

## Choosing the unreal. *La ciudad y sus muros inciertos* by Murakami.

### Elegir lo irreal. *La ciudad y sus muros inciertos* de Murakami.



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#### Abstract.

The aim of this paper is to show how *La ciudad y sus muros inciertos*, Murakami's last novel, offers some singularities within his narrative and, at the same time, shows continuity in the use of certain compositional elements (characters, literary motifs, the recourse to the fantastic). The analysis will focus on delimiting the outstanding singularities - in addition to its mark of transtextuality due to its essential relationship with previous works - such as the choice of themes and issues of special entity: individual identity, the possible dimensions of existence, death and its enigmas. This scrutiny reveals the heterogeneous character of its sections, which range from elegiac tones to fantastic realism or metaphysical approaches. In the development of this analysis we have taken into account the contributions on the author's affiliation with fantastic realism and on the presence of the Japanese mythological tradition in his narrative universe.

**Key words:** Contemporary narrative. Fantastic realism. Haruki Murakami. Japanese novel.

#### Resumen.

El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar cómo *La ciudad y sus muros inciertos*, última novela de Murakami, ofrece algunas singularidades dentro de su narrativa y, al mismo tiempo, muestra continuidad en el empleo de ciertos elementos compositivos (personajes, motivos literarios, el recurso a lo fantástico). El análisis se va a centrar en delimitar las singularidades destacables -además de su marca de transtextualidad por su relación esencial con obras precedentes- tales como la elección de temas y asuntos de especial entidad: la identidad individual, las dimensiones posibles de la existencia, la muerte y sus enigmas. Se constata

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en este escrutinio el carácter heterogéneo de sus apartados, que oscilan del tono elegíaco hasta el realismo fantástico o planteamientos metafísicos. En el desarrollo de este análisis se han tenido en cuenta las aportaciones sobre la filiación del autor en el Realismo fantástico y sobre la presencia de la tradición mitológica japonesa en su universo narrativo.

**Palabras clave:** Narrativa contemporánea. Realismo fantástico. Haruki Murakami. Novela japonesa.

The novel -published in Japan in 2023, in English in 2024- takes up an idea already raised in previous stories by the author, to give new form to plots and issues of the 80s that Murakami revisits. The protagonist, whose human profile is well known among the author's gallery of characters, is, once again, an adult without any vital or affective roots, who lives marked by the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of the girl he loved in his early youth, at the age of seventeen. This elegiac tone marks the first part of the novel, in which the memory of the past and its nostalgia are combined with the character's stay in the peculiar city with its impregnable walls. The lament for lost youthful love and its indelible imprint is a recurring motif in Murakami (Castellón, 2024, p.81). The next two sections incorporate into the plot matters of a more abstract nature, with philosophical approaches that reflect on questions of deep metaphysical depth.

Again written in the first person, like most of his works, it is divided into three parts and an epilogue, with chapters set -depending on the part of the novel in question- in the real world of contemporary Japan, or in the walled city, a space created by the minds of the characters, a fortified enclosure whose inhabitants are settled in a safe but dull life, without any shocks, but lacking in emotional warmth, because they are deprived of their shadow, their conscience. In the chapters set in the walled city, the story ventures into an artificial city, whose morphology is described and mapped, crossed daily by a flock of unicorns, firmly enclosed by the wall; the entity, real or imagined, of this city is the basic plot support of the novel, along with the renunciation that those who find themselves in it must make: to be stripped of their shadow. This loss of identity, the loss of one's own shadow, is the central question on which philosophical reflections of literary resonance are projected throughout the novel.

The three parts are configured differently around these two worlds. As a whole, many of the keys that distinguish the author reappear, in terms of characters, background, setting, cultural references, style and, of course, the plot, with its turns from the real and immediate to the fantastic and devoid of logic. However, it is striking to note the narrative weight given here to issues that in his previous works did not show that nuclear character; in particular, the themes of self-identity, self-consciousness and reflection on death and transcendence, or perhaps rather, human uncertainty about existence, its dimensions, and its end. This gravity in the novelistic approach had already surfaced in the immediately preceding work, the compilation *First Person Singular* (2020), some of whose stories intone a nostalgic *Ubi sunt*, or explore certain spiritual approaches. It would seem that Murakami now directs his gaze to the vital situation in which he finds himself as an individual, due to his age: a greater proximity to death and its enigmas. Likewise, the disquisitions on existence, its real or perhaps imagined entity, the possible crossovers and interferences between the two, one's own identity, have a major presence here, although it is true that they had already appeared more succinctly in some short stories ("The Mirror", "First Person Singular" [...]).

