

# UC Berkeley Publications

## Title

Review of Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage

## Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/365461jf>

## Journal

Room One Thousand, 3(3)

## Author

Hong, Tiffany

## Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed



Tiffany Hong

## Review of *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*

by Haruki Murakami

Translated by Philip Gabriel.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014

The fictional works of Haruki Murakami have always been structured according to a quest narrative, but *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* explicitly prioritizes this trajectory. The novel deviates from the author's publications since *Norwegian Wood* in its confinement to the mundane, chronological sphere, rather than alternating between mimetic reality and "the other world," or the supernatural, temporally suspended state where the Murakami protagonist negotiates his or her ontological split within a reified terrain of the subconscious. The author's predilection for metatextual cartography can be traced to the literalization of the psyche into a mind-map, the most facile identification being the subterranean well—*ido* in Japanese—with the Freudian id. With the exception of a few comparatively realistic prose works, Boku, the omnipresent and interchangeable Murakami (male) hero, is unfailingly propelled on a quest that culminates in a *katabasis*

Opposite: Model by Yuxu Han and Carlos Martinez-Horta from *Dense Ecologies / City and Bay*.

(surpassing traditional confines to the horizontal plane) to the other world, following a predetermined ascetic, meditative period in which the protagonist (and reader) must await properly timed revelations through an established ritual of spiritual purging and fortification in a geographically exiled, historically charged space. This ascetic practice—as seen in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and *Kafka on the Shore*—necessitates isolation and corporeal and spatial purity (physical exercise, housecleaning, abstinence from alcohol and sexual relations, meditation) in a temporally and spatially ‘sacred space’ (the mountain retreat, the well, and the cabin, respectively) in preparation for legitimate crossing.

*Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki* is no different in its impetus to arrive at a conceptually and emotionally charged other space. Its existentially passive protagonist is maneuvered into pilgrimage via the ultimatum of his girlfriend Sara, who threatens to withhold sexual intercourse until Tsukuru can resolve the trauma of his expulsion from his group of friends.<sup>1</sup> In her capacity as a travel agent, Sara conveniently arranges Tsukuru’s itinerary and functions as his private detective and spirit guide of sorts.<sup>2</sup> Her uncanny foresight is nevertheless dialled down from the supernatural prescience of other Murakami girlfriends who perform a similar function. In this case, Sara initiates and positions herself as the prize of the quest narrative, whereas, in other works, the girlfriend figure recedes—first sexually/verbally and then physically—in order for the protagonist to commence spiritual preparations.<sup>3</sup> All peripheral reference to the intrusion of the other world—the six-fingered pianist, Haida’s ‘other self,’ and Tsukuru’s ‘dark side’ physically manifesting (and travelling) to Shiro’s Hamamatsu apartment—are nonchalantly dismissed as closed, inconclusive puzzles at the end of the novel. Pilgrimage here is restricted to feasible realities and timelines, its significance amplified by its naming, a rarity in Murakami’s writing.

In the decidedly realistic *Tsukuru Tazaki*, the mystical and heavily archetypal trajectories delineated above are pared down to Tsukuru's paranormally unremarkable trips to his hometown and to Hämeenlinna (the terminus of Finland's first railway line). Murakami retains his nostalgia for the prelapsarian pastoral landscape as the site of sublimation and continues his critique of the center-periphery radius—with modernity and privilege decreasing centrifugally—by once again literalizing the stagnated flow of time in the suburban/rural extremities.<sup>4</sup> Here the dichotomy of urban and rural is reimagined as a spectrum, with Tōkyō as the overwhelmingly advanced, fast-paced metropolis, Nagoya as the comfortingly provincial epicentre of high-school harmony, and Finland as the radically unknowable and externalized site of pilgrimage.

Perhaps, because of the novel's realistic setting, the temporal suspension of the latter two sites are similarly configured in related but distinct ways: the perfect circle of adolescence in Nagoya is unsustainable (and unsustained); the encounters with Ao and Aka are brief and expectedly awkward, and it is only in a verbal slip—unconsciously addressing Aka with the familiar *omae*—that Tsukuru is able to momentarily return to that discourse and flow of high school temporality. Outside of language, of course, there is no returning to the site of innocence. Given Murakami's suspicion of *logos* and the literal, it follows that access to the other world and the unconscious are mediated through verbal slippages and music.

Tazaki's encounters with Finns are reduced to "clever witticisms" and sidestepping of linguistic authenticity: Olga and the cab driver speak (aphoristic) English; Edvard speaks Japanese; the two girls in the town confuse Japanese and Chinese (in English); and even the Charon-esque old guide expectorates and angrily articulates himself in a comically incomprehensible way (259). Even Finland's exoticism is elided to privilege Shiro's cottage as a holy, temporally untouchable site,

where the two listen to Liszt's *Year of Pilgrimage*, "giving themselves up to the flow of time" (324). The disparate temporalities of the novel—Tsukuru's present reality and the hypothetical timeline in which the group's self-contained harmony *should have* persisted—are in this place delicately realigned, the purpose of pilgrimage fulfilled. For the first time, Tazaki is able to recognize that "He was in exactly the right place" (271). Indeed, he arrives at this conclusion by grace of the disconnect between interior/exterior, as the otherness of Finland negates the perpetual "lack of direction" in himself (43).

