

A PILGRIMAGE TO THE END OF THE RAINBOW: HARUKI MURAKAMI, COLORLESS TSUKURU TAZAKI AND HIS YEARS OF PILGRIMAGE (2013)

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Abstract The present study aims to decipher the “plural” reading suggested by the novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, published by Haruki Murakami in 2013, by identifying a narrative composition structured around binary conceptual pairs: *colour-colourless, colour-noncolour, one-multiple, freedom-threat*. It examines, from a semiotic-cultural and poetic-hermeneutic perspective, the dialectics of paired key concepts that shape the “becoming” of a “colourless” protagonist. The argument also presents the discursive-narrative strategy through which the Japanese writer synthesises various existing studies in the field into his own theory of colours, thus transforming the novel’s space into a graphic-pictorial composition that draws on the properties of light and colour as physical-chemical and philosophical-cultural phenomena, with an emphasis on the subjective dimension and the emotional effects of chromatic imagery.

Keywords Haruki Murakami, colour theory, conceptual binomial.

Esse est percipi. / To be is to be perceived.

George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*

The Way has existence, spirit is nothingness.

Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*

Haruki Murakami (b. 1949) is the Japanese writer who, for the past several decades, has captivated readers across the world, not only from all age groups, but also from different social classes and religious backgrounds. Sold in millions of copies, the novelist’s books have, on the global literary market, given rise to a movement known as “Murakami Haruki *genshō*,” or the “Murakami

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phenomenon.”¹ Shifting away from the canon of national tradition, Haruki Murakami’s literature has transformed its author into a *global* writer, on a *global* cultural-literary scene by creating characters (homodiegetic and heterodiegetic) as embodiments of human subjects who move through stages of transformation from detachment to engagement, in order to meet – psychologically, socially and culturally – the “other,” with complete honesty, in the search for their own freedom.

The same “adventure” of the self can also be found in the novel *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi* (*Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of pilgrimage*), published by Haruki Murakami in 2013 – two years after the devastating 2011 Tōhoku earthquake of 11 March 2011 (followed by a massive tsunami that caused severe damage to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant), a cataclysm that has been recorded in the memory of this century as “3.11” (an abbreviation of the date March 11th). Whether or not it was indeed the writer’s response to the “3.11” event, the reference to the triple natural and human disaster is not explicit in the novel. However, given that this was Haruki Murakami’s first publication after the catastrophe, and that it centres on themes of trauma and recovery, the narrative may resonate with the unprecedented experience of the Japanese archipelago. Moreover, the name of the protagonist, Tsukuru Tazaki, may be read allegorically: the family name Tazaki may allude to the coastline of the Tohoku region, which had been most affected by the tsunami, while the given name Tsukuru (“to create,” “to build”) could be interpreted as an imperative of the post-disaster moment, or as aligning with the slogan of a group of artists from that period: “Tsukuru koto ga ikiru koto” (“To create is to live”).² In the year of its publication, the novel was at the top of Japan’s bestseller list, having sold 985,000 copies. In the year that followed, it also ranked among the leading translated literary works listed by *The New York Times*.³

The protagonist, Tsukuru Tazaki, is an employee of a railway company in Tokyo, tasked to design station layouts, so that the overwhelming flow of people can be directed efficiently and safely. Tsukuru is not required to consider each passenger’s commute schedule, nor is he concerned with whether or not they manage to spend their time usefully or pleasantly on the overcrowded train, listening to language lessons on their iPods, reading *manga* comics, or listening to Brahms symphonies. As an engineer, he is expected to deliver only “efficiency,” based on precise calculations, and, therefore, he himself does not claim to be a profound thinker or a sociologist: “The protocol for operating a railway station was pretty much the same throughout the world, the whole operation reliant on precise, skillful professionalism. This aroused a natural response in him, a sure sense that he was in the right place.”⁴

¹ See Tomoki Wakatsuki, *The Haruki Phenomenon. Haruki Murakami as Cosmopolitan Writer* (Singapore: Springer, 2020).

² See Jonathan Dil, *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy. Stories from the Second Basement* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 177.

³ See Wakatsuki, *The Haruki Phenomenon*, 22.

⁴ Haruki Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, trans. Philip Gabriel (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2015), 298.

Although his name was officially written using logograms, Tsukuru signed it phonetically, in the *hiragana* syllabary: 「多崎つくる」. His given name had been chosen by his father, before he was born, although he never told anyone the reason for this preference. In Japanese, the name “Tsukuru” can be written using two⁵ logographic characters: 「創る」 or 「作る」 and it would appear that his father hesitated for a long time over which one to choose. Although his mother had recommended using the first *kanji* character, due to the fact that its additional connotation is “to create,” his father ultimately opted for the second, preferring its more austere form. Tsukuru learned these details from his mother, after his father’s funeral:

“After his father’s funeral, Tsukuru’s mother recalled the discussion that had taken place when her husband had chosen the name. ‘Your father felt that giving you the character for ‘create’ would be a burden to you,’ she told Tsukuru. ‘The simpler character was also read as ‘Tsukuru,’ and he thought it was a more easygoing, comfortable sort of name.’”⁶

Although he had never felt close to his father, Tsukuru shared his view on the fact that the chosen character suited him, since he could indeed find no trace of originality within himself – although he was unsure whether life’s burdens had actually been lighter due to the form of the character. His mother and sisters called him Saku, an alternative reading of the logographic character in his name, as it was shorter.

At the age of thirty-six, at the beginning of the novel, Tsukuru recalls, in front of his newly acquainted girlfriend Sara Kimoto, memories of his school years. In a small bar in Ebisu (Tokyo), he recounts the story of his adolescence: during his high school years in Nagoya, he had been a member of a close-knit group of five friends – two girls and three boys – who, through a “happy, yet entirely accidental chemical fusion” met during a volunteer program they all attended and formed “a beautiful community.”

Far from being accidental, the number “five” becomes, in the narrative, the vehicle for a hidden mystery, whose symbolism is rooted in the sum of the first even number and the first odd number: 2 (girls) + 3 (boys). As a sign of “union,” five seems to be the centre of harmony and balance, facilitating the hierogamy – the marriage between the terrestrial (2) and the celestial (3) principles. However, the number “five” can also be found in the pentagonal harmony of the Pythagoreans (which left its mark in the five-pointed star, or the five-petaled flower of Gothic architecture), the pentagram thus becoming the emblem of the microcosm and the androgyne, within which the human figure, with arms and legs outstretched, can be inscribed through its five extremities (head, legs and arms). Yet, the same pentagram also lies at the origin of the Chinese logogram 「人」, representing the human being,⁷ a character that is also present in the Japanese

⁵ In addition to the two logographic characters invoked by the author in the text, the Japanese language also uses another logogram with the same reading: 「造る」. While 「作る」 is used for constructing certain objects on a smaller scale, 「造る」 is used for making larger-scale objects (ships, buildings, parks, vehicles etc.).

⁶ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 53.

