

**Coming Home to Modern Japan.
An Orphic Dialogue between Japan and the West
in Murakami Haruki's *Norwegian Wood***

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Abstract

This article addresses the debate on the ‘Japanese identity’ of *Norwegian Wood*, which—though popular—is often conducted in an intuitive fashion. I try to find a way out by looking more thoroughly into the Orphic legacy of the novel than has been done up to now by Japanese scholars. First of all, my purpose is to extend the intertextual reading by bringing into the equation the Japanese version of the Orpheus tale. A comparative analysis can thus trace the author’s more-or-less unconscious cultural influences from Japan (the myth of Izanagi) and the West (Orpheus). Furthermore, I take into account the novel’s love triangles, which connect the two intertexts. In short, I see the novel’s identity as a transformative one. Murakami’s Orpheus—the love-stricken Tōru—tracks across the Greek/Western parameters of the Orphic myth (i.e., the triumph of death and individuality) after his descent into the ‘Underworld’ of Ami Hostel but finally sails back to Japanese home waters, as it were, when he decides to *look forward* to life and love (Midori). Choosing connectedness over alienation like Izanagi, the protagonist of *Norwegian Wood*—and arguably its dislocated author—leave behind the tempting but disillusioning Western culture. Both achieve this however thanks to one crucial element which is lacking in the Japanese myth and represented in the novel by Reiko: the wondrous power of music/art. The latter is Murakami’s Golden Fleece brought back from the West. Finally I discuss how this enriched state of mind may have altered Murakami’s ‘vague, Japanese’ fictional ‘I’.

Keywords: Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, intertextuality, Orpheus, Izanagi, East-West



Orpheus the Tired Troubadour, Giorgio De Chirico, 1970. Oil on canvas, 149 x 147 cm

Part 1. THE ORPHIC INTERTEXTS

The research presented here¹ was inspired by reading an interview with Murakami Haruki in *The Sydney Morning Herald* dating from 2006. Here the best-selling writer illustrates the place of the 'fantastic' in Japanese spirituality by citing the Greek Orpheus myth as an example of an un-Japanese way of thinking.

You know the myth of Orpheus. He goes to the underworld to look for his deceased wife, but it's far away and he has to undergo many trials to get there. There's a big river and a wasteland. My characters go to the other world, the other side. In the Western world, there is a big wall you have to climb up. In this country, once you want to go there, it's easy. It's just beneath your feet. ("Not Lost in Translation")

It seems Murakami designates his fantastic writing as being part of Japanese spirituality rather than being a product of Western culture. The story of Tōru in Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* offers an interesting case study to put this statement to the test. As in the Greek myth, a loved one (Naoko) travels to the 'other world' in *Norwegian Wood*. This is Ami Hostel, a mental institution—today's Underworld—from where "once you've left you can't come back" (Murakami, *NW* 133). Tōru's Orphic descent fails, leading to the 'second' loss of his Eurydice. Finally, both myth and novel obey the same parallel thematic binary oppositions: present/past, life/death, man/woman, and individual/community.

On the other hand, in many respects Murakami's Orpheus stands out as the antipode of the son of Calliope, the Muse of poetry, whose singing and string-playing enraptured everything and everyone. Initially, Tōru, as he himself claims, is an inconspicuous, average student majoring in theatre history but excelling in nothing. Although he is a dedicated reader, he never finds the right words to express his feelings.

¹ I am grateful to Prof. Suzuki Akiyoshi (Konan Women's University, Japan), Prof. Mark Williams (Akita International University, Japan) and Prof. Myles Chilton (Chiba University, Japan) for serving as the Japan reading panel for this paper and delivering me with most valuable comments in that capacity. This research is an offshoot of thesis research conducted between 2011 and 2012 at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

Likewise, Tōru's trip to Ami Hostel unfolds in a very different way than Orpheus' descent into the Greek Underworld.

It is my belief these differences in character and plot can be retraced to the residue of another version of Orpheus' story: the Japanese myth of Izanagi and Izanami. Murakami does not cite the story, but it is a myth he certainly knows and one that embodies the Japanese spirituality described in the abovementioned interview. By conducting a comparative analysis not only of the Greek Orpheus—as has already been done by Japanese scholars—but also of the myth of Izanagi, I believe the author's more-or-less unconscious cultural influences from Japan and the West can be traced. Thus not only a geographical but also a cognitive mapping of Murakami's novel is established.

