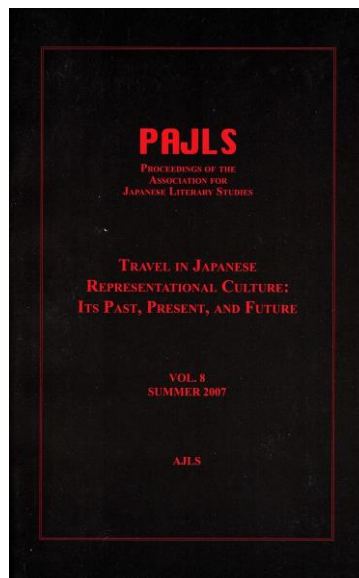


“‘Tours of the Womb, Tours of Hell’: Circular Journeys in Late Twentieth-century Literature”

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**“TOURS OF THE WOMB, TOURS OF HELL”
CIRCULAR JOURNEYS IN LATE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE**

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Midway through the 1995 anime *Ghost in the Shell*, in a welcome departure from the blood, gore, and battling machinery which fill much of the rest of the film, there is a sequence which takes the viewers on a tour of a *Bladerunner*-style city, with its bright lights and shining plate-glass windows, its polluted waterways, run-down buildings, and clutter of overhead signs. The tone of reflective melancholy of the sequence is intensified by the funereal pace of movement in the city scenes, and by the soundtrack, which returns to the powerful, almost ritualistic music of the title sequence of the film. In that title sequence we first saw the cyborg heroine floating naked in a tank, a female body not as yet endowed with consciousness. In the middle of the city sequence it becomes clear that this melancholic tour is to be understood as that of our now-conscious cyborg, a reflection on matters of self and identity within the space of the city.

For a cyborg, matters of identity are complicated by physical reproducibility: we thus see what we may presume to be the heroine as she is conveyed on a waterbus past a coffee shop in a large glass-plated building, meeting the gaze of a woman with an identical face looking out. In the next shots a mannequin, again with the same face, is seen in a brightly-lit display window—we must presume that the heroine herself is in the position of the viewer outside. The sequence concludes with the view of an abandoned car bobbing slowly up and down in the waterway, and beyond it in a badly lit show window bare of display, a group of naked, armless, and featureless mannequins.¹

Though not all will encounter the problems of physical reproducibility faced by cyborgs and androids, similar episodes wherein characters embark upon a period of wandering with no clear destination or pressing purpose, circumambulations which may bring them back to the point of departure superficially unchanged, abound in modern film and fiction. Such circular journeys (the term intended to suggest both the sense of physical and mental circumambulation, and the sense of a contained “episode” within a larger work) can be used as here to express

¹ *Ghost in the Shell* (Kōkaku kidōtai), dir. Mamoru Oshii, 1998.

or explore a sense of dissolution of self, often within the city, and thus provide a forum for discourse on identity in the modern world. Such circular journeys may also be read as a performance of the critique of modernity itself, as the description of the *Ghost in the Shell* sequence, with its combination of bright lights and urban decay, its shining glass surfaces and sense of spiritual hollowness, may suggest.

Though the example with which I have begun this paper is from the mid-1990s, the use of circular journeys in both literature and film, whether as exploration of the self, as critique of modernity, or critique of ideology in a more specifically political sense, is certainly nothing new, as studies of the journeys which Ōta Toyotarō describes around Berlin in Mori Ogai's "Maihime" (The Dancing Girl, 1890) demonstrate.² My own interest, however, is in the ways in which this use of circular journeys develops in literature and film in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this paper I will look in particular at two literary examples from the 1980s in which circular journeys feature prominently: Iijima Kōichi's 1982 poem "Kagayaku enkan" (Shining Circles) and Hino Keizō's 1985 novel *Yume no shima* (Island of Dreams).

In an article on the literary implications of Jung's use of the model of a descent to the underworld to describe and explore his own breakdown around the time of the First World War, Evans Lansing Smith states that "the descent to the underworld (*nekylia*) is the single most important myth for the modernist authors who wrote during C. G. Jung's lifetime."³ I would suggest that underworld journeys have perhaps an equally important place in post-1945 Japanese literature and film, in part due to the influence of those modernists and their literary precursors. Without going into any details, I will simply mention in passing Kurosawa's Akira's film *Ikiru* (1952), Enchi Fumiko's short story "A Bond for Two Lifetimes: Gleanings" (1957), Kanai Mieko's short story "Rabbits" (1976), Ōe Kenzaburō's novel *The Silent Cry* (1967), and Abe Kōbō's novel *The Ark Sakura* (1984) as some of the better known works in which descent and (in most cases) return, whether physical or

² See Kamei Hideo, *Transformations of Sensibility: The Phenomenology of Meiji Literature*, ed. and trans. Michael Bourdaghs (Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan: Ann Arbor), 67–85; and Maeda Ai, *Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity*, ed. James A. Fujii (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2004) 295–328.