⁷ See Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres*, Édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Robert Lafont/ Jupiter, 1982), 258.

writing. Thus, as an expression of the human being in terms of biological and spiritual evolution, the number “five” represents the five senses and the five sensible forms of matter, or the whole of the sensory world.⁸

The ancient Chinese masters made sure that, under heaven, universal laws were five in numbers: five colours of the rainbow (black, red, yellow, blue-green, and white), five tastes, five tones, five metals, five viscera, five planets, five directions (east, south, centre, west, and north), five regions of space, and five senses. However, the Esoteric Shingon sect (真言宗、 “The True Word School”)⁹ of Japanese Buddhism outlines five directions (four cardinal points and a centre), five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, void), five colours, five mantra syllables, and five qualities of knowledge and wisdom possessed by the supreme Buddha, which the Shingon practitioner seeks to acquire progressively in order to attain enlightenment. In other words, in the Far Eastern worldview, “five” appears as the number for totality, or for “integrated perfection.”¹⁰

The same circle of perfect friendship seems to also emerge from the bond among the five adolescents who had been inseparable in high school, and whose harmony may be likened to the human hand, whose flawless functioning depends on its five fingers – as a stationmaster notes during a conversation with Tsukuru about the genetic anomaly of six-fingered people (polydactyly): “For what the hand has to do, five fingers are all that are necessary, and the most efficient number.”¹¹ The five high school students understood and accepted one another, as each was deeply content to be a constituent part of the group. However, as they each grew and matures at different paces, naturally drifting in different directions over time, their ultimate separation became inevitable. Thus, Tsukuru, having left for Tokyo to pursue his university studies, finds himself abruptly excluded from this ideal group during his second year, with no explanation from his friends – an explanation that he, in turn, does not dare to demand. He experiences this exclusion as an acute trauma and he spends the following five (!) months in a hermit-like isolation, thinking either about death or about nothing at all: “It was as if he were sleepwalking through life, as if he had already died but not yet noticed it.”¹² When the seclusion becomes unbearable, he wanders aimlessly through the streets or stops on a bench in a railway station to watch the trains coming and going. Yet, although during these months of alienation and absolute solitude, taking his own life seems the most natural course of action, Tsukuru ultimately does not act on his desire for self-annihilation, a feeling that gradually and seamlessly transforms into an abstract thought

⁸ See *ibid.*, 254-258.

⁹ The Shingon School was founded in 896 by the Japanese monk Kūkai (774-835), posthumously known as Kobo-Daishi, who brought the Zhēnyán doctrines from China to Japan. According to this Esoteric Buddhist sect, all beings are inherently enlightened, and the attainment of enlightenment (or the grasping of the mysteries of life and death) can be achieved through the practice of the three mysteries: *mudra* (ritual hand gestures), *mantra* (the recitation of words or magic formulas), and *mandala* (graphic visual representations of the universe and the deities).

¹⁰ See Chevalier, Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 255.

¹¹ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 183.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

on death: “Perhaps he didn’t commit suicide then because he couldn’t conceive of a method that fit the pure and intense feelings he had toward death.”¹³

Without understanding the inner reason that had led him to suddenly abandon his suicidal thoughts and those of a fatal outcome, Tsukuru returns to life just as abruptly as he had plunged into his desire for... death, but as a changed and unrecognisable person – both inside and out. The prolonged desire for his own disappearance over the course of five months gives additional nuance to the symbolism of the number itself: “five” can be read not only as the sum of 4 and 1, an association that suggests severe failure, but also as the number of the “centre” and that of the “heart” in ancient Chinese thought:¹⁴

“The feeling of the wind, the sound of rushing water, the sense of sunlight breaking through the clouds, the colors of flowers as the seasons changed – everything around him felt changed, as if they had all been recast. The person here now, the one he saw in the mirror, might at first glance resemble Tsukuru Tazaki, but it wasn’t actually him. It was merely a container that, for the sake of convenience, was labeled with the same name – but its contents had been replaced (*emphasis added*). He was called by that name simply because there was, for the time being, no other name to call him.”¹⁵

Abandoned by his friends at the age of twenty and still deprived of the “perfect communion” ideal, as a source of warmth emanating from the “lucky but entirely accidental chemical fusion,”¹⁶ the protagonist enters a sixteen-year period marked by the routine of habit. But after meeting Sara, an employee of a travel agency, and urged by her insistence to free himself from this “ghostly shadow” haunting his life, Tsukuru Tazaki manages to break away from his banal existence and embarks on a search for explanations and answers regarding his exclusion from the group. Somewhat hesitantly and with considerable reluctance, he sets out on a journey that gradually turns into a pilgrimage, in order to reconnect with three of his former friends. Like assembling puzzle pieces, Tsukuru reconstructs the history of their friendship and contacts them one by one, each profile taking shape through various direct and indirect sources of information and commentary.

Unlike his own name, each of Tsukuru’s high school friends bears a name that contains – and that can be associated with – a colour: Akamatsu (red pine), Ōmi (blue sea), Shirane (white

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ See Chevalier, Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 254-257.

¹⁵ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 40. Original text: 「体型も顔つきも一変し、世界を見る目も変わった。吹く風の感触や、流れる水音や、雲間から差す光の気配や、季節の花の色合いも以前とは違ったものとして感じられる。あるいはまったく新規にこしらえられたものように思える。ここにいるのは、こうして鏡に映っているのは、一見して多崎つくるのようではあるが、実際はそうじゃない。それは中身を入れ替えられた (*emphasis added*)、多崎つくと便器的に呼ばれている入れ物に過ぎない。彼がまだその名で呼ばれているのは、とりあえずほかに呼びようもないからだ。」

Haruki Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2013), 45.

¹⁶ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 7.

root) and Kurono (black field). Consequently, the adolescents addressed one another by the nicknames Aka (Red), Ao (Blue), Shiro (White) and Kuro (Black). Since no colour appears in Tsukuru Tazaki's name, his nickname became "colourless Tsukuru." Perhaps influenced by this nickname, Tsukuru considered himself a "dull" and insignificant person, both in his own eyes and in the eyes of others:

"There must be something in him, something fundamental, that disenchanting people. 'Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki,' he said aloud. I basically have nothing to offer to others. If you think about it, I don't even have anything to offer myself."¹⁷

Alongside the aforementioned four "colours" (blue, red, white, and black), another "colour" invoked in the novel is "grey," during the meeting between student Tsukuru and a university colleague named Fumiaki Haida • 灰田文紹 (grey field), or Mister Gray, a thinker of abstract matters, who prefers to reflect "freely and purely" – without ever having actually created anything concrete, as opposed to Tsukuru, who, in accordance with his name, enjoyed building and giving form to things. But through Haida, Tsukuru learns the story of Haida's father about a pianist named Midorikawa, an acquaintance from his youth. Thus, "green" also enters the chromatic scene, present in the name Midorikawa • 緑川 (green river), for whom the world contains both "beautiful" and "ugly" colours, some of which are "joyful," while others are "gloomy." Moreover, Midorikawa possesses the ability to see the colours of people, which, in some, shine intensely, while in others, they barely flicker:

"Each individual has their own unique color, which shines faintly around the contours of their body (emphasis added). Like a halo. Or a backlight."¹⁸

Although it seemed that "grey" and "green" had entered Tsukuru's life as new colours that promised new possibilities, Haida, too, disappeared unexpectedly, with no word or warning, much like the high school friends who had rejected him with no explanation. If at that time, in his youth, he painfully understood the importance of friendship and "how much colour" it had brought into his life, now, in adulthood, Tsukuru comes to realize, through recollection, that they were all actually enclosed within the perfection of a captive circle – a captivity that was, in all fairness, accepted willingly and by no means regretted.

Using modern technology to locate them, Akamatsu Kei • 赤松慶, Ōmi Yoshio • 青海悦夫, Shirane Yuzuki • 白根柚木 and Kurono Eri • 黒埜恵理 are the names that appear on Tsukuru's computer screen in his first search for his childhood friends. By simply seeing their names, he feels enveloped by a past that begins to blend with the present, like an odourless and colourless

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 77. Original text: 「人間は一人ひとり自分の色というものを持っていて (emphasis added)、そいつが体の輪郭に沿ってほんのり光って浮かんでいるんだよ。後光みたいに。あるいはバックライトみたいだ。俺の目にはその色がはっきり見える。」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 87.

“smoke” that “seeps” through the crack of the door into an inner space. With Sara’s help and through online means, Tsukuru discovers that Blue works as a Lexus car salesman in Nagoya and, despite his young age, he is the head of sales; Red owns a company named BEYOND, that is a mixture between a self-help seminar and a business training centre; Black is married to a Finnish man, with whom she has a family in Helsinki; and White had died at the age of thirty, according to the newspaper articles that reported her death six years earlier. These findings reinforce Tsukuru’s motivation to undertake the journey-pilgrimage: on the one hand, his belated desire to receive an explanation for his exclusion from the group and, on the other hand, his need to uncover the circumstances surrounding White’s death.