In accordance with Murakami's statement on Japanese spirituality as opposed to the Greek Orpheus myth, Tōru has to undertake a long voyage uphill to reach his destination, but the only real obstacle is the narrow mountain pass where his coach is temporarily halted by an oncoming car. Calling at the sanatorium, Tōru waits for the gatekeeper, but the Japanese Charon not does even sit at his post. Once inside, Naoko's lover does nothing more than Izanagi did in Yomi, the Japanese Underworld: try to convince his lover (not the gods) with tender words (not on the wings of music) to accompany to him back to the outside world (as is known, the hero Orpheus first had to move the heart of the goddess Persephone).

Eventually and most importantly, Tōru chooses life over death (though the Greek Orpheus does not commit suicide, he has no further will to live) and connectedness over alienation. In the Japanese myth, the god Izanagi too chooses reintegration into his community of peers after his return from the underworld. The Japanese Orpheus swears to bestow on the world more lives than his now-vengeful sister Izanami can negate.

At first glance, Murakami's conception of the balance between the fantastic and reality in Japan is reflected neatly in *Norwegian Wood*. It would seem the Japanese mythical intertext holds sway in the novel more than the Greek one does. However—unlike what the reader is led to believe in the interview—the narrative of Tōru becomes more similar to that of the troubled Thracian bard after his first visit to Naoko in Ami Hostel. Furthermore, one major structural feature remains for which neither of the Orpheus myths can offer any explanation: the love triangles.

In the next pages I shall demonstrate that the triangle mechanism serves as an elaborate narratological transposition of the novelist's cultural intertwining of the West, Japan, and what I shall call the 'third place' of the mature Murakami. After that, I will analyse thoroughly the 'Western' Orphic intertext.

1.1. Third time around

In *Norwegian Wood* three pairs, three Orphic couples, are foregrounded—Kizuki–Naoko, Naoko–Tōru and finally Tōru–Midori—whilst in both the Greek and Japanese myths only two lovers appear. The first of the love triangles is formed by Naoko–Tōru–Kizuki, the second by Midori–Tōru–Naoko and the third in the end by Tōru–Midori–Reiko.

Furthermore, the mechanism of the love triangles attributes to each of the couples its own 'third person'. Tōru serves in this capacity for Naoko and Kizuki. He is, so to speak, the appendix to the first Orphic couple. When they go out together, Kizuki always tries to find a fourth person for Tōru. But as the narrator, who throughout the novel obsessively counts the number of people in connection, observes: "Kizuki and Naoko and I: odd, but that was the most comfortable combination. Introducing a fourth person into the mix would always make things a little awkward" (27).

When Kizuki was still alive, Tōru served as the link between the couple's own self-involved world and the rest of society. After Kizuki's suicide, Tōru's sexual desire for Naoko unleashes itself and he transforms into a rival of his once best friend Kizuki for Naoko's love. But after the first night of her courtship with Tōru, Naoko flees both college and Tōru without leaving behind any message. From this point onwards, Tōru turns from a passive outsider into an active Orpheus in search of his beloved Eurydice, who herself is grieving for the passing away of her Orpheus.

After Tōru's first visit to Ami Hostel, the second 'third person' comes into play: Midori. She thoroughly alters the story. In the second love triangle, Midori–Tōru–Naoko, the centre is no longer Naoko but Tōru. It is now his turn to choose: between a lively Midori and a sickly Naoko. Midori performs the same function here as Tōru in the previous love triangle, as the connection to the outside world for the Orphic couple. The initial response is the same as the one Naoko gave to Tōru: the communication fails because Tōru also cannot help but *look back* to his Eurydice.

The love triangles offer an interesting structural departure from the novel's Orphic intertexts, assembling three lovers in narratological triangles rather than pairs (Orpheus/Eurydice, Izanagi/Izanami), but at the same time this triangular infrastructure renders visible both Western/Greek and Japanese parameters of the Orphic myths. This is achieved firstly by the doubling of the mythical love couple when Naoko and Tōru, the central Orphic couple, split up.