In this search for the authentic self and in the recognition of the different levels of the mind and of existence, the protagonist's dreams play an eminent role, revealing themselves to him as indicators of the path he must take, or as forms of direct communication with the voices of the other reality. The dream passages offer interpretative clues, but they are also the gateway to the other world, to other dimensions and experiences. This is how the young woman he loves ("You") values dreams in the first part of the novel, as recalled by the protagonist-narrator:

The world of dreams is as real, or almost as real, as the physical world of objects and phenomena, and it is, therefore, a pity to abandon it to oblivion and let it fade away. No doubt you referred to them as authentic sources of spiritual knowledge (Murakami, 2024, p. 38).

The writing of the novel coincided with the period of the past pandemic and that atmosphere somehow creeps into the text, here transmuted into "pandemic of the spirit, of the soul." It is quite unusual, on the other hand, that the author includes an *Epilogue*, where he gives an account of the vicissitudes of the writing of this work and of his process of reworking it from a distant initial short story, the intermediate phase with the development of a novel, and the final result he has reached with this recent publication. It is also noteworthy that it includes in the second part certain points of literary criticism about some literary movements -magical realism and postmodernism- which, although in the text they are used strictly in reference to the work of Gabriel García Márquez, turn out to be the labels that have been used to frame Murakami's narrative (Strecher, Sotelo).

As the text is, in its totality, of a complex nature, since it moves from the mimetic plane, of detailed and careful representation of aspects of reality, to other planes inserted in more diffuse or ethereal realities, it may be pertinent to take into consideration the definition of narrative coined, some decades ago, by structuralists. For example, Todorov's definition: "Nous lisons un livre, l'histoire en question n'appartient pas à la 'vie' mais à cet univers imaginaire que nous ne connaissons qu'à travers le livre" ["We read a book, the story in question is not part of 'life', but of that imaginary universe that we only know through the book"] (Todorov, 1966, p.138). The work is, therefore, a discursive product, it is not obliged to give a faithful account of the existing reality; this premise is valid for a good part of Murakami's narratives. Indeed, in his works the plots open up to spaces that go beyond the realm of the known, and in these unknown territories the inexplicable occurs, only to return again to the real world.

Based on this narrative path from the known real world to the mysterious regions of the unreal, it has been considered that Murakami's work presents features of fantastic realism: fictions clearly framed in a recognizable real world, in which, at a certain moment, the leap to the fantastic takes place -through an event, a character, a place-, and the extraordinary bursts in, to return to the tangible and known, to the everyday and locatable scenarios in the denouement. Thus, Roas, among others, has delimited the scope of the

fantastic : "The conflictive coexistence of the possible and the impossible defines the fantastic and distinguishes it from nearby categories, such as the marvelous or science fiction, in which this conflict does not occur" (Roas, 2009, p.94).

This bias would be registered in a good part of his novels, such as -in chronological order of their appearance in Japan- *The Hunt for the Wild Ram*, *Chronicle of the Bird that Winds the World*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *1Q84* and *The Death of the Commendatore*. On the other hand, there are those of a substantially realistic nature, such as *Sputnik*, *My Love*, *Tokyo Blues* or *South of the Border*, *West of the Sun*. The short stories, on the other hand, would fall between these two labels, depending on how they are written.

For some critics, that detour into the unknown allows Murakamian creatures to dive into the interiorities of their own mind; thus, in order to access their self-identification, they have to go through that journey into the realms of metaphysics (Strecher, 2014, p.69). Carlos Rubio understands, for his part, that those elements with which the fantastic is manifested in the works are rooted in the collective imaginary of the Japanese cosmovision:

Religion and nature are two sides of the same coin in Japan, so one cannot be treated without the other; neither does Murakami. Myths and dreams are vehicles of existential truths in our writer (Rubio, 2012, p.16).