³ Evans Lansing Smith, "Descent to the Underworld: Jung and His Brothers," in Karin Barnaby and Pellegrino d'Acierno ed., *C.G. Jung and the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 251.

Circularity here is clearly expressed in the idea of climbing and descending, returning (戻ってくる) to the place in which one began, but it appears also in the choice of words used to describe the action of the movement in the aquarium in the first line: 「まるく一巡りして」, literally “to circularly do one round.” The word translated here as “interiors,” 「内部」, appears in the poem three times, always with the *furigana* 「なか」—as such it is appears as a marked term, the significance of which I will consider a little later.

The stanza continues with a two-line description of the containment of the “world’s image” in art exhibitions, again with the specific mention of return (戻ってくる), followed by a single line which lists elements of a circus:

The stink of the circus the animals gyrations in the air

I have retained the spacing of the original Japanese line here, as elsewhere. This use of spacing within lines is a technique which is to be found in much of Iijima’s poetry, but it is especially effective in this poem used as in the second line to stress movement out and back, or used as here to emphasize the individual elements in a list of nouns or noun-phrases. Though not a strict rule, the lines which list nouns or noun-phrases tend in this poem to be divided as in this case into three parts, often followed by a line divided in two, creating a sense of repetition in the patterning of the poem which adds to the sense of cyclicity over all. A notable exception is in the final stanza (quoted later), in which a list of five elements is followed by a line divided into three parts, establishing within these two lines the sense of the return of all previous elements raised earlier in the poem.⁶

In the last three lines of the first stanza the word “interior” (内部) reappears, this time to describe things “inside” the films of Federico Fellini—I translate it below as “within”:

Tours of hell within the films of Federico Fellini
Tours of the womb secret passages white-painted women and
the squealing voices of clowns
There ceaselessly searching for the world’s vulva for the center
of the earth

⁶ For grammatical reasons, my own translation reverses the order of these lines.

This extended reference to Fellini (the final line here can be taken as part of the reference, or can be understood to express again the desires of the poet, encompassing the entire stanza) for me calls to mind the nighttime expedition to the deserted villa in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) in particular, but may also be taken as a more general reference to the processions and pleasure-trips, clowning, and masquerades found in several of Fellini's films and used to enact and parody self-absorbed decadence as an apparent response to a crisis in spiritual or social values.

The second stanza of the poem expands further upon this desire for circular movement, and it is here that it becomes clear that this is a desire for escape, with the remark: "I even choose to flee from place to place (逃げまわる) inside nightmares." It is the third and fourth stanzas, however, in which the various elements introduced in the first stanza are brought back together in order to show what it is that the poet is attempting to flee from, or what it is he is attempting to compensate for in this glorification of circling. I will quote these final two stanzas in full.

Our country's aquariums and exhibitions and circuses and
 Festivals are somewhat like miniature gardens
 Shivering under a poor light, but
 They don't get as far as boiling over like the shining bubbles
 of brass instruments
 Like all things seething up, but
 Even within the darkness of cinemas people don't tend to
 laugh much, but

Even so, in this age of company employees when strangers are
 more and more like strangers
 I seem to be seeking to walk round and round in shining circles
 As of aquariums as of towers where there thrive
 Rogues drunkards clowns frenzy white-painted madwomen.

The critique of contemporary Japan here comes through clearly in the description of an age "when strangers are more and more like strangers." Similar to Fellini's depiction of self-conscious decadence as a reaction to spiritual malaise, the poet here chooses circling as an escape from the poverty of external reality—though from the description of "miniature gardens / shivering under a poor light," and of people failing to laugh in cinemas, we can understand that those places of entertainment to which he flees are themselves caught up in that poverty. We may note some

similarity here too with the depiction of the city in *Ghost in the Shell*, with its bright lights and decay.