In this first love triangle Naoko must make an Orphic choice between Tōru and Kizuki: that is, between life and death, between *looking forward or backward*. Naoko, whose sickness has “deeper roots” (192), never processes the death of Kizuki. Like the Greek hero she pays for this with her death because her grief places her outside the community of the living, the only difference being that Naoko commits suicide and therefore ‘chooses’ death herself.

In other words: Naoko does what the Greek Orpheus wanted to, but was not capable of doing. For his part, Tōru eventually completes the mourning process and chooses life like Izanagi after a ritual purification in water. He in turn does what the Greek Orpheus could have done, but did not want to do. This suggests that Naoko and Kizuki represent the parameters of the Greek myth (death/individuality), whereas Tōru and Midori incarnate the Japanese ones (life/community).

1.2. The Greek Orpheus in Ami Hostel (Reiko)

Besides Midori and Tōru, Reiko constitutes the third ‘third person’ to discuss. She is introduced in the drawn-out and crucial sixth chapter relating Tōru's first visit to Ami Hostel. After his trip it is she who welcomes the youthful Tōru there. Then, as an experienced older woman, Reiko serves as a guide for Naoko and Tōru. For in the hospital that is not like any other hospital it is prohibited to move in pairs (cf. 126, 129), recalling, by the way, the importance of the narrative love triangles.

The author lays it on thick that Reiko embodies the Greek Orpheus. The very first thing she tells him is that surely he has not touched any musical instrument for years (123). Ironically Murakami has the narrator say that he had no idea why Reiko started talking about music. She turns out to be the music teacher at the sanatorium, where, moreover, as she puts it, relatively many special talents are to be found (128).

Murakami gives us a Reiko who in Ami Hostel lets the birds flutter in their cage with the same inexplicable magic held by the Greek Orpheus (176). During a walk with Naoko and Tōru, she draws them further up into the mountains to listen to the radio. “If I don’t come here once in a while,” the woman says, “I don’t have any idea what’s playing out there” (183). When Reiko recounts her life to Murakami's Orpheus in private it appears that as a child she was prepared for a career as a concert pianist, a dream that almost materialised until she fell into a severe depression. She had lost “some jewel of energy” (155).

During her musical studies Reiko never played for herself, only for others. That is why she ended up in Ami Hostel, regaining her former joy of playing music. After the loss of Eurydice, Orpheus too lost the power to charm others with his music (cf. Ovid XI, vv. 39-40). Drawn from this experience, Reiko seeks to warn Tōru against repeating his own previous mistakes. Although the musician denies that she is able to, she offers him two pieces of advice. The first one is “not to let yourself get impatient” (Murakami, *NW* 151) and the second “once you've left you can't come back” (133).

This is where the second element of the Western Orphic legacy absent in the Japanese myth lingers on in the superstructure of the novel, in *the Upper World of Norwegian Wood*: the discovery of personal artistic expression through which the narrator is later enabled to commemorate his lost Eurydice *painlessly*. Upon his return to Tokyo, Reiko inspires Tōru to start playing the guitar again. It heralds the writing of his personal story. Instead of a consumer of literature and music, he becomes a creator.

Yet at first Tōru does not take Reiko’s two Orphic counsels to heart. When Murakami’s Orpheus leaves the sanatorium he turns around several times (217) thus violating the mythical ban on the backward gaze. He also starts a relationship with Midori and yet he visits Naoko for a second time.

1.3. Murakami's nomadic Orpheus sails West

It seems that after his first visit to Ami Hostel Tōru will copy Orpheus' errors, apparently implicating him in Naoko's death. Apparently, of course, because Naoko did not love him but Kizuki. However, the final loss of his beloved does extract a heavy toll on his mental health.

He behaves in an utterly confused way, as the Greek Orpheus did, lamenting after Eurydice's 'second death' that the gods of the underworld were so cruel (Ovid X, vv. 61-70). Likewise, Tōru slowly sinks into self-pity and entrenches himself in his "own world" (Murakami, *NW* 333), as Midori sorely puts it. More and more, Tōru comes to resemble the Greek singer-poet. After Naoko's death, Murakami's Orpheus decides to retire from the city to the countryside.

