novel reflects absurdist logic. Watanabe narrates the whole story from a plane at age 37, looking back. He tells us that he cannot always recover the faces of the people he has lost, that "no one is in" the scenes he remembers (Murakami 3). He has all the background but the people have faded. This is the novel's formal statement of the absurd: the world remains; the human beings disappear. The scenery stays; the meaning does not.

Camus is careful to distinguish between two kinds of response to the absurd that he considers forms of surrender. The first is physical suicide, the literal ending of one's life. The second is philosophical suicide, the intellectual leap toward a belief system God, ideology, fate

that resolves the tension by denying that it exists. Both are, for Camus, failures of honesty. Both choose resolution over revolt. Both destroy the confrontation instead of living inside it.

Kizuki represents the first form. His suicide is not explained in the novel, and Camus would say that this is as it should be, because suicide rarely has a single clear cause. Camus writes that "there are many causes for a suicide, and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful" (5). What matters is not the immediate reason but the underlying surrender: the act of confessing, as Camus puts it, that "life is too much for you or that you do not understand it" (5). Kizuki, by choosing death on what seems like an ordinary evening, acts out this confession. He ends his confrontation with the world rather than continuing to live inside it.

Naoko's situation is more complex and more sympathetic. She does not want to die in the way Kizuki seemed to want to die. She genuinely tries to recover. She goes to the sanatorium. She talks to Reiko. She writes to Watanabe. But she describes herself in terms that make clear how completely the absurd has closed in on her:

> I'm confused. Really confused. And it's a lot deeper than you think. Deeper... darker... colder. But tell me something. How could you have slept with me that time? How could you have done such a thing? Why didn't you just leave me alone? (Murakami 6)

The depth and darkness and coldness that Naoko describes are the qualities of the absurd pressing in on her from inside. She is not simply sad. She is in the condition that Camus identifies when he writes about how "at the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman" and how a person can feel, at certain moments, that the world "evades us because it becomes itself again" (14). Naoko cannot find her way back from that feeling of evasion.

She also recognizes, in a moment of striking clarity, that her condition is connected to a failure to grow into the world's difficulty: "Because we would have had to pay the world back what we owed it. The pain of growing up. We didn't pay when we should have, so now the bills are due. Which is why Kizuki did what he did, and why I'm here" (Murakami 101). This is almost a perfect restatement of Camus's idea that the absurd arises when a person stops living within habit and routine and is suddenly confronted with the full weight of existence. Naoko and Kizuki, she says, were like "kids who grew up naked on a desert island" (101). They were sheltered from the confrontation that Camus says is unavoidable. When the confrontation finally arrived, they were not equipped to remain standing inside it.

Naoko's death she hangs herself in the woods of the sanatorium is described at the end of the novel through the words of others. Watanabe learns of it indirectly. What is striking about how Murakami presents this death is that it is not framed as a tragedy in the conventional sense. It is framed as the logical conclusion of a person who could not hold the confrontation in place. "In woods as dark as the depths of her own heart, she hanged herself," Watanabe tells Kizuki's memory (Murakami 212). The darkness of the woods and the darkness inside her are the same. Her world and her inner life have collapsed into each other, and there is no light left.

Watanabe is the novel's closest equivalent to Camus's absurd hero. He does not choose death. He does not choose philosophical escape through religion or ideology. He chooses, again and again, to remain. He chooses to go on feeling the full weight of what he has lost, without looking away from it and without being destroyed by it.

After Naoko dies, Watanabe leaves Tokyo and walks through the countryside for weeks. He sleeps in fields and car parks. He drinks. He barely eats. He is not trying to forget Naoko. He is trying to do what Camus says the absurd demands: to stay inside the confrontation. He tells

Kizuki's memory directly: "Unlike you, I've chosen to live and to live the best I know how. Sure, it was hard for you. What the hell, it's hard for me. Really hard. And all because you killed yourself and left Naoko behind. But that's something I will never do. I will never, ever, turn my back on her" (Murakami 191).

This declaration is the novel's equivalent of Camus's argument that revolt is the only honest response to the absurd. Watanabe does not say that things are fine or that Naoko's death makes sense. He says that he has chosen life anyway. This is precisely the structure of Camusian revolt: not the optimistic belief that things will improve, but the decision to keep living in full acknowledgment that they may not. Camus describes this as "a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity" that "challenges the world anew every second" (54-55). What Murakami shows through Watanabe is that the revolt Camus describes is not a philosophical position adopted in the abstract. It is lived, in the body, day by day. Watanabe walks. He writes letters to Naoko even after she dies, in order to hold his life together. He returns to Tokyo. He finds Midori. The process is slow and painful and unresolved. But it continues. This is exactly what Camus means when he says that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (123).