The reunion with Blue offers Tsukuru partial answers: White had accused Tsukuru of rape shortly after his departure to Tokyo, and was later found dead. Yet why White had brought such an accusation against Tsukuru, and who killed her, remain unanswered question until the end of the novel. Although the other friends were initially sceptical toward White’s accusation, given that their “colourless” friend had never been the type to impose his will upon others, her insistence on his hypocrisy and duplicity gradually transformed their doubt into a tacit acknowledgement of his guilt. White had then moved to Yokohama, where she lived alone and gave piano lessons to children. However, after enrolling in the conservatory, as she was diligent and introverted, she became increasingly more difficult and withdrawn, likely under the growing pressure that, no matter how much she practiced, she would never reach the level she aspired to. Strangled by an unknown assailant, she was found only three days later, on her kitchen floor. Gradually, the remaining members of the friend group lost contact with one another, so that only Blue and Red attended White’s funeral, since Tsukuru had not been notified and Black had already left for Finland.

The meeting with Red adds further nuances to the details surrounding White that Tsukuru had received from Blue: passing through the area, Red had met White a few months before her death, but it seemed to him that the young woman had lost her former charm and radiance:

“Seeing Shiro like that was very painful. It hurt to see that she no longer had that burning *something* she used to have. That what had been remarkable about her had vanished. That the special *something* would no longer be able to move me the way it used to (...) My point is that she’d lost the glow she used to have, her vitality (*emphasis added*).”¹⁹

Although, at first, even considering the possibility of a psychological disorder, Tsukuru could not understand how White could have fabricated the story that she had gone to Tokyo to see him and, on the night she stayed at his place, he had drugged and raped her, his reunion with

¹⁹ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 171. Original text: 「そんなシロを目の前にしているのは、正直なところ、おれにとってはけっこうきつい体験だった。昔はそこにあったはずの熱い何かは今ではもう見当たらないということが。そういう非凡なものが、行き場を持たないまま消えてなくなってしまったことが。それがもうおれの心を震わせてくれないことが。[...] 大事なのはシロはそのとき既に、生命力がもたらず自然な輝きを失っていたということだ (*emphasis added*).」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 200-201.

Black in Finland allows him to accept past events as a path of suffering necessary to rediscover his inner harmony, allowing him to forgive White:

“And in that moment, he was finally able to accept it all. In the deepest recesses of his soul, Tsukuru Tazaki understood. One heart is not connected to another through harmony alone. They are, instead, linked deeply through their wounds. Pain linked to pain, fragility to fragility. There is no silence without a cry of grief, no forgiveness without bloodshed, no acceptance without a passage through acute loss. That is what lies at the root of true harmony.”²⁰

After the meeting with the three friends from his adolescent years, Tsukuru comes to understand that White, who had been the most sensitive among them, had foreseen the inevitable separation. Anticipating the inevitable breakup, she had been incapable of facing the threat that would compel her to accept the permanent loss of her own identity within this dissolution. Because she had not had the strength to leave the group on her own, she had turned Tsukuru into a “scapegoat.” Acting under the impulse of her instincts, White had “climbed onto Tsukuru’s shoulders,” counting on the fact that he would be able to overcome the critical moment if he were to find himself in such a situation: Colourless Tsukuru seems to have emanated, only for White, *glimmers* and *flickers*²¹ of “calm” and “nonchalance.”

After the circle split up, Tsukuru manages to save himself, overcoming the critical moment and projecting himself into the future. This “road of recovery,”²² paved with various... colours, invites the reader to consider a possible psychoanalytic interpretation of the narrative, as proposed by Jonathan Dil (2023). Drawing on the *psychology of individuation* articulated by Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), according to which the neurotic disorders caused by the dissonance between “conscious” and “subconscious” can be overcome through the compensatory function of dreams,²³ the author convincingly demonstrates that the alchemical operation of *discovering the self* is, in Haruki Murakami’s fiction, the therapeutic trajectory that requires psychological references associated with an alchemical metamorphosis, beginning with the “special chemistry” shared by the five friends. In alchemy, in the process of transforming metal into gold, two major stages can be identified: *separation* and *reunification*, which can be repeated an infinite number of times. In the first stage, the metal is heated and reduced back to its raw state (*prima materia*), a

²⁰ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 261. Original text: 「そのとき彼はようやくすべてを受け入れることができた。魂のいちばん底の部分で多崎つくるは理解した。人の心と人の心は調和だけで結びついているのではない。それはむしろ傷と傷によって深く結びついているのだ(s.n.)。痛みと痛みによって、脆さと脆さによって繋がっているのだ。悲痛な叫びを含まない静けさはなく、血を地面に流さない赦しはなく、痛切な喪失を通り抜けない受容はない。それが真の調和の根底にあるものなのだ。」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 307.

²¹ See Carl Gustav Jung, *Puterea sufletului. Antologie*, Vol. IV, trans. Suzana Holan (Bucharest: Anima, 1994), 52. In alchemical terms, Jung defines the image of *scintillae* (glimmers) as a visual illusion arising within the “transforming substance.”

²² Dil, *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy*, 180.

²³ See Jung, *Puterea sufletului. Antologie*, Vol. I, 112-115.

process called blackening (*nigredo*). In psychological terms, this stage of blackness can be associated with the metaphor of depression and death. It is the dark night of the soul that Tsukuru had experienced for twenty years, through his unexpected exclusion from his friend group, which, in his dialogue with Black, he likens to having been thrown – or having thrown himself – off a ship into the sea, during the night. In fact, the group harmony and, along with it, its “chemistry” had already fractured with Tsukuru’s departure to Tokyo. For Tsukuru, after the dissolution of the perfect circle, this first stage in the alchemical process of rediscovering the self corresponds to the months during which he obsessively thought about death. However, the dark period he entered as a result of his sudden and unexpected expulsion from the group ends with a “decapitation,” as suggested by the dream of the woman who could separate her body from her heart; since the process of becoming conscious²⁴ is one of the most important therapeutic factors through which the ego discovers the self, Tsukuru is pulled out of the overwhelming suicidal state and withdrawal from the world and is set on a path towards (psycho)analysis, self-understanding, and, ultimately, recovery.

Subsequently, in alchemy, the black obtained through separation gradually turns into colour: from white (silver), through yellow, to red (gold), the final stage of reunification, assimilated to the blood that animates individual life or, ultimately, to the self.²⁵ For Jung, the psychotherapeutic process resembles the alchemical transformation of metal through different chromatic stages – under the heat of fire, assimilated to passion or libido –, similar to an external representation of the power of individual metamorphosis. Moreover, since the alchemic fire must be controlled through empty vessels, which separate the substances and the colours, Tsukuru’s role in the friend group can also be interpreted alchemically:²⁶ that of maintaining the group’s harmony. It is therefore not accidental that the protagonist himself describes his self as “an empty vessel!”

“Maybe I *am* just an empty, futile person, he thought. But it was precisely because there was nothing inside of me that these people could find, even if for a short time, a place where they belonged (...). If that were true, then maybe he should be happy he was hollow (*emphasis added*).”²⁷

Moreover, Tsukuru’s very name can, in its turn, be associated with the alchemic process itself, since “tsukuru” (as a common word) means “to make, to build”, although not in an elevated sense, but in a concrete, practical one: to make something with one’s own hands. Tsukuru acknowledges the power of his name; it is, in fact, what would help him recover after being excluded from the circle of perfection fractured by White (Shiro), when the circumstances are described by Blue, analysed by Red, and given meaning by Black (Kuro). Thus, Tsukuru’s pilgrimage

²⁴ See Jung, *Puterea sufletului. Antologie*, Vol. IV, 47.

²⁵ See Dill, *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy*, 186.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 180-181.