On this nomadic journey he encounters a young fisherman who offers him food, sake and money. But it is not a real encounter where a dialogue is established. The young fisherman talks about his deceased mother. He too has lost a loved one, but the battered Tōru listens to him absently. The fisherman, on the other hand, expresses his sympathy. Tōru takes the money, but not the "feeling" of this gift (362). Tōru does not choose to share his pain, which would have turned the fisherman into a fellow-man, a companion on his voyage (cf. Luke 10: 25-37).

He ultimately senses the failure of his introspection and his journey: "I knew I had to go back to the real world" (363). Like Orpheus after his return from Hades, the nomad Tōru is too far removed from the human community. Unlike Izanagi's purification ritual in the water after his return from Yomi, Tōru finds no solace in nature. What will heal him is his 'musical' conversation with Reiko in his apartment in Tokyo. This is the turning point. Reiko reminds Murakami's Orpheus that in the Upper World people like Midori care about him, people to whom he has obligations.

Reiko makes him aware that he must choose between Midori and Naoko, just as Naoko had to choose between Tōru and Kizuki, and Orpheus had to choose between Eurydice and the Bacchae Women. In short, she reminds him about everything the Greek Orpheus did not bother to do upon his return from the Underworld. She has left

Ami Hostel especially to tell him this. And this time, unlike at Ami Hostel or with the fisherman, Tōru listens sincerely² and opens up.

1.4. Ending the mythical curse on the gaze

More importantly, Reiko reminds Tōru that he—and this information is crucial—chose life *before* Naoko's death. (Maybe, in a strange sense, when he looked back after leaving the sanatorium for the first time he behaved like Izanagi, who hurried back to the Upper World at the sight of Izanami's rotting ghost.) “You made your decision long before Naoko died You chose Midori. Naoko chose to die” (379). The encounter with Reiko in Tokyo allows Tōru to *look forward* and move on with his life. Moreover, in doing so, Reiko (Orpheus) restores herself. The “human jukebox” (381) does not return to Ami Hostel.

The identification of Reiko as the bearer of the musical power of the Western Orphic myth also sheds light on the meaning of Tōru's uncanny coupling with Reiko (who, reminding us of Hitchcock's movie *Vertigo*, wears Naoko's clothes). Just as Murakami's Orpheus was unfaithful to Naoko with Midori when she was still alive, he now shows her infidelity in death. Again the triangular mechanism of the novel comes into force but, this time, shutting off the mythical curse on the gaze. In other words, the explicit divine command of the Orphic myths (“look forward, not backward”) has been respected in the end, paradoxically with the help of a narratological mechanism absent in those myths (the love triangles), and, most importantly, through Reiko.

I therefore find the conclusion drawn by J. Rubin in his excellent reference fan book *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* incomplete and hence difficult to agree with. On the authority of the fact that Tōru sleeps with Reiko four times (the pronunciation of the Japanese word for ‘four’ is a homophone for ‘death’), and believing that the adult narrator is unhappy, Rubin states that Tōru “implicitly chooses

² Cf. Rubin: “Tōru is presented as writing directly to the reader, which intensifies the impression of sincerity” (151). In this sense, too, the realisation of Tōru's sincerity serves as a precondition to Murakami's challenge of writing a realistic (and perhaps an autobiographical) novel. Being sincere, by the way, was a necessary precondition for entering Ami Hostel.

death and negativity (Naoko) over life (Midori); Tōru will live with the memories of Naoko rather than give himself over to the vitality of Midori” (159).

It is true that we cannot be totally sure the older Tōru found happiness in living with the vital Midori. The final scene of the novel (Tōru picks up the phone and calls Midori) leaves the reader’s knowledge of the actual reunion of Tōru and Midori wanting, so if he is unhappy in the aeroplane it may indeed be because he has never been able to commit to love after Naoko. Maybe he split up with Midori? This is speculation and in no way certain.

What is certain however is that at the end of the plot Reiko made Tōru see that he chose life and Midori over Naoko and death. That is why it is so important that he makes the choice *before* Naoko’s death. Unlike in the Orphic myths, his decision to look forward does not coincide with—and thus is not in any way related to—her death. This is the significance of Reiko’s words when she tells him: “Whether Naoko is alive or dead, it has nothing to do with you” (379).