Midori herself functions as the embodiment of the passionate dimension of the absurd. She is alive in a way that Naoko cannot be. She is direct, funny, and fully present in the physical world. She insists on joy in the face of difficulty. She does not pretend that her father's illness or her family's poverty are not painful; she simply refuses to let them extinguish her desire for life. Watanabe's movement toward Midori at the end of the novel is his movement toward passion in the Camusian sense: the desire to live as fully as possible within the time available, without asking whether that time has a larger purpose.

One of the most important moments in *Norwegian Wood* comes after Naoko's death, when Watanabe reflects on what grief has taught him. The passage is worth quoting at length because it speaks directly to the absurdist claim that meaning cannot be manufactured from experience, but must be lived through:

> What I learned from Naoko's death was this: no truth can cure the sadness we feel from losing a loved one. No truth, no sincerity, no strength, no kindness, can cure that sorrow. All we can do is see that sadness through to the end and learn something from it, but what we learn will be no help in facing the next sadness that comes to us without warning. (Murakami 210)

This is a deeply absurdist conclusion. Watanabe does not say that grief teaches nothing. He says that what grief teaches cannot be used again. Every sadness must be met fresh. There is no accumulation of wisdom that makes the confrontation easier. This echoes Camus's description of the absurd as something that "cannot be divided" and that "ends with death" but also insists on itself moment by moment (31). The human being is always, at every new loss, standing face to face with the irrational.

Camus makes a similar point when he describes how the absurd person must "preserve" the confrontation, must refuse to let it be resolved by comforting explanations. He writes that "for me the sole datum is the absurd. The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me" (31). Watanabe preserves his grief in exactly this way. He does not explain Naoko's death. He does not make it meaningful. He carries it forward, unchanged, into the next part of his life.

The novel's use of memory is also consistent with this framework. Watanabe narrates everything in retrospect, from a great distance in time. He repeatedly tells us that his memories

are fading and imperfect: "Clutching these faded, fading, imperfect memories to my breast, I go on writing this book with all the desperate intensity of a starving man sucking on bones" (Murakami 7). The act of writing is itself a form of revolt: an insistence on remaining in relation to the people he has lost, even as they slip away. He cannot recover Naoko. He cannot make her live again in his memory. But he can refuse to let her disappear without a struggle.

Camus ends *The Myth of Sisyphus* with his famous reading of the Sisyphus myth. Sisyphus is condemned to roll a rock up a hill forever; every time it reaches the top, it falls back down. Camus's point is that Sisyphus is not defined by the futility of the task but by his consciousness of that futility. He sees clearly what he is doing. He does not pretend it has a purpose. And yet he continues. This is why Camus concludes: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). The happiness Camus has in mind is not the happiness of satisfaction or success. It is the happiness of a person who lives without illusions and does not break. He writes:

> I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (123)

Watanabe is Murakami's Sisyphus. His burden is not a stone but the memory of the dead. Kizuki. Naoko. The weight of their absence, which he carries without the comfort of religion or the escape of forgetting. He goes on walking, working, loving, writing letters. He picks up his

burden each morning and carries it through another day. The rock falls. He goes back down the mountain. He picks it up again.

Camus says that "Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (121). The "lucidity" here is exactly the quality that Watanabe demonstrates throughout the novel. He never pretends he does not know what has happened. He never tells himself a comforting story about Naoko's death. He looks at it directly, repeatedly, and he goes on.

This is also why the novel ends where it does: not with resolution, but with Watanabe calling Midori from a phone box, standing "in the middle of nowhere" (Murakami, final pages). He does not know exactly where he is. He knows only that he wants to see her. That desire unresolved, uncertain, located in no specific future is the absurd person's version of happiness. Not the satisfaction of a goal achieved, but the continuation of living, which is itself the only goal the absurd allows.

Reading *Norwegian Wood* through Camus's absurdism does not reduce the novel to a philosophical diagram. It opens it up. Murakami's characters are not arguments. They are people, fully drawn, living inside situations that happen to enact the philosophical choices that Camus identifies. Kizuki chooses physical suicide: the ending of the confrontation. Naoko also cannot maintain the struggle and chooses death. Watanabe chooses revolt: the decision to stay inside the absurd and keep living. Midori embodies the passion that revolt makes possible.

What connects the two works most deeply is their shared insistence that the question of whether to go on living is not abstract. It is the most urgent question there is. Camus says so

directly in his opening pages. Murakami shows it through the lives of young people in Tokyo in the late 1960s, people who have everything they could need materially and still cannot find solid ground beneath their feet. The novel asks, with the seriousness that Camus demands, whether life is worth living. And it answers, through Watanabe's survival and his final call to Midori, that it is not because the world has given any reason, but because the human being, in revolt, makes it so. Camus concludes that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (123). Murakami's novel shows us what that struggle looks like in practice: imperfect, painful, full of loss, and stubbornly alive.

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