In the last line of the penultimate stanza above, the word “interior” (内部) appears again, once more translated here as “within.” The reappearance of this word and the fact that it is marked with *furigana* (ふりがな) each time may be understood to emphasize the poet’s retreat to the “inside.” That this signifies a psychological space as well as indicating the architectural interiors enumerated in the poem is suggested by the lines on Fellini in the first stanza, and the “tours of hell / tours of the womb” already mentioned.⁷ However, in spite of this invocation of grotesque journeys the poem appears to lack the return of Jung’s *nekya* or the regenerating effect of Bakhtinian grotesque realism. It is, rather, a nostalgic turn to the interior, a retreat from the stagnancy observed outside rather than the search for purpose or the means of renewal.

What is of particular interest at the end of the poem, though, is the choice of figures (or states) to furnish the interior: “rogues drunkards clowns frenzy white-painted madwomen.” In contrast to the apparent focus on interiority, the list seems to bring to the fore figures who are somehow turned inside-out, or who wear their identity on the outside: those whose profession it is to deceive or to take on disguises (rogues, clowns), or those whose vices or irrationalities have spilled over to the outside and now define them (drunkards, frenzy, white-painted madwomen). In other words, at the same time as he laments the fact that “strangers are more and more like strangers,” the poet chooses to populate his interior world with people who can only be strangers—a parody of reality which calls to mind, for instance, an Ensor painting in which apparently ordinary people are depicted wearing grotesque masks.⁸

The population of the interior world with figures whose “identity” is worn on the outside suggests interesting connections with the questions of face and self raised by the *Ghost in the Shell* sequence, and brings me also to the other work I wish to consider in this paper, Hino Keizō’s *Yume no shima*, a novel in which confusion of face also plays an important part. I stated earlier that circular journeys can often be found as episodes in longer works. Hino’s novel is of interest for the fact that it is in effect nothing more than an extended episode, or series of episodes, of this type—at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Sakai Shōzō (his

⁷ Note that in the original the two phrases appear at the end of one line and the beginning of the next, though I have sacrificed this proximity in my translation above in order to retain the original line spacing.

⁸ James Ensor (1860–1949), a Belgian painter, is best known for pictures involving masks or skulls.

family name, meaning “boundary,” itself suggesting that he will remain in the liminal state of the traveler throughout) is led by certain unsettling experiences to wander outwards from the city and around the reclaimed lands of Tokyo Bay. The novel reads as one long search for self and exploration of identity, set against the exploration of identity of the city itself—indeed, the two are tied together by means of Shōzō’s profession and his memory: the employee of an engineering firm, Shōzō has helped to build high-rise Tokyo on the ruins left at the end of the Second World War, and the newly reclaimed lands cause him to recall and reflect on those ruins.

Towards the end of the novel, on an island in Tokyo Bay covered in dense vegetation, Shōzō experiences a particularly memorable change in perception. Sitting by the now unconscious body of the woman who has brought him to this island, and across from the boy who appears to be her younger brother, Sakai turns to follow the boy’s gaze over his shoulder and sees the entire forest “collapsing” (崩れ落ちている):

It wasn’t an earthquake or a whirlwind. In the bright sunshine, the same as before, slowly and without sound, [the forest] collapsed and sank to the ground like a marquee from which the supporting poles had suddenly been removed. It looked as though suddenly the trunks had been drained of the power to stand, the branches of the power to hold their leaves, the leaves of the power to unfurl, the vines of their power to cling.⁹

That this is a matter of perception is clear in the fact that nothing actually happens here in the physical sense. This is further elucidated in the lines which follow, in which we are informed that “The forest preserved intact the substance of the forest as before, only the form had disappeared.”

This incident, if it can be called that, in which “form” disappears as if Shōzō is suddenly able to see through a previously obscuring façade and onto the truth lurking behind, is part of an ongoing discourse in the novel on the disjunction between reality and appearance. This is already signaled in the title: *Yume no Shima*, the Island of Dreams, sets up the possibility of an opposition between dream and reality before the novel begins. *Yume no Shima* is also, of course, the name of one area of the reclaimed lands in Tokyo Bay which are notorious for having been built on junk and which, as Shōzō reflects in the novel, must either have been

⁹ Hino Keizō, *Yume no shima* (Tokyo: Kōdansha bungei bunko, 1988), 145. Translations are my own.

named by a person with great powers of imagination or named in irony. It is a period of wandering in these reclaimed wastelands which finally brings Shōzō to the island wilderness – which itself is in fact also reclaimed land, one of the Odaiba fortifications built to protect against foreign intrusion in the late Edo period.¹⁰

