
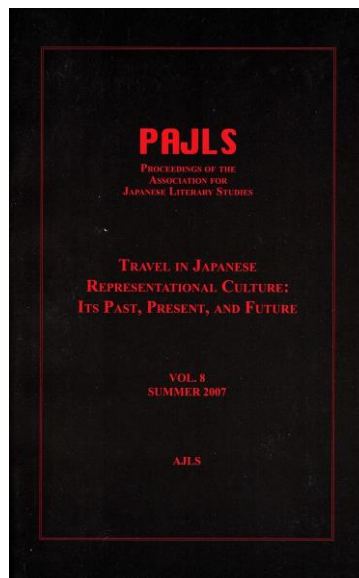


“Are We There Yet? Traveling Toward the Self in Contemporary Japanese Cinema”

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Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 8 (2007): 456–467.



PAJLS 8:
Travel in Japanese Representational Culture: Its Past, Present, and Future.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

**ARE WE THERE YET?
TRAVELING TOWARD THE SELF IN CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE CINEMA**

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This paper will explore the ways in which the two dimensions of travel—outer movement through space and inner movement through time, memory, and the self—cohere in contemporary Japanese cinema, proposing, after Graburn and other anthropologists, that travel does indeed function as a multi-faceted secular ritual, here highlighting the process of identity-formation and self-discovery not situated, as in the works of pre-modern writers, in the natural world, but rather within the urban space of the modern, westernised Japan. I will draw on two films, *Vibrator* (Hiroki Ryuichi, 2003) and *Drive* (Sabu, 2002), utilising both narratological and visual/semiotic analyses, to examine ways in which directors have captured these complementing aspects of temporal, spatial, and psychological movement in works fundamentally concerned with the process of creation of self-identity, both to situate this self-identity within and to overcome the potentially alienating, modern, urban space.

**THE LINEAGE OF TRAVEL IN THE
JAPANESE LITERARY ARTS**

Travel is certainly nothing new in the Japanese arts, from the earliest days of literary expression to the most contemporary notions of virtual travel in animated video games. With the *haikai* poet, Bashō (1644–1694), travel becomes an artform in and of itself, a source of inspiration for the poet as well as a means of reconnecting the artist with the antecedent classics of Japanese art. Travel existed for Bashō as something which he could not resist, as a force of nature *within* himself that compelled him to explore the literary landscape of Japan. As he himself has it in the famous opening lines of his most well-known work, *Oku no hosomichi* (*Narrow Roads to the Interior*, 1689), “I, too, now when would that have been—I, too, could not stop my thoughts of wandering, of drifting like a cloud blown by the wind...” What we have here is, on the one hand, a very personal account of the relationship between the poet and travel, and a very intimate connection between the poet and the natural world. I’ve left out for brevity’s sake the continuation of this sentence which flows forward from idea to idea very

much as a traveler moves forward from sight to sight—the structure of Bashō’s prose passages is brilliantly designed to convey a tremendous sense of restless motion, mirroring the psychological restlessness of the poet eager to embark on his journey. The key point here, however, is the necessity for travel—for tourism—in this poet’s life to resituate both his life and his work within the wider arena of his era, his literary tradition, and his place. This necessity still exists in the modern world.

MODERNITY’S URBAN/NATURAL SCHISM

But it is precisely the situation of the modern, urban individual within the natural world that is problematic in the modern conception of travel, for the simple fact that the modern world is precisely *urban*. In contrast to the experience of travel for the premodern world, modern travel even when conceived of as an escape from urbanity still remains marked as occurring within urbanity’s spaces—from station to station, via public or private transit, modern travel is inescapably part of the technologised, urban world. Ways of conceiving of travel have not necessarily kept pace with travel’s changing face: travel agents and travel posters still emphasize the potential to reconnect oneself with nature, be that nature the beaches of Mexico, the mountains of Japan, or the “Super Natural” province of Canada’s British Columbia, and yet the modern traveler still has access to the modern amenities of nightlife, shopping, and a safe bed in which to sleep.