Regarding the textual genesis of the book, the background of the novel comes from two different previous texts that Murakami wrote in the 1980s. The first in which this core plot appears was a short story from 1980, just after his second novel, *Pinball, 1973*. With the same title as the recent novel, the essential lines of the story were already traced in the tale: the lacerating loss of youthful love, the protagonist's acute feeling of loneliness and absence, and the appearance of the created city, as an artificial limited space where to lead a life deprived of its natural meaning, without uncertainties and hopes. The girl that the unnamed protagonist loved disappeared to go to that city, of which she spoke to him in their meetings, while confessing to him that it was in the city where her authentic 'I' resided, since her visible 'I' in the real world was, according to her, only her shadow. In this first short version of the

story, the narrator escapes from the city, a different ending from the two later novel versions.

She recovered the story in novel format in 1985, with *El fin del mundo y un despiadado país de las maravillas*, a dystopian fiction that develops around two parallel worlds, alternating in chapters. The totally unreal framework chosen for this novel would lead us to place it in another generic category, as a science fiction story, since it does not combine -as in fantastic realism- the possible and the impossible, only the latter space, through a murky futuristic atmosphere and the walled city. In the two parallel universes the settings are artificial, not mimetic, although to a different degree in each case: either it is a Tokyo of the future or, on the other hand, it is the walled city; it would not be, therefore, entirely inappropriate to consider that the novel *The End of the World...* presents features of science fiction, in dystopian settings.

In the novel *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* there is also a duality of settings for the course of the overall plot; from the initial central theme of longing for the beloved who has mysteriously disappeared, Murakami bifurcates the development of the narrative into two parallel worlds: the real one, where the two lovers' youthful encounter took place and where the protagonist lives until the age of forty-five, and the fantastic one, the walled city, a mental creation of the characters. As he himself has revealed, Murakami resorts to his creative heritage, to the two precedents mentioned above, the short story of the same name (1980), and the novel *The End of the World [...]* (1985).

In the *Epilogue to The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, Murakami is very explicit about the transtextuality of the novel, and comments on the whole evolutionary process, from the initial text -the hypotext, for Genette (1982)-, its continuation in *The End of the World...*, to finally arrive at the new text, the hypertext. He confesses that the first version, the story of the same name, did not satisfy him at all; in fact, he never allowed it to be reprinted. However, the next stage, *The End of the World [...]*, came about thanks to that first text; but he also recognizes that he did not yet have the expertise and mastery of the craft that has given him over time; that is why he stresses that he was then limited in capturing reality, due

to his inability to write in a "realistic style", which does emerge in the last novel. Forty years after the short story, Murakami feels the need to address those contents again, to provide the reader, he says, "a way out", which he lacked before.

This realistic style is especially prevalent in the second part, set, for the most part, in a mountain village where the protagonist takes refuge after deciding to leave his empty and paralyzing life in Tokyo. Now he becomes a library director, and it will be precisely in the library where his encounters with the fantastic take place, in this case, with the ghost of the former director, Koyasu, who will act as a guide and reference in his bewildered life. There also wanders another character who will be revealed as fundamental for affecting the fate of the protagonist, the autistic boy, also unnamed (he is only mentioned by his clothing, a sweatshirt with the image of a yellow submarine). Both characters are the protagonists of two interspersed narratives that enrich and broaden the perspective of the plot, constructed in the third person, since it is another secondary character who narrates them to the protagonist, now narrator. According to Murakami, these two characters serve as guides to the protagonist, and compose with him a "story of succession of three generations" (Yukata and Koyama).

There is, however, a contrast between the first and this second part that, to some extent, is surprising. The protagonist, so lacerated in the first part by the loss of his beloved, to the point of abandoning his real existence for her, now shows little sign of this emotional burden. The memory of youth, so intense before, seems to have been diluted; what was interpreted as the deep engine of his existence -the uncontainable desire to meet again with the young woman-, now does not show signs of pushing him in his steps. This sensitive change, together with a marked difference in the expressive modality -now a realistic setting, in mimetic reflection-, produces a certain strangeness due to its discontinuity in relation to the character.

In addition to the library, the other enclave where reality is blurred and transformed will be the river, a space that connects the two parallel worlds. The library of the village of mountain and the river that bathes it are the spaces of the fantastic. In the former, the ghost

of the former director is shown as a character, whose appearances allow him to approach that special form of existence after death. In one of these encounters the protagonist experiences confusion about reality:

Something barely perceptible was contorting between the threads of the curved web of space-time and intermingling and interweaving with other primordial essences, creating a bewildering reality of which it was impossible for me to guess whether it was within me, and therefore my creation, or whether, on the contrary, it had somehow been produced from the presence of Mr. Koyasu himself. (Murakami, 2024, p.280).