²⁷ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 209. Original text: 「おれは内容のない空しい人間かもしれない、とつくるは思う。しかしこうして中身を欠いていればこそ、たとえ一時的であれ、そこに居場所を見いだしてくれた人々もいたのだ。[...] とすれば、つくるは自分が空虚であることをむしろ喜ぶべきなのかもしれない(*emphasis added*)。」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 245.

becomes another “representation”²⁸ of the *desire for individuation*. The four “colourful” friends denote competing elements, but, by understanding them, Tsukuru – as “an empty vessel” – is able to transform them into something that transcends their individual components. This is undoubtedly a difficult alchemical process, which led to his exclusion. However, it turned his gaze inwards, in order to understand his own purpose. By using the symbols of his own language as decryption keys for hidden meanings, given that he discerns the tragedy of the soul’s permanent change and the destiny of creation,²⁹ the alchemical process ultimately implies operations that can be reduced to the well-known formula *solve et coagula*, or *dissolve and integrate*, easily applicable both to the evolution of the objective world and to that of the subjective one – namely, to the individual set on the path towards perfection and self-knowledge.

Interpreting Haruki Murakami’s novel through the presence of the invoked colours, as a graphic-pictorial composition with its own inner life – one that secretly contains a spiritual universe of emotions and experiences –, the text may also be analysed as a poetic-narrative strategy whose internal structuring reveals an intersection of binary conceptual pairs that both highlight and complement one another. If we accept the premise that thought operates through a finite number of key concepts that can be enumerated and explained, and that they are, in fact, paired concepts, each concept having a “counterpart”³⁰ that is neither better nor worse in relation to itself,³¹ the first pairs identifiable in the text are, naturally, of a chromatic-symbolic nature: *colour-colourless* (Blue and Red – Tsukuru), *colour-noncolour* (Blue and Red – White and Black), and *noncolour-colourless* (White and Black – Tsukuru).

In the poem *Voyelles* (1883), which opens with the verse “*A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles, [...]*”³² Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) assigns a colour to each vowel in the language. The French poet’s poem – probably his most well-known and one that has incited to numerous interpretations – gives rise not only to a *colourful alphabet* and *hearing sense*, but also posits a creator who reflects on the possible maximal exploitation of the word. As a sign or an object that does not fix meaning, but instead offers the richness of multiple images, the word, or the essential element to which it can be reduced – for instance, several vowels – can generate intuitive, personal images, transformed into the subject’s own “illumination.” Much more important than associating “A” with “black” is for the reader to accept “A” as an “object” that can be *played* with, or as a “sign” to which various values (colours) can be *assigned*, as in a kind of algebra of language.

²⁸ See Dill, *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy*, 182.

²⁹ Chevalier, Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 22.

³⁰ Colours can also be interpreted as opposing dual pairs. Thus, physics recognises four “primary” colours: blue, green, yellow, and red, in which the pairs blue-yellow and red-green are “opposed” within an “opponent processing” system – see Robert Finlay, “Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Color in World History,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 18, No.4 (2007): 383-431 – that generates all the colours perceived by the human eye, thus forming the rainbow.

³¹ See Michel Tournier, *Oglinda ideilor. Tratat*, rev. and expanded ed., trans. Rodica Baconsky and Alina Pelea (Bucharest: Univers, 2024), 7-10.

³² Arthur Rimbaud, *Poésies. Une saison en enfer. Illuminations*, pref. René Char, ed. Louis Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 78.

If, for Rimbaud, “plural” reading is suggested through an approach to sounds from a semiotic-cultural perspective, for Haruki Murakami it appears to rely primarily on the semiotics and poetics of colour, with chromatics becoming the very instrument that carries literal meaning. The novelist uses the word as a “form” and converts it into “colour” in order to shape the inner life of a “colourless” protagonist and of the other “coloured” characters with whom the protagonist interacts. Recognising the power of colour to exert special effects on the human spirit, the novel’s space is transformed into a graphic-pictorial composition that draws on the characteristics of light and colour as physical-chemical and philosophical-cultural phenomena. Moreover, as in a field of forces centred on the concept of the “train station” – Tsukuru’s “adoptive” space –, the colour-word establishes, within the literary text, an essential connection of temporal and spatial relations defines by the “chronotope,”³³ the colour itself seeming to constitute its own dimension.³⁴ The invisible support structuring the surface of the tableau made out of words, arranged in secret discursive relations with the elements of various chromatic images, transforms the reader into a viewer whose spiritual eye attempts to decipher the “plural reading” proposed by the author in the narrative text, identifying its binary conceptual composition in which the selection of the centrifugal “warm” or centripetal “cold” colour³⁵ receives a particular motivation in the pursuit of chromatic harmony, subtly but profoundly associated with the musical impression.

Entering a dialogue across time with the “novel of formation”³⁶ and particularly with the “apprenticeship novels” proposed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) and *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (1821) – as is unequivocally suggested by the title of the Japanese novel: *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* –, the Japanese writer’s narrative contains the same theme of the imperfect and uncertain human becoming, struggling in its own way to conquer individual and social harmony – without making the idea of trying and becoming mutually exclusive. In his effort to offer colourless Tsukuru his own aura, the narrator seems to subtly draw on the scientific and philosophical-cultural developments related to the definition of colour.³⁷

³³ See Mihail Bahtin, *Probleme de literatură și estetică*, trans. Nicolae Iliescu (Bucharest: Univers, 1982), 294.

³⁴ In the physical universe, colour is considered to be the fifth dimension – see Finlay, “Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Color in World History,” 393 –, alongside the spatial tridimensionality and the fourth dimension, namely time.

³⁵ See Wassily Kandinsky, *Spiritualul în artă*, trans. Amelia Pavel (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1994), 72.

³⁶ See Bahtin, *Probleme de literatură și estetică*, 259.

³⁷ In the course of evolution, the transition from nocturnal to diurnal existence enabled humans to perceive a wide range of colours, the intense coloration of the natural environment being due to luminosity. The development of sight in the human brain reorganised the hierarchy of the newly developed abilities resulted from the increasingly more intense use of sight: depth perception, direct frontal vision, precise hand coordination, perceptual scanning for predators, recognition of objects at a distance, the formation of mental maps for the surrounding environment, behavioural responses in accordance with set goals, and the identification of the edible resources, relying on their colour. This change thus contributed to the enlargement of the brain, to the development of symbolic thought, and to the complex visual processing ability. See Finlay, “Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Color in World History,” 391-392.

Colour does not actually exist in reality. The physical experiments conducted by Isaac Newton (1643-1727) have shown that sunlight consists of a mixture of rays with multiple wavelengths (or different colours), which he termed the “spectrum” (from the Latin *specere*, “to look at”) in order to describe the image of the rainbow in seven colours. By transferring the theory of colour from the sphere of philosophy and painting into that of mathematics and optics, the physicist showed that colour is actually not an inherent property of an object, as it had been believed since Aristotle (384-322 BC), but rather an illusion arising from the human visual system’s response to light.³⁸ Advancing this research further, scientists Thomas Young (1773-1829), Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) and James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) later elaborated the trichromatic theory, linking colour perception to the physiology of the retina and to electromagnetic radiation.³⁹ Mathematics thus prove that light interacts with certain structures in the retina in order to give rise to the sense of sight. Thus, with respect to the colour *vision*, the electromagnetic vibrations (insofar as they reach the human retina) increase in frequency from blue to red, in a fairly narrow range, in which the human eye can distinguish approximately ten million variations.⁴⁰ By studying both colour perception and the division of light by the prism, Maxwell also tried to reconcile the three existing lines of inquiry in colour theory: those of the optician, the physiologist and the artist – whose independent results, although all valid, contradicted one another. The same attempt to reunify multiple perspectives on understanding colour to different extents of knowledge (scientific, psychological and philosophical-cultural) seems to emerge from Haruki Murakami’s novel as well, on the deeper level of the construction of the narrative textual meaning.