Unconsciously building on this insight in the aeroplane, Tōru decides to write a novel, be artistic, in order to deal with his haunting past in a proper way. It is the cover version of the Beatles song played in the aeroplane (lending its title to the novel) which triggered Tōru’s memory of Naoko. Taking a closer look at ‘that place’, where the novel is being born, one can see that music is as important as writing is, maybe even more important. Music, more than anything—as we saw—is embodied in the character of Reiko.

It all boils down to our appreciation of her. Rubin sees her as a negative force, as Naoko’s body double. However, looking at the matter through the Orphic intertext, one sees she embodies not death but the solace of art itself.

1.5. Murakami’s Orpheus muses about life and death

The parameters of the myth of Orpheus and the myth of Izanagi appear not only in the opposition of the two love couples Naoko–Kizuki and Tōru–Midori after Naoko’s death, but in Tōru’s own coming-of-age as well. Before finally choosing connectedness with his Japanese peers, as Izanagi did in the myth, he heads West. This is where the Western Orphic intertext comes into full force. In a sense, the coming-of-age of

Murakami's Orpheus is also his coming home, recalling, by the way, that Orpheus was also a fellow companion on Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece.

This intense inner struggle between two sets of thinking reflected in the two different Orphic myths of the West and Japan is also rendered obvious if one examines the trajectory of Tōru's conceptions of life and death, one of the central contradictions pondered by all the world's Orphic myths. After Kizuki's suicide Tōru muses about the issue. Up until that moment he had always perceived death as something quite separate from life: "until the day it reaches out for us, it leaves us alone" (30). Life and death are independent categories, a fact that is made perpetual in all Orphic myths after the violation of the prohibition against the act of looking. As the narrator of *Norwegian Wood* himself observes, that constitutes a "simple, logical truth" (30).

Tōru's contemplation goes on: "Life is here, death is over there. I am here, not over there" (30). This shows the cultural thinking of Japanese spirituality. The Japanese Orphic myth strongly emphasizes the fact that Izanagi's free will is illusory, that mortal life is from now on a given in nature, and that with the Japanese Orpheus all humanity has to accept this separation. The Greek Orpheus' short triumph over death keeps this possibility alive as an illusion for him and his followers. It is no accident that Orpheus lay at the root of a cult in ancient times, the Orphic mysteries.

After Kizuki's death the narrator eliminates philosophically his former rigid, binary thinking on the matter. Now, he declares, death has seized him as well (31). This allows Naoko to have Tōru in tow, as it were, since she too is unable to abandon the memory of the dead Kizuki. It is important to remember at this point that, unlike in the Greek version, the element of Orpheus' heartbreak (as well as the element of the healing power given by artistic expression) is conspicuously absent in the Japanese myth of Izanagi, dealing therefore more with the death/life opposition. The second phase in his thinking on life and death is thus closer to the 'truth' contained in the Greek myth.

It is when Naoko commits suicide that Tōru is forced once again (by Reiko, as I have suggested) to review his ideas, that is, to *look forward*: to Midori and towards life. He failed in rescuing Naoko from the Underworld. The latter follows Kizuki in death and so upholds the Greek Orpheus' legacy. The grieving Tōru, however, now has to brush aside the ghost of Naoko, as Izanagi did when haunted by the reflection of his

rotting sister and lover. Once again, Murakami's Orpheus has to stand 'on the other side' of the spiritual divide.

But that does not mean his thinking returns to the traditional Japanese simplicity of linearity ("life is here, death is over there"). He rethinks all past events and concludes sadly that, all in all, "[b]y living our lives, we nurture death" (360), echoing the former phase of his thinking. However, he continues, in a striking clarity familiar to the sentiment of *mono no aware*, "[t]rue as this might be, it was only one of the truths we had to learn. What I learned from Naoko's death was this: no truth can cure the sadness we feel from losing a loved one."