As it is developed within the novel this discourse of reality and appearance, illusion, or dream appears at least superficially as a critique of a specific Japanese modernity similar to that of “Kagayaku enkan,” though the recourse to dreams rather than nightmares is perhaps suggestive of the difference in approach in these two works. It is notable that in spite of a cinematic reference which would suggest the possibility of underworld journeys—not in the novel itself, but in the author’s address to the reader at the end of the *bunkobon* version, in which he suggests that the black-clad motorbike-riding woman who guides Shōzō around the reclaimed lands was inspired by Jean Cocteau’s film *Orphée*¹¹—this novel remains firmly on the surface; thus, in the course of viewing the city from outside, Shōzō begins to see his visible self as “nothing more than a shapeless projection onto a three dimensional world”¹² and to compare himself—and, by extension, the other inhabitants of Tokyo—to the mannequins which he has been viewing in store windows in town.

At the same time as beginning to see himself as mannequin, Shōzō also begins to sense the possibility of unknown selves hidden within his own body, and this theme is developed through that same black-clad woman he has met on his wanderings. Just a few moments before the quotation given above, in which Shōzō sees the forest collapsing, he has been considering the multiple expressions crossing the unconscious woman’s face, and reflecting:

Are people really such knotted and layered things of multiple expressions, multiple voices, multiple signs, multiple consciousnesses like this? (...) It’s as if the original state of mankind has been laid terribly bare.¹³

Shōzō turns the reflection back on himself to consider that the face he exposes to the world is not in any sense his true self. In fact, as readers

¹⁰ For details on the history of the areas of reclaimed land which appear in this novel, see Satō Izumi, “Nioi no aru posutomodan e: Hino Keizō Yume no shima to Rinkai Fukutoshin,” in *Bungaku* 5:5 (September 2004), 136–162.

¹¹ Hino Keizō, “Yume no shima e,” in Hino, *Yume no shima*, 189.

¹² Hino, *Yume no shima*, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 143.

we will discover at the end of the novel that the woman really does hold the possibility of “multiple consciousnesses,” something which Shōzō himself will never know.

As well as this woman who leads him further and further from the familiar, early in the novel Shōzō meets a woman who arranges displays of mannequins for store windows in the city (notably beginning with a disturbing display of a family whose gazes that do not meet, reminiscent of the estrangement of Iijima’s poem), and who utters prophetic warnings about his involvement with the woman of the reclaimed lands. Throughout the novel, Shōzō struggles to understand the connection between these two women; it is only after he meets his death at the end of the novel (a death foretold by the woman of the city) that the solution to the mystery is revealed to the reader, and to the woman herself—that is, the two women are in fact one, her two selves the result of multiple personality disorder.

My intention when I first began work on this paper was to try to read the journeys performed by Shōzō as ideological critique, and to suggest that the dichotomy created between appearance and reality in the novel could be compared to the language of cultural theory, in particular to that of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* and its exploration of “dream” and “phantasm.” However, the ending of the novel leads away from such an interpretation: far from being an innovative awakening, an ending in which the narrative focus switches to the now (temporarily) cured Yōko, with its too real solution of the mystery of the two women as one woman suffering from a medical disorder, leaves the impression of a trick played on the reader who until this point has been restricted to Shōzō’s point of view.

That this trick is one which has a specifically gendered aspect also raises the question of ideology, but ideology as unconscious reproduction rather than conscious critique. In an article on the “gender critique” of “ruins” in *Yume no shima*, Matsushita Hiroyuki argues that though Hino himself expresses his ideal of ruins as “neutral point,” and of his own sentences as “neutral,” his work betrays him.¹⁴ In *Yume no shima*, Matsushita suggests, Shōzō’s journey to the reclaimed land and its discourse of search for identity, that “modern myth,”¹⁵ is nothing more than a very common plot of one man’s recovery of sexuality, something which he claims the narrator tries to hide behind identification with “a

¹⁴ Matsushita Hiroyuki, “Hino Keizo *Yume no shima* ron: haikyo no jendaa kuritiikku,” in *Shōwa bungaku kenkyū* 35 (July 1997), 119–120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

more cosmological “power” (that of the cycle of waste and construction of the city raised many times in the novel).¹⁶

Before the change to Yōkō’s point of view at the end of the novel, in fact, I would suggest that the “two” women perform roles similar to that of Iijima’s “white-plastered madwomen”—characters defined by their exteriority who populate the interior space of Shōzō’s newly discovered world. In performing their physical perambulations within the real or imagined city, therefore, both Iijima’s poetic persona and Hino’s protagonist also enact a retreat to a circumscribed psychological space of their own making which reconstructs the perceived poverty of the external reality from which they seek to escape. The internal reconstruction can be read, of course, as a parody of the external world, and thus appears as a form of ideological critique of the booming Japan of the 1980s. Nevertheless, such a reconstruction on the one hand may risk reproduction of aspects of the dominant ideology, as Matsushita’s comments suggest of Hino’s novel, and on the other may indulge both writer and reader in a somewhat uncritical fascination with the parodic alternative world, as we could suggest of Iijima’s poem.