If light becomes an abstract concept in the mathematical framework of the theory of relativity, in the universe, colour is the “reality of living beings,” created by the human mind as it interprets the surrounding vibrations, through which the world takes shape. As a constituent part of the sense of sight, colour is connected to the neocortex. However, as physiological phenomenon, it is highly subjective, as it is linked to the emotional matrix of the limbic system. When the wavelengths corresponding to red reach the brain, they trigger the emotions associated with red: a colour typically associated with fire, fury, desire, danger, and blood. In other words, the human being reacts to the colour more on the basis of a subliminal emotion, rather than based on a rational analysis, which could explain the attraction to certain colours (chronophilia) or the hostility towards other colours (chromophobia).⁴¹ The fact that the colour phenomenon is both in a physical relationship with vibrations and energy emission and a physiological link to the human mind (colour being a human “invention,” much like sound and smell) is undoubtedly demonstrated by the nicknames of the characters in the narrative text under scrutiny and by the manner in which they interact.

³⁸ See *ibid.*, 384.

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 388.

⁴⁰ See Victoria Finlay, *Culorile: o istorie culturală*, trans. Claudia Popa (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2025), 13.

⁴¹ See R. Finlay, “Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Color in World History,” 394.

Just like a prism reveals the existence of multiple wavelengths called “colours,” Haruki Murakami’s novel also reveals, through the absence of colour, a spectrum of personalities. The nicknames Blue and Red no longer seem arbitrary, given that the human eye perceives colour change progressively,⁴² from blue (400-490nm) to red (610-700nm). Accepting that something is not “coloured,” but rather “produces” colour,⁴³ all “colours” invoked in the novel acquire the valence of carriers of a “spiritual impression.”⁴⁴ When set in motion, colour induces an almost physical sensation, which can trigger a chain of psychological reactions: red attracts and stimulates, while blue deepens calm. Thus, the character Red in the novel is a famous entrepreneur, pampered by the media, but in whom Tsukuru, upon their reunion, sees a form of calculated revenge against society, describing him as an “elitist” who assumes an *outcast* tendency. If Red’s psychological and social profile covers the broad spectrum of the ambivalent symbolism of red – the colour of blood and fire,⁴⁵ that both fascinates and repels, through its obvious dangerous side –, Blue’s portrait highlights the association of his name with calm and tranquillity, with integrity and loyalty.⁴⁶ By no means as a coincidence, after sixteen years, when Tsukuru decides to seek out his former friends, the first one he looks for is Blue, the captain of the rugby team in his student years, now a Toyota Lexus car salesman – the sensitive young man who openly confesses to Tsukuru both the sorrow caused by White’s death (he had been unable to hold back his tears at her funeral) and his suspicion regarding the ethical integrity of Red’s activities. Although “red” and “blue” are colours that do not physically blend, the juxtaposition of the two names (Red and Blue) creates an “intensely active harmony” within the content of the narrative’s discursive-pictorial composition precisely through the strong spiritual contrast between them, resulting from their collision and their competition for dominance.

However, the chromatic palette of Haruki Murakami’s narrative is further complemented by two “noncolours,” associated with the girls’ names: White and Black. In a novel written by a

⁴² See *ibid.*, 388.

⁴³ See V. Finlay, 14.

⁴⁴ Kandinsky, *Spiritualul în artă*, 37.

⁴⁵ See Chevalier, Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 831.

⁴⁶ The reflection on the symbolism of colours in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* can also be found in the work of the Japanese writer Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), the “titan” of modern Japanese literature, in the novel *Sorekara* • 『それから』 (*And Then*, 1909). In the aforementioned narrative text, the protagonist is Daisuke Nagai, a *dandy* of the Meiji Era (1868-1912), a man who distanced himself from the Confucian values of the traditional Japanese mentality and who was drawn to the Western modernism. Following the psychological orbit articulated by the Italian writer Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938), a representative of Italian decadence and later an advocate of futurism, Daisuke decorated his house half in red and half in blue, adhering to the Italian writer’s claim that these two colours were the only ones capable of representing the two fundamental states of the soul during one’s lifetime. Therefore, in Daisuke’s home, the rooms that required a certain degree of exaltation, such as the music room or the library, were painted in red, while those dedicated to rest of sleep, which demanded the spirit be calm, were painted in shades of blue. Thus, it appeared that the young Japanese poet had satisfied his spiritual curiosity by drawing on an Italian psychologist’s explanations.

Japanese author, white and black seem to draw on the tradition of monochrome pictorial (*sumie*) and calligraphic (*shodō*) art, in which the meaning of the artistic composition emerges from the dialogue between white space and black ink. Initially, colour justifies White's name as a member of the "perfect circle" during the high school years: the purity and innocence of a radiant white, which transforms the adolescent into the very embodiment of spirituality when she plays Franz Liszt's *Le mal du Pays* on the piano. However, after the group's dissolution, the initial pure white is replaced by a white that follows black – in alchemy, the process of *nigredo* (*blackening*) is followed by the *albedo* (*whitening*)⁴⁷ –, associated with depression and melancholy. The "sensation" of colour as freshness and vitality gives way to the bitter "taste" of colour,⁴⁸ and only Black continues, for a while, to care for White; ultimately, she also gives up out of exhaustion, seemingly hastening her friend's violent death. Red had met with White before her death, and he confesses to Tsukuru the shocking surprise of he felt at her physical and spiritual transformation: White had lost her "glow." A possible marker of the "silence of stillness,"⁴⁹ white as a noncolour became the symbol of a universe from which all colours, as attributes, qualities and material substances, disappeared. Perhaps that is precisely why, when Tsukuru's pilgrimage approaches its end in Finland, against the background of an awareness of suffering, Black insists that Tsukuru abandon the use of colour-based nicknames and return to their real names. Thus, White becomes Yuzu again – her name resonating with the yellow (sometimes green) fruit that is very popular in the Japanese archipelago –, while Black returns to Eri.

White and black are the noncolours with a special status, both physically and artistically, in relation to the rest of the chromatic spectrum. The designation-nickname "noncolours" (or "achromatic colours") relies on the way in which light interacts with the objects and how the human retina processes this interaction. Lacking a wavelength of its own, white physically represents the totality of light, or the synthesis of all colours in the visible spectrum, given that it is "everything", while also neutralizing all colours. At the opposing end, black signifies the absorption or complete absence of light, thus physically being "nothing." In keeping with the strong duality of the colour-nickname from high school, Black seems to be a complex nature: it symbolises both elegance and power, both sorrow and mystery, as proven by her artistic work – ceramics consisting of thick objects, with slightly uneven edges, lacking an elegant, piercing beauty, but possessing a "strangely soothing" warmth, with delicate patterns, like leaves blown by the wind, which give the viewer the impression of either loneliness or vitality and colour – a refinement reminiscent of the traditional Japanese kimonos.

If white is used pictorially to increase the luminosity of a colour, black serves to reduce its intensity or to create shadows. Thus, the white and black non-colours are used solely to create values and tones, on a spectrum ranging from maximum brightness to complete darkness; given that neither of them constitutes a new chromatic shade, the white and black individual non-colours located at opposite ends, clearly distinguish themselves from the "pure" colours (i.e., primary and

⁴⁷ See Dil, *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy*, 185.

⁴⁸ See Kandinsky, *Spiritualul în artă*, 51.