Norwegian Wood intertwines the dominant themes of the Greek as well as the Japanese Orpheus myth: the tragic dimension of the loss of a lover, and Japanese spirituality. Thus, when establishing the novel's cognitive mapping between the Western and Japanese intertext, where does Murakami's Orpheus finally stand on the life/death thematic? The answer can be found in the story's ending (the beginning of the plot). Years after the tragic events, Tōru involuntarily *looks back* to Naoko whilst sitting in an aeroplane.

It is here that he ultimately 'decided' to create a novel, *Norwegian Wood*, to keep his fading memory of Naoko alive, as he promised her.

Once, long ago, when I was still young, when the memories were far more vivid than they are now, I often tried to write about her. But I couldn't produce a line. ... Everything was too sharp and clear, so that I could never tell where to start—the way a map that shows too much can sometimes be useless. Now, though, I realize that all I can place in the imperfect vessel of writing are imperfect memories and imperfect thoughts. The more the memories of Naoko inside me fade, the more deeply I am able to understand her. (10)

The novel itself is the place where the conflict between the dramatic 'Western' truth of Orpheus, who looks backward (too much), and the drastic 'Japanese' solution of Izanagi, who looks forward (too much), can be transcended.

No truth about life and death, as Tōru declared himself when Naoko committed suicide, can offer any solace—and the fact that artistic rendition does not equal truthfulness is underscored by saying his memory on paper will be an imperfect one. However, and curiously, through writing Tōru has at last confronted the *personal* truth

he had always known, but chose to ignore: Naoko never loved him (but did he really love her either?).

Part 2. MURAKAMI'S ORPHEUS' TRANSFORMATIVE IDENTITY

2.1. Back from the Underworld. Vague, Japanese 'I'?

Murakami's characters are always looking for a third way out of this impasse between past and present. As I see it, *Norwegian Wood* is salient in Murakami's *oeuvre* as past and present coincide with myth and novel and, in a veiled way, with the apparent cultural dualism between Japan and the West. The comparative analysis elaborated in this essay can contribute to the debate on the Japanese identity of the novel and on that basis determine more exactly its significance for the understanding of Murakami's works as a whole, and indeed the dislocated identity between the West and Japan of the author itself.

In *Norwegian Wood* (as in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*) a well connects two narrative worlds: on the one hand a society ruled by Logos (the modern Westernized world with the city as its pre-eminent locus), on the other a mythical, traditional community surrounded by nature (represented by the young Japanese fisherman). The well also connects Naoko's world with Tōru's, and the mythical Orphic infrastructure with the novel's modern superstructure. It is significant that sitting in the aeroplane, thinking about the landscape of his youth, Tōru is no longer sure whether the well actually existed.

Suzuki Akiyoshi, who has analysed *Norwegian Wood* by superimposing a map of ancient Japan on the topography of the novel, retracing the walks of the characters through the modern Japanese cities, concludes that in the novel there "is no border between the ground and the subterranean. Japanese are always controlled, through memory, by the past and dragged into the world of death. The embodiment of this standpoint ... is the world of Murakami" (38).

This echoes much of the Murakami interview I quoted at the beginning of the paper: "once you want to go there, it's easy. It's just beneath your feet." Thus after his easy but failed Orphic descent to the Western Underworld, physically Murakami's

Orpheus may be back in the Japanese Upper World, but mentally he finds himself as a nomad on a borderline between the West and Japan, between present and past, and between life and death (always somewhere in between).

According to another Japanese scholar, Takemoto Toshio (72-73), this kind of nomadism of Murakami's fictional 'I' was still considered an escapist, chimeric way out in the previous novel, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985). He designates the type of character in this novel as a "vague, Japanese I".³ It is a philosophy of the recluse recalling Nietzsche, meaning—as Takemoto explains—that Murakami declared the Cartesian subject dead early on, and that he aligned himself with the postmodern theories injected into Japan during his formative years. This vague, Japanese 'I' assumes plural identities, like the novel's protagonist, in order to live both in a counter-utopian, bucolic Wonderland and in modern Tokyo.

In my reading of *Norwegian Wood*, I have suggested the identity crisis of the love-stricken Tōru leads to the choosing of the Japanese parameters of the Orphic myths (life, forward orientation, community) after having absorbed the counsels of Reiko, the transposition of the Greek Orpheus. Does this imply the nomadic, vague, Japanese 'I' in this novel has found his way home, cherishing his Japanese passport?