I mentioned above my initial intention to read Hino’s novel through a Benjaminian lens. As I worked on this paper, however, the discomfort which the ending of the novel caused me found a counterpart in a growing uneasiness over my own approach, an uneasiness which was reinforced and clarified when I came across an article by the Argentinian critic Beatriz Sarlo. In “Forgetting Benjamin,” originally directed at the Argentinian academic community, Sarlo criticizes what she terms the “Benjamin trend” of the 1980s, commenting as follows on what she views as the “trivialization” of Walter Benjamin’s work:

Strollers unknown and indifferent to one another, foreigners, marginal characters, conspirators, dandies, collectors, murderers, cityscapes, galleries, display windows, mannequins, modernity and the ruins of modernity, shopping centers and freeways—a background rustle of sounds where the words *flâneur* and *flânerie* are uttered as unexpected synonyms of practically any movement that takes place in a public space.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 127.

¹⁷ Beatriz Sarlo, “Forgetting Benjamin,” trans. Francisco González, *Cultural Critique* 49 (2001), 84–85.

That such a list reads like an enumeration of elements to be found in such 1980s works as “Shining Circles” and *Island of Dreams*—not to mention the 1990s *Ghost in the Shell*—suggests, of course, that the persistent fascination with “modernity and the ruins of modernity” does not belong to the academic community alone. The continued power of such tropes in the popular and literary imagination is a subject worthy of attention. Nevertheless, Sarlo makes an important point: as critics it is necessary to exercise caution if we are to avoid using our writing on this subject as an excuse to give free rein to our own uncritical fascination with the same tropes.

Bearing this in mind, it may be valuable to look also for more overtly critical approaches from within the literature itself. I will conclude here by mentioning briefly one more example of a fictional episode which pairs a physical journey with a search for self, but which does so to somewhat different effect. It appears in Ishikawa Jun’s *Kyōfūki* (*Wild Wind Chronicles*, 1980), a novel which initially appeared in serial installments through the 1970s.¹⁸ In the fortieth of the novel’s fifty-five chapters Yanagi Yasuki, the wastrel son of an important family (a character type familiar from Ishikawa’s earlier works) is carried off on such a journey in spite of himself.

The journey is initiated by a confusion of faces redolent of that found in both *Ghost in the Shell* and *Island of Dreams*, but in this case both the initial confusion and the journey that follows it are given a comical aspect. At the beginning of the chapter Yasuki, who has recently had his sense of identity shaken by his discovery that he is unable to live up to the deeds of the admired “Bluebeard” ancestor on whom he has modeled himself, as well as being unsettled by an unexpected encounter with the supernatural, sits down to a breakfast of beer and sardines only to find that the faces of the canned sardines look familiar to him. In concluding that it is his own face he sees in theirs, Yasuki is suddenly confronted by the sense of having multiple selves and by his inability to pinpoint any single self. Carried from the room on a slick of oil from the can and “swimming in sardine thought,” Yasuki finds himself leaving on a journey, going first to the mountains—where he immediately realizes he has no place—and then returning to drift around the more

¹⁸ More detailed discussion of this novel can be found in my dissertation, “Vengeful ghosts and phantom roads: past, present and future in Ishikawa Jun’s later fiction” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2004), as well as in an earlier dissertation by Lucy Tian Hiang Ko Loh, “The World of Ishikawa Jun’s Fiction” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1986), 200–228.

questionable areas of the city, where he is finally brought back to earth by his failure to see his own face in *yakitori*.¹⁹

That this episode is intended as a parody of an established convention is suggested in the line which precedes Yasuki's departure for the mountains. As he is carried from the house, the narrative overlaps with Yasuki's own voice to remark, "When you take one step out, that's a journey. It seemed like a journey to go on a search for one certain 'me' (*ore*) amongst the countless 'me's."²⁰ The physical journey and its accompanying inner quest for identity is thus joined by one further form of circling—that which turns back to reflect on the sphere of literature itself.

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¹⁹ *Ishikawa Jun zenshū* vol. 9 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1991), 568–9. Translations are my own.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 570.

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