⁴⁹ See *ibid.*, 80.

secondary). Nevertheless, they can reunite, since the combination of white and black physically results in the colour grey. Grey is a neutral, balanced colour, but one with a dual reputation – it is associated not only with intellect and intelligence, but also with monotony and a lack of colour in one’s life. In the novel, the mixture of white and black resides in the grey contained in the name of Tsukuru’s college friend Haida (meaning “grey field”), a younger university colleague – whom Tsukuru meets at the swimming pool – inclined towards philosophy and abstract ideas. Tsukuru’s reengagement with the world, after the five months of isolation, begins through the mental union (*unio mentalis*) between the two, the union between *logos* and *psyche*, as Haida teaches Tsukuru about another way of “doing”: that of imagining things through words. Through Haida, Tsukuru also learns the story of Haida’s father who, during his student years, in order to escape the political protests in Tokyo, had retreated to a hot springs resort where he met a pianist named Midorikawa (meaning “green river”). An intermediary between blue and yellow, green is part of the “secondary” colours that function as bridges between the primary ones. It is therefore no coincidence that Midorikawa claims to see people’s colours, as a kind of halos. He had received this gift when he accepted his own death and was supposed to pass it on to someone with the appropriate colour (Midorikawa believes Haida’s father to be the right person, although he assures him that he would not pass death itself on to him – thus, Haida’s father, much like young Tsukuru, also returns to the world). For Midokawa, who received the gift of seeing colour by accepting imminent death in return, colour represents the power of perception, intimately connected to the power of intuition, devoid of tangible external effects:

“There’s no logic or illogic in that scene. No good or evil. Everything is merged into one. And you are one part of that merging. You leave the boundary of your physical body behind to become a metaphysical being. You become intuition (*emphasis added*)”⁵⁰

In his *Theory of Colours* (1810), Goethe challenges Newton’s theory according to which colourless light contains all colours perceived through analysis. For Goethe, light is originally simple, while colour manifests itself not only as a property of light, but also as a subjective physiological and psychological phenomenon, perceived through the interaction between light and darkness.⁵¹ Convinced that the perception of colour is a human experience, rather than a purely physical one, Goethe regards colours as the product of the outside world’s aggression upon light. Colours are therefore produced by light passing through “turbid media”⁵² – such as the air, for instance – thus giving rise to the blue of the sky or the sea. In other words, for Goethe, the

⁵⁰ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 79. Original text: 「その情景には論理も非論理もない。善も悪もない。すべてがひとつに融合している。そして君自身もその融合の一部になる。君は肉体という枠を離れ、いわば形而上的存在になる。君は直観 (*emphasis added*) になる。」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 90.

⁵¹ See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Despre teoria culorilor: Partea didactică*, trans. Mihaela Zaharia (Bucharest: Editura Economică, 2005), 96-109.

⁵² See *ibid.*, 163.

seven colours represent the seven “sorrows of light,”⁵³ a vision that today finds its illustration in photographers’ unequivocal preference for black and white images, over colour photography. However, the black and white photograph actually combines a wide array of greys, from the lightest to the darkest shades. As a “palette of greys” that grants the image “subtlety” and “depth,” the grey image can depict reality in a “pure state”⁵⁴ that helps the viewer sense “the very substance of things.” As a true photographer who perceives the essence of grey, Haida-Mr. Gray tells Tsukuru that the “pure state” of abstract thought is similar to constructing a void, perceiving the very “substance of things” through intuition.

“The man gave it some thought. ‘I don’t really know. I don’t have any set, clear goal like you. I just want to think deeply about things. Contemplate ideas in a pure, free sort of way. That’s all. If you think about it, that’s kind of like constructing a vacuum.’”⁵⁵

Unlike the binary *colour-noncolour* pair, exemplified by Blue and Red, respectively White and Black, the other two chromatic symbolic pairs in the text, like *colour-colourless* (Blue and Red-Tsukuru), and *noncolour-colourless* (White and Black-Tsukuru), become activated only in the presence of colourless Tsukuru, recalling the host encountered in the heart of the mountains by the young pilgrim Wilhelm Meister, who draws the young man’s attention to the fact that, when something devoid of life is animated, it may in turn bestow life upon others.⁵⁶

Although the frequency range of electromagnetic waves in the universe, from the radio waves to ultrashort cosmic waves, is immense, the human eye can detect only a relatively small fraction of this vast spectrum, the lowest frequency of visible light being found in blue, and the highest in red light. Moreover, when the human eye perceives the entire range of visible light simultaneously, it interprets it as “white,” whereas, when certain wavelengths are absent from the electromagnetic spectrum, the eye perceives the light as “colourful.” Yet, light itself, as a source of colour, never ceases or slows down. Thus, James Clerk Maxwell suggests⁵⁷ that the human eye only sees colour, and not light itself – light being invisible both to the eye and to instruments. If, in the narrative under scrutiny, the nicknames Blue and Red borne by Tsukuru’s childhood friends refer to the colours located at the extremes of the visible chromatic spectrum of light, while the nicknames White and Black evoke non-colours, lacking a wavelength of their own, represent either the totality of light (and, therefore, of colours), or, at the opposite extreme, the complete absence of light (and, therefore, of colours), then colourless Tsukuru seems to possess, in alchemical-physical terms, the *glittering spark of the soul*,⁵⁸ arising from the innate natural light of the human being in search for perfection:

⁵³ See Tournier, *Oglinda ideilor*, 127.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, 126-127.

⁵⁵ See Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 45.

⁵⁶ See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Opere 7. Proză. Anii de drumetie ai lui Wilhelm Meister*, trans. Valeria Sadoveanu (Bucharest: Univers, 1988), 8.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Finlay, “Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Color in World History,” 393.

⁵⁸ See C. G. Jung, *Simboluri onirice ale procesului de individualizare*, IV, transl. Carmen Oniți (Bucharest: Teora,

“There was a new light (*emphasis added*) in his eyes, a glint he’d never seen before, a lonely, isolated light with limited range.”⁵⁹

The glittering spark constitutes the spiritual and social DNA of a “colourless” individual, emphasising the metamorphosis through which the quality of being “colourless” comes to be perceived as... blinding – Goethe actually noted, in his *Theory of Colours*,⁶⁰ that a blinding image is devoid of colour. Conversely, if we interpret colour not merely as an attribute of the characters or as a quality that confers its bearer different characteristics, but also as a symbol within the Japanese imaginary that recovers the fundamental elements of the cosmology of the Japanese esoteric Buddhist Shingon sect (one of the major Japanese schools): blue – the aquatic element, red – fire, white – wind (or air, in the Western imagination), and black – the telluric element – all of these colours becoming the pseudonyms of four friends within the group of five –, the protagonist’s “colourlessness” seems to be identifiable with the fifth element, namely the *void*. The treatise *Go rin no sho* • 五輪書 or the *Book of Five Rings*, written by the legendary Japanese samurai sword master Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645), presents *the way of the sword strategy* (*hyōhō*) through five rings, corresponding to the primordial elements composing the entire universe (both matter and mind): earth (*chi* • 土), water (*sui* • 水), fire (*ka* • 火), wind (*fu* • 風) and void (*ku* • 空). For Miyamoto Musashi, earth implies knowledge from the level of the details to that of the whole, from surface to depth, water becomes the counterpart of pure spirit, fire is associated with immediate action, wind evokes the understanding of oneself and of others, and the spirit of the void – creative and infinitely potential – represents everything that is not, existing where nothing is. Thus, Tsukuru, as unequivocally suggested by the novel’s original title, *Shikisai o motanai* (*emphasis added*) *Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi* (色彩を持たない多崎つくると、彼の巡礼の年) – which literally translates to *Tsukuru Tazaki who has no colour* (*emphasis added*) and his years of pilgrimage –, precisely because he does not possess a “colour,” he is able to follow *the path of the true spirit*. Therefore, he obtains the knowledge of what does not exist,⁶¹ conceiving the void as a *path* and considering the *path* to be a void, Tsukuru rediscovers the *glimmer* of his own spirit.

If, for Plato (420 BC – 340 BC), colour is a “flame”⁶² that emanates from every type of body – with particles proportioned to the visual ray, in a way that produces sensations –, for physicists, the perception of colour, a cardinal dimension of reality, is founded on the radical subjectivity of the visual illusion, which makes the experience of colour difficult to frame within a rational

1996), 52-55.

⁵⁹ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 44. Original text: 「その目には新しい光 (*emphasis added*) が浮かんでいた。彼自身にも見覚えのない光だった。孤独で行き場を持たない、限定された場所で完結することを求められている光だ。」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 50.