Takemoto claims a change of character occurs in *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (1992), the successor of *Norwegian Wood*. Here the nomadic protagonist Hajime⁴—like Murakami the former owner of an upscale music club, where visitors could escape stress and reality—is mercilessly exposed as a money-grubber and (like the Dionysian Orpheus) a failure in love and life. As the author matures, so to speak, the vagueness of Murakami's postmodern 'I' is being more ironically exposed.

Yet in my opinion, *Norwegian Wood*, situated between *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* and *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, but omitted by Takemoto, at least foretells the ending of this "vague, Japanese I". In suggesting this, I wish to stress the 'Japanese' element of the scholar's concept and see

³ My translation from the French "moi vague nippon".

⁴ NB: as a common noun 始め (*hajime*) means start, opening, beginning.

the postmodern 'vague' itself as a modifier contrasting the first 'I'. From this viewpoint Tōru's identity crisis during his nomadic voyage is the crisis of the vague 'I'.

The comparative analysis of the Orphic intertexts in *Norwegian Wood* has revealed that the novel's protagonist most clearly assumes the traits of a Greek Orpheus after seeking Naoko at Ami Hostel, making the same mistakes as the Thracian singer-poet. When his Eurydice commits suicide, the depressed Tōru wanders around like a stranger in the city as well as in nature, unable to reconnect in either of the worlds linked by the well. In other words, he experiences the downside of the story of the Greek Orpheus, who—unlike Izanagi—looks back too much once returned to the Upper World.

When Tōru arrives at college, he is surrounded (or lets himself be surrounded) by Western imported goods. The main character even manages to read no Japanese authors at all. Likewise, no Japanese musicians are addressed. It is also noticeable that all his lessons at college deal with Western theatre. It is known Murakami himself was very much under the spell of the so-called individualistic values of the West as opposed to the so-called suffocating social life in the Japan in which he grew up. He actively disliked Japanese literature, Mishima in particular (Rubin 14).

As in *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, where Hajime's 'I' can only pursue ludic pleasures, Tōru's inner escape to 'individualistic values of the West' is illusory. Conversely, if you look upon his nomad's Orphic journey into nature as following the trail of Izanagi, who was isolated after his descent into the Underworld in order to ritually purify himself before being reintegrated into the community of the gods, the impoverished Tōru comes to realise that the mythical Japanese past offers no solace either.

Therefore, either way, the possibility of Murakami's vague, Japanese 'I' in combining successfully two possible worlds and therefore plural identities—as the Greek or the Japanese Orpheus, in the traditional past or in the Westernized present—is being short-circuited in *Norwegian Wood* as well as in the next novel. It shows the progress achieved with respect to the narrator of the previous novel, who—as Takemoto (73) points out—could not move *either forward or backward*, who had nowhere to go.

When in *Norwegian Wood* the nomadic Tōru repents, he has left behind the vices of the Western Orpheus who could only look *backward*, ready to become a less

“vague”, more “Japanese I”. Like Izanagi, Murakami’s Orpheus decides to look *forward*, enabled however by the artistic virtue of the Greek Orpheus. Conversely, he also completes the Greek Orpheus’ mourning process. It is as if the novel’s protagonist restores himself from Orpheus’ sickness by the miraculous drug the same held the licence on but forgot about after losing Eurydice to the Underworld.

Art’s solace is Murakami’s Golden Fleece brought back from Greece, the West. By commemorating Naoko, Murakami’s Orpheus takes himself one step further than his mythical predecessor Izanagi, who reintegrated but also chased the ghost of his beloved wife. The wondrous power of the creation of (novelistic) art allows for Tōru’s identity transformation as well as his reintegration home in the Japanese community, like Izanagi’s.

Thus, in this most *creative* way, Murakami’s Orpheus chooses connectedness over alienation. Tōru’s Japanese identity, like Murakami’s own in world literature, becomes a transformative one. For me this is the deeper meaning of the juxtaposition of the two Orphic intertexts in *Norwegian Wood*. In this (unconscious) reworking of the mythical intertexts, he adopts not the Orphic vices but the Orphic virtues of East and West.