The library is a privileged space in Murakami's stories, as is notoriously proven in *Kafka on the Shore* or in the disturbing tale "The Secret Library"; this preference is logical, coherent, in someone who declares himself an inveterate reader. In this regard, as an eloquent curiosity, a library has been built in Tokyo that bears his name at the university where he studied, Waseda; its architect explains that its design with stairs behind the entrance is conceived as the tunnel that leads from reality to unreality, as in Murakami's works. In the novel, the ghostly character of the former director defines the library as an enclosure endowed with a peculiar character: "It is not just a building for public use that treasures a huge number of books. It is a special place that welcomes lost souls, lost hearts" (Murakami, 2024, p.382).

The other place, the river, will be the zone of passage, of access / exit from the walled city, by way of prodigious events. Murakami justifies the presence of such natural environments in his works by his own personal experience:

Because I grew up in the Hanshinkan area in western Japan, rivers, seas and mountains are extremely important elements to me. The novel's city in Fukushima Prefecture's Aizu region is in the mountains. Since I used to go to the mountains often as a child, that type of ambiance is very important to me.

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Fukushima Prefecture, is in the mountains. Since I used to often go to the mountains when I was a child, that kind of environment is very important to me] (Yukawa and Koyama, 2023).

Here, however, the - seemingly - idyllic river can become threatening.

The use of creatures from other planes, of non-real entity, appearing in areas with special properties -mostly, in natural spaces- is common in Murakami's narrative. Hence his association with fantastic realism. Sotelo shows how reality and unreality are combined in the author's fictions:

His aesthetics possess a sensory basis that sometimes dispenses with rational solutions. His stories are possible, even if they do not really happen, as possible worlds that are expressed through literature. Murakami builds worlds and fills them with inhabitants that belong to a different nature; his objects, people, actions and ideas are similar to reality, but there are also others that do not imitate that model, and are marvelous and impossible, as well as plausible and convincing. Their world is constituted by a multitude of images that become metaphors because they have a symbolic world behind them based on Eastern and Western myths (Sotelo, 2012, p.41).

In the third part, again the character's journey is located in the walled city, as in the first part. If before, in the first stay in the city, he dialogued with his shadow about staying there or leaving the city -so that his shadow would not perish-, now he will maintain that dialogue with a new interlocutor, the autistic young man, who voluntarily leaves the real world, the mountain village, where he feels strange, to move to the walled city; the transfer and his existence and accommodation in the city enter fully into the range of the fantastic. What matters to both of them in this dialogue is, once again, their own identity, as a cardinal issue in the whole work. The moments of the night's sleep will allow the two to meet and converse. In those conversations they discuss, for example, the subject of death and what the afterlife

might be; that subject had also appeared in their encounters with Koyasu's ghost. In this regard, the boy opens up a possibility linked to beliefs:

It is possible to think that there is something that frees us from mortality.

-For example?

-Faith.

-Faith in what?

-Faith that there is someone to break your fall and catch you before you hit the ground. A faith rooted in the depths of your soul. Without vagueness or conditions (Murakami, 2024, p. 615).

This quest about the great questions - one's own identity and its nature, the unknown after death - that human beings ask themselves can be pointed out as a novel content in the author's work. The substantial uncertainty that afflicts the protagonist-about his life, about his decisions to remain or not in the walled city, about his encounters and experiences-is due, in part, to the impossibility of recognizing whether, like Calderon's Segismundo, he has dreamed something, or whether it has really happened. From his dreams he has extracted premonitions, but also insecurity, and, finally, events take place in them that transform his life. This is how the character defines his dreams: "The territory located at the edge of reality, at its most abstract and conceptual extreme" (Murakami, 2024, p.569). The dream would be that interregnum between the conscious world and what is experienced on the other side, in the domain of unreality. This tormented character struggles between the two, in which the author projects for the readers his polyhedral vision of human existence. The protagonist puts it bluntly: "I maintain that there is not only one reality, but that we are offered a wide range of possibilities, from which each person has to select one" (Murakami, 2024, p.599). He, who has experienced these diverse possibilities, as well as the duality of self-identity - the authentic self and its shadow - ends up making his personal choice.

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