⁶⁰ See Goethe, *Despre teoria culorilor*, 110.

⁶¹ See Miyamoto Musashi, *Cartea celor cinci cercuri. Gorin no sho. Drumul pe care mergi singur. Dokkōdō. 35 de articole despre strategie. Hyōhō sanjūgo kajō*, 7th ed. revised and expanded, trans. by Neculai Amălinei (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2024), 113-114.

⁶² See Plato, *Opere VII. Timaios*, ed. Petru Creția (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1993), 187.

analysis.⁶³ In an attempt to create a bridge between Newton (*colours are only in our minds*) and Goethe (*colours are in the world*), Wittgenstein proposes the solution of interpreting the concepts of colour as being formed through shared human practices,⁶⁴ rather than through physical or personal sensations, given that the essence of colour does not reside merely in nature or in the mind, but also in the logic of generally accepted concepts of colour.⁶⁵ Aligning with the various natures dedicated to colour theory, which he synthesises poetically and narratively, for Haruki Murakami colour seems to reveal fundamental truths about human perception, emphasising the subjective dimension and the emotional effects. The binary concepts of *colour-noncolour*, *colour-colourless* and *noncolour-colourless*, identifiable in the novel, thus reflect the dialectic of certain paired key concepts in spiritual contrast, through which the Japanese writer offers the reader a game of interpretation in the form of a temporal and spatial pilgrimage undertaken by the protagonist in search of the self and inner freedom. Moreover, if we read these complementary binary pairs through a synesthetic correspondence between colour, word, symbol and music, the narrative text can be read as the author's suggestive proposal of his own chromatic-discursive "theory," in which the colours, non-colours and colourlessness fuse together, resonating musically with Franz Liszt's suite for solo piano, *Années de pèlerinage* (*Years of Pilgrimage*).

Haida had given Tsukuru a record of *Le mal du pays* (Switzerland), part of the collection *Années de pèlerinage / Years of Pilgrimage* (1855), a sonata by Franz Liszt (1811-1886), in a "correct and beautiful" interpretation of the pianist Lazar Berman (1930-2005). Haida explains to Tsukuru that the title *Le mal du pays* would translate as "melancholy" or "homesickness," but it actually conveys a sadness for no reason, stirred by a pastoral landscape. Listening to it, Tsukuru immediately recognises it as the piece passionately played on the piano by White. Liszt's melancholic and nostalgic suite remembered by Tsukuru because of Haida and listened to again countless times over the years, becomes the musical background of Haruki Murakami's narrative, as a leitmotif for the destinies of the characters; a musical background through which Yuzu continued to live. One of the most beautiful slow, discrete and romantic of Liszt's compositions – one that is difficult to perform both correctly and beautifully, as Claudio Arrau (1903-1991) and Lazar Berman do⁶⁶ –, a witness to the protagonist's trauma and to his fear of being hurt again, *Le mal du pays*, as "the memory of an intense pain," as well as an empowering incantation that would enable him to move forward into a new chapter of his life, aids Tsukuru in his transition from detachment to involvement, from agonising death to active life:

⁶³ See Finlay, "Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Color in World History," 431.

⁶⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. by Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 2e-4e.

⁶⁵ See Dale Jacquette, "Wittgenstein and the Color Incompatibility Problem," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No.3 (Jul. 1990): 353-365, and Zeno Vendler, "Goethe, Wittgenstein, and the Essence of Color," *The Monist*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (1995): 391-410.

⁶⁶ See Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 48.

“The quiet, melancholy music gradually gave shape to the undefined sadness enveloping his heart, as if countless microscopic bits of pollen adhered to an invisible being concealed in the air, ultimately revealing, slowly and silently, its shape.”⁶⁷

The title of Liszt’s *Années de pèlerinage*, which includes *Le mal du pays*, is thus an obvious reference to Goethe’s novels about young Wilhelm Meister’s formative journey (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* and especially *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*), through which the Hungarian composer aligns himself with the Romantic literature of his time. Liszt openly admits, in the preface to the score, that his own pilgrimage through different countries enabled him to encounter landscapes that deeply moved and affected him, stirring the desire to express, through music, the strong sensations and the vivid emotions he experienced. Given that it is not merely a musical ornament, in Haruki Murakami’s narrative, the sonata *Le mal du pays*, like a musical... binder, comes to function as a “blood vessel” between the protagonist and the other characters: when asked by Tsukuru, Red and Blue did not remember White playing the piece on the piano during their high school years; only Black preserves the memory of Yuzu’s passionate interpretation:

“She was very good at pieces of this length. In longer pieces she sort of ran out of energy halfway through. But everyone has their own special qualities. I always feel like a part of Yuzu lives on in this music. It’s so vibrant, so luminous.”⁶⁸

In fact, Black also has *Le mal du pays* in her own CD collection, in the less “elegant” interpretation of Alfred Brendel (1931-2025),⁶⁹ which she and Tsukuru listen to together, in the cabin in the Hämeenlinna Forest in Finland – when Tsukuru remembers that, after having packed for the Scandinavian country, he had once again felt the need to listen to the recording of Liszt’s composition performed by Lazar Breman, the record Haida had left him fifteen years earlier. Having returned to Japan from the northern European lands, wanting to leave the past behind, Tsukuru listens to the piece one final time. Thus, along the musical notes that have reverberated within his soul like a... metaphysical sadness, Tsukuru’s pilgrimage, undertaken in search for the self and his own identity, comes to an end: “This final episode featuring *Le mal du pays* shows Tsukuru’s change because he is about to complete his pilgrimage.”⁷⁰ The repetition and accumulation of the same musical sounds favour the “concentration”⁷¹ of a spiritual atmosphere of unspoken thoughts and unexpressed emotions, necessary for emotional maturing. Evidence of this is also offered by Tsukuru’s dream at the end of the novel, in which he is seated before a piano whose white keys were very white and whose black keys were very black, performing a sonata in the great hall of a palace with marble floors and a very high ceiling. Beside him, there is a woman dressed in black, who turns the pages of the score. There, everything is black and white, with no

⁶⁷ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 208.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁶⁹ See *ibid.* 261.

⁷⁰ Wakatsuki, *The Haruki Phenomenon*, 25.

⁷¹ See Kandinski, 87.

other colour in sight. He does not know whether or not he had created the difficult and very long composition, with a complex structure that demanded exceptional technical skill from the pianist, but, because he immediately understands the world expressed there, he attempts to render it perfectly through sound. In his dream, he is very talented and has a “dazzling, invigorating experience,” reading the score, which appears to him as a “complicated blueprint in 3D:”

“Absorbed in his playing, his body was pierced by a flash of inspiration, like a bolt of lightning on a summer afternoon. The music had an ambitious, virtuoso structure, but at the same time it was beautifully introspective. It honestly and delicately expressed, in a full, tangible way, what it meant to be alive (emphasis added).”⁷²

Yet, although the performer was delighted by the reality he was creating through music, the audience, composed of about fifty people, seemed bored and irritated. Little by little, the noise of the hall drowned out the music. The pianist, however, continued to play, his fingers gliding passionately across the keys, until he suddenly realised that the woman turning the pages of the score had six fingers on one hand. Although curious about the woman beside him, he did not raise his eyes from the score, despite the fact that nobody was listening to him anymore. It is at this moment that Tsukuru awakens and, naturally, still under the impression of the dream, associates life with a musical score, in a sense that it is sometimes difficult to understand and, consequently, to interpret:

“Our lives are like a complex musical score, Tsukuru thought. Filled with all sorts of cryptic writing, sixteenth and thirty-second notes and other strange signs. It’s next to impossible to correctly interpret these, and even if you could, and then could transpose them into the correct sounds, there’s no guarantee that people would correctly understand, or appreciate, the meaning therein. No guarantee it would make people happy. Why must the workings of people’s lives be so convoluted?”⁷³

Liszt’s piece gives Tsukuru the sensation that two temporalities and two spaces had merged: the past with the present, and *the world beyond* (*atchira no sekai* • あっちらの世界) with *this world* (*kotchira no sekai* • こっちらの世界). However, imperceptibly, Tsukuru comes to desire belonging to *this world* (i.e., reality), *the world here and now*, but to do so, he must find where he actually belongs. For five months, he had been in *the world beyond* (*the supra-reality of that time*) and had then returned, while remaining connected to the intermediary realms between unconsciousness and consciousness through his black-and-white dreams. Colourless Tsukuru could only have a “colourless” life, his quiet and lonely existence flowing slowly until the age of thirty-

⁷² Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 287-288. Original text: 「その音楽を無心に演奏しながら、彼の身体は夏の午後の雷光のような靈感に、鋭く刺し貴かれた。大柄なヴィルテオオーズの構造を持ちながらも、見事に美しく内省的な音楽だった。それは人が生きるという行為の有り様をどこまでも率直に、繊細に立体的に表現していた(emphasis added)。」 Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 341.