2.2. Over there, alongside the West and Japan

This feature in the novel recalls Murakami's own stated third resting place besides Hawaii and Japan—“over there”⁵ (“Haruki Murakami. Bref, j’ai survécu.” 90)—and coincides, I might add, with a third place alongside (or between) life and death.

As the narrator puts it at the end of the novel, it is from the “dead center of this place that was *no place*” (Murakami, *NW* 386, my emphasis) that he still holds Midori on the telephone line. Given a negative ‘charge’, this place in the Upper World where Tōru has to find happiness is nowhere. It can not be pointed out on an evidence-based, geographical map (cf. Suzuki). As the mature Tōru put it before he starts writing the novel (*supra*), “a map that shows too much can sometimes be useless”.

⁵ Translated from the French “là-bas”.

With a positive charge, the Orphic opposition between life and death, being and non-being, forward and backward—in short the conflict between the Greek and the Japanese parameters of the myth—is transcended in the realm of art, in the novel itself.⁶ Thus a ‘third’ synthesis between Japan and the West as well as between past (Underground) and present (Upper World) is achieved by Murakami’s Orphic adaptation: the “over there” in *Norwegian Wood*. It is here that the mature Tōru finally finds happiness after all these years, keeping his promise to Naoko as well as getting her out of his system.

This in turn may explain why the novel served as the ideal place for personal reflection, primarily for the Japanese reading public. I believe the implicit cultural intermingling of the Orphic myths of Japan and the West helps to explain what Rubin designated as the “greater demographic impact” (160) of *Norwegian Wood*. Like modern Japan, the novel tries to find a balance between the country’s own cultural heritage and the present ‘imported’ from the West.

It may not be unrelated to the fact that the novel has turned out to be a object of commercial hype in that country, but not in the West. By an ironic twist, it has made matters worse for the author himself. He has often declared that before *Norwegian Wood*, he used to be a cult writer in Japan, as he still is in the West today. “That book destroyed my reputation [in Japan]” (“Writer on the Borderline”). The huge success of the novel in his home country, putting it well ahead of his ‘cult’ works, only served to prolong the author’s own nomadic stay in the West (cf. Rubin 161).

To add to the complex debate on the novel’s national identity, Rubin (147-148) points out that Murakami wrote his Orphic adaptation in Italy and *Greece*. As is well known, Murakami settled back in Japan after being ‘called home’ by the national

⁶ Cf. Murakami cited in Rubin: “But once I get involved in writing a long piece of fiction, there is nothing I can do to prevent an image of death from taking shape in my mind ... and the sensation never leaves me until the moment I have written the last line of the book” (164). This angst may be linked to Murakami’s habit of listening to music during the ‘morbid’ writing process. One might say it is a legacy of the Greek Orpheus.

disasters of 1995. It may be argued that Tōru's Orphic voyage mirrors the author's own trail on the world map from the young Murakami to the mature one.

All I could think about when I began writing fiction in my youth was how to run as far as I could from the "Japanese Condition". I wanted to distance myself as much as possible from the curse of Japanese. ... When I was in Japan, all I wanted was to be an individual. (Qtd. in Rubin 47)

The author's disillusionment with a once-hopeful image of the West (the absolute freedom of the individual) after fleeing his native Japanese community led to the carving-out of a 'third' resting place back in Japan's postmodern present: "over there"; a place that is nowhere and that only exists in art, a *fictional* place.

During the nineties, years after writing *Norwegian Wood*, the mature Murakami declared in interviews that he wanted to write something more related to his home county as he now considered himself a Japanese writer (cf. e.g. *Kitarubeki sakka-tachi* 181). For the author too, perhaps, a change in character into a less vague, Japanese 'I' had occurred. He no longer looked backward, having decided to keep the past under fictional lock and key.

Paradoxically, like Tōru, Murakami rediscovered his Japanese identity after his own 'individualistic', nomadic flight to the West. Then he re-emerged as a 'wrecked ship' still carrying the Japanese flag, back in the Upper World, the "real world". It is as if Tōru's retreat from Ami Hostel to the Upper World was itself either a premonition or a preparation for the homecoming of this dislocated author. One can choose between the two options depending on whether one has read *Norwegian Wood* 'looking down the well' or not.

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