Tsukuru—at a train station platform, no less, a site par excellence of repetitive and hermetic locomotion—meditates on the inertia of his life thus far: "*Tsukuru Tazaki had nowhere he had to go*. This was like a running theme of his life. He had no place he had to go to, no place to come back to. He never did, and he didn't now. The only place for him was *where he was now*" (367). The aggregation of grammatical place- and time-markers is exceptional in this quotation. Tsukuru's fixation on unproductive locomotion—trains and swimming—comes to a head at Shinjuku Station, a photograph of which, he dourly notes, immortalized the Japanese as a miserable people in "pointless movement from point A to point B" (361). Murakami's allusion to the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō subway sarin gas attack deflects this criticism by recontextualizing the continuous flux of the world's busiest station as a testament to a "professionalism" that induces a "sure sense that [Tsukuru] was in the right place" (364). In the absence of this conviction in proper orientation and timing, Tsukuru, and by extension the Murakami protagonist, invests great faith in the restorative potential of mundane ritual (repetition sublimated), and meditative inactivity. Emerging from the six-month period of thanatotic metamorphosis, Tsukuru acknowledges that "[h]abit, in fact, was what propelled his life forward" (56). As in *Dance Dance Dance*, the Murakami protagonist must commit

to mobility, despite the appearance of stasis or meaninglessness.

The Murakami chronotope is a magically realized conflation of time-space: the other world is a site of radical, problematic nostalgia or developmental stasis that exists in a parallel realm in its own suspended temporality. In *Tsukuru Tazaki*, these metaphysical elements are distilled into occasional remarks and turns of phrase that motion towards less abstract constructions in other novels—for Murakami’s novels are all palimpsestic and pivot on fan service necessitating intimacy with the Murakamiverse—that nevertheless conceptualize time and space in an unusually synonymous fashion. The abstract, self-contained perfection of his adolescent friendships is reified into location: “Get on the bullet train at the Tōkyō station and in an hour and a half he’d arrive at an *orderly, harmonious, intimate place*” (31). Sara astutely likens this “orderly, harmonious community” to “the universe,” transcending the specificity of Nagoya as place entirely (24). Tsukuru concludes, “That place doesn’t exist anymore” (32). The referent is actually that *time*—a chronotopic overlap punctuated by his conviction that “life came to a halt at age twenty” (371). Tsukuru’s pilgrimage is concerned with proper *temporal* orientation rather than spatial itinerary: the two tracks of his life—chronology as it *should have been*, in opposition to the stasis of life *as it is*. Ultimately the two converge in the Hämeenlinna cottage, where *Le mal du pays* serves as junction to the other (frozen, repressed, unconscious) world.

[Endnotes]

1. To be fair, sexuality is often the favored mode of articulating ontological stability in Murakami’s fiction. Characters express agency and punctuate personal milestones through the act of sex. Sexual violence, unfettered promiscuity, and even incest, are identified as mechanisms of Murakami villains, who manipulate sexuality for access to an individual’s black box or ‘core,’ the nexus of personal identity.
2. Sara controls the timing of Tsukuru’s pilgrimage, from expediting his journey to



delaying revelation (of her fidelity) for three days upon his return. Predetermined duration is crucial here, for when Sara and Tsukuru attempt intercourse before the pronounced date, he cannot perform.

3. Seemingly regressing from the potential of writing his first homosexual male (imaginary?) sex scene, Murakami depicts female sexuality in this novel in an enormously problematic fashion. Sara tantalizes with her body as an (ultimate) site of pilgrimage, and Shiro falsifies a rape accusation out of contorted adolescent hormonal energies and in competition with Kuro, who harbors an unrequited love for the (unprecedented for a Murakami protagonist, handsome and privileged) protagonist. Tsukuru, at the very least, feels guilty for his pedophilic erotic dreams about Kuro and Shiro, who are configured as interchangeable and “a formless, abstract being” (24). Moreover, the homoerotic encounter and relationship is utilized as an example of the *something* that repels those around him, and the one other (openly) gay character is depicted as an unsavory opportunist who has united military, religious, and advertising techniques – all vilified in Murakami fiction – to spearhead a company that essentially trades in corporate brainwashing. Moreover, the male-male scene is depicted with familiar imagery – a doppelgänger, paralysis – intimately associated with the malevolent and perverse in Murakami.

4. This dichotomy is fully actualized in the textually divided *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, where the (hyper-)modern city occupies one narrative, and the redemptive, timeless fairytale town occupies the other.