⁷³ Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, 290.

six, leaving almost no trace behind – the only exceptions being, perhaps, the moments when he listened to the *Années de pèlerinage* record on his record player. Music, nonetheless, is a formative process, which, by favouring synesthetic associations and possible correspondences between colours and musical notes, remains in constant search for sentimental complexity and for the subtlety of the emotions that cannot be expressed through words alone. *Le mal du pays*, in particular, as the leitmotif music of the text, expressed the narrator's efforts to characterise his protagonist and the secondary characters not only through physical and moral-behavioural descriptions, but also through a spiritual atmosphere; the musical experience seems to not be primarily artistic, but rather purely spiritual. In an attempt to capture the *movement of the soul*, music undoubtedly acquires the valence of a means of expressing the characters' spiritual lives, thus imbuing Liszt's score with a unique vitality.

Solitary and silent, Tsukuru Tazaki is, in a certain sense, a belated Romantic who comes to acquire *dialogical knowledge* through his search for the other. And because, until he set out on his pilgrimage, he had believed for sixteen years that he had nothing to turn to, and, therefore, nothing to return to, the place in which he found himself at any given moment represented the only *reality*. However, through this pilgrimage to the past, mediated by Liszt's composition, Tsukuru ultimately accepts the fact that there is no such thing as an "ideal group" in the shape of an "equilateral pentagram," and that, in the present, perfect harmony is a utopia difficult to sustain, in a world characterised by permanent movement and change. Exiled from the dream of perfect friendship, he comes to understand that not only "harmony" connects one self to another, but also that each individual belongs to a place that they seek over a period of time, or even throughout their entire lifetime. As far as he himself is concerned, that place is the railway station, namely his place of work and his lifelong spiritual refuge. Through the adoptive space of the station, and through his feelings for Sara, Tsukuru feels that he may now enter reality, his attachment to the "real" also implying his integration into an active life.

Thus, another binary pair that emerges from the narrative text would be *one-multiple*, or, in other words, *individual-array*, which bears witness to the transition from the history of personal becoming to the history of the collectivity, Tsukuru's pilgrimage continuing passively through his profession as a railway station engineer. As a space where crowds gather, the station symbolises an open and universally accessible space,⁷⁴ a cosmopolitan environment in which the self encounters the other and the other encounters another other. Given that he had liked railway stations since childhood, it is unsurprising that Tsukuru Tazaki chose this profession. Naturally, whenever he had a little free time, or when he did not know what to do with himself, or even when he found himself in a critical situation, his steps would carry him to a station, just as other would go to concerts, the cinema, or clubs; Tsukuru could spend hours there, analysing the structure of the building, the flow of passengers, or the movements of the traffic managers. The arrival of trains on schedule, the intervention of the cleaning crews, the preparations made by the train attendants for the next departure displayed on the railcars, and the announcements echoing through the station seemed to make up the world in which he felt he belonged. Tsukuru now preferred the JR

⁷⁴ See Wakatsuki, *The Haruki Phenomenon*, 27.

station from Shinjuku (Tokyo), especially platforms 9 and 10 which, unlike the other platforms used by the commuter trains, were less crowded and allowed him to scrutinise the station leisurely. As a marker of a civilisation that has reached the highest peaks of technology and informatics, Shinjuku station is the space that both embodies and individualises the protagonist of this novel: Tsukuru Tazaki.

Tokyo's Shinjuku Station is recorded in the Guinness Book of Records as the busiest railway station in the world.⁷⁵ An enormous space, with sixteen sectors from which trains depart – a complicated network of railway tracks used daily by three and a half million people. During rush hours, this labyrinth is transformed into an ocean of people. In order to direct traffic, five days a week, with no incidents and with great precision, the diligent traffic managers devoted to their profession are required to not only help other workers reach their destinations safely, but also ensure the security of the station grounds and the safety of the passengers. Thus, the final pages of the novel *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* reveal another pair of binary concepts: *freedom-threat*. Far from being a mere linguistic “experiment” centred on the symbolism of the number “five” or a semiotic-poetic “theory” of colours, the narrative text draws the contemporary reader's attention to both the freedom and the threat embodied by a grand space such as a contemporary railway station in a metropolis like Tokyo, which, in the event of a terrorist attack, could turn into a nightmare beyond imagination.

While sitting on a bench in Shinjuku station, Tsukuru thought about how the course of his life had seemed to end when he was twenty years old, the moment he was expelled from the group. After the five months during which, sixteen years ago, he had thought intensely about death, innocently believing that – if he gazed long enough into his own depth – his heart would simply stop beating on its own, the years that followed passed by like “a calm wind,” with neither pain nor passion, with neither intense experiences nor joy. He was now in his mid-life years and the railway station had become “the place where he had to be,” the place where he felt at home. With a spirit of independence that he displayed since his youth, through his desire to leave his hometown and study at a university in Tokyo, in order to pursue a career in railway station design – although his actual profession required him more often to renovate old stations than to design new ones –, Tsukuru is, in fact, the first to leave behind his friends from the perfect circle. Perhaps it is precisely because of his rebellious nature that his friends ultimately expel him from the group – despite being aware of the fact that he could never have harmed White.

As a survivor of both imposed and later self-imposed isolation, through the courage to undertake a pilgrimage into his own past and confront his own memories, Tsukuru has an “epiphany”⁷⁶ marked by an individual identity distinct from that of the group, becoming conscious of both himself and the other. Similar to Wilhelm Meister, Tsukuru comes to accept that life itself must be a continuous pilgrimage (be it concrete or imaginary, active or passive), in order to attain and preserve his own inner harmony: “My life is to be a perpetual wandering. I have strange duties

⁷⁵ See Murakami, *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*, 246-247.

⁷⁶ See Wakatsuki, 26.

to perform, duties of a pilgrim, through unusual trials and vicissitudes.”⁷⁷ However, the journey undertaken by a concrete character, in limited life situations, is also employed by the author of the narrative as a pretext for constructing a setting that depicts an era marked by disparities and tensions between the old and the new, that interfere with the human destiny; it also serves to create an atmosphere of meditation on moral and social values, of reflection and engagement with scientific achievements (such as those dedicated to colour theory).

Haruki Murakami has often been referred to as an un-Japanese writer.⁷⁸ His image as an “outsider” was often facilitated, on the one hand, by his constant rejection of traditional Japanese literature and, on the other hand, by his conscious association with the cultural Other (through the frequent recurrence of Western cultural products in his fiction). Yet, over time, Haruki Murakami’s simultaneous attachment to and detachment from both Japan and the West developed into a new means of representing the East-West “cross-cultural effects,” a process equally delicate and complicated.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

⁷⁷ See Goethe, *Opere* 7, 5.

⁷⁸ Chikako Nihei, *Haruki Murakami: Storytelling and Productive Distance* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 107-108.