It is possible even now to perceive in travel a romanticism that calls to something fundamentally necessary to the human psyche. Writing about Bashō, Thomas Heyd remarks that “wandering—the act of leisurely, albeit attentive, traversing the land in a relatively unaided way—has an aesthetic that may help us to recover a sense of the depth of space, of the real diversity of places, and of our human lives within the larger context of nature” (Heyd, p. 291). This act of recovery is important because “the practice of wandering may constitute a way to resist the de-aestheticizing effects of the trends in modern society” (Heyd, p. 291) such as urban crowding, the commodifying influences of consumer culture, and the scheduled, almost regimented, predictability of the career day, which alienate modern urban dwellers from not only the natural world but more significantly from the community around them and ultimately from their own sense of individuated self-identity, as well. While I may disagree with Heyd’s term “de-aestheticising” to describe the contemporary urban milieu, I can certainly accept his intentions—the urban world is essentially cut off from the natural world, and thus

urbanites themselves are essentially alienated from that which in previous ages had been accessible to them in demonstrably more tangible ways.

Nonetheless, the process of travel as it is expressed in contemporary Japanese art itself comes to accept its urban situation. As this paper will show, while travel still retains its power to resituate the traveler, and to permit the traveler an occasion to overcome alienation (importantly, not necessarily social alienation but personal—alienation from the deepest psychological layers of self-identity) this process occurs within a space highlighted as urban, as technologised, as global. By locating this process of re-situation within a modern, urban space, contemporary Japanese art maintains its awareness of its antecedent traditions, but avoids the problematic of the relationship of the urban world with the natural, instead seeking a solution to alienation and the problem of self-identity precisely within the urban space conceived of as alienating and anonymous. By re-awakening modern, urban existence to the potential for an ongoing engagement with beauty, the wanderer resituates his or her life within a broader context containing transcendent aspects that permit a reconnection with tangibly enduring concepts of community and spirituality—for “the wandering of the poet is similar in certain interesting aspects to the shaman’s journey” (Heyd, p. 291).

Addressing this issue of the relationship between the wandering poet and the shamanistic expression of profound human truth, Watanabe Shouichi in a talk delivered in 1989 notes the long-existing tradition of wandering amongst Japanese poets, and proposes very effectively that this served the function of reverence for them—the very act of composing a poem in “good Japanese” (*ii yamato kotoba*) was sufficient to form an expression of Buddhist enlightenment which simultaneously honored the myriad Shinto deities as well (Watanabe, p. 14). Thus the act of wandering and along the way composing poetry was an act of communion—an act which corresponded to the European pilgrimages of the Middle Ages to redeem the souls condemned to Purgatory (Watanabe, p. 13)—and an act of discovering within Nature the transcendent truth of Buddhist wisdom. It was also an act of locating the self within that world of natural beauty as the momentary consciousness able to appreciate, though fleetingly, the surrounding beauty that equally infused the self. Watanabe refers explicitly to Saigyō as the poet most keenly aware of this relationship between wandering, poetry, and philosophical transcendence, and as the model Bashō was to follow 500 years later in his own peregrinations. Saigyō, Watanabe argues, believed in the direct experience of reality—the manifestation of the originary noumenon, *honjisuijakusetsu*, and the direct expression of this experience

through the creation of poetry infused with the spirit of the poet in good Japanese—*kokoro o komete yamato kotoba de utaeba sorede yoroshii* (“it’s enough just to compose a poem in Japanese, putting all of one’s heart into it”)—thus fusing the poet, the expression, and the direct experience of reality within the locus of poetry inspired by the process of travel (Watanabe, p. 14). Watanabe proposes that Bashō, too, was a believer of this same principle, the direct experience of reality, and as such—as a wandering poet—was a successor to the tradition of which Saigyō was a part—in fact, Watanabe suggests that Bashō’s very motivation for setting out on his travels, the record of which was to become his *Oku no hosomichi*, was precisely to follow in Saigyō’s footsteps (Watanabe, p. 15). Thus the lineage which runs through Saigyō and on to Bashō is a lineage of religious/philosophical expression of the poet’s direct experience of reality made possible by the very act of wandering and composing poetry. This direct experience of reality is the goal of travel, as the process of seeking out the “best places” in Japan and leaving behind there one’s poem, one’s memento of reverential expression (Watanabe, p. 15). In this way art, Nature, reverence, and the self are fused in the process of poetic composition and travel.

While Bashō—and, from Watanabe’s argument, unfortunately not Saigyō—may exist within Japanese literary memory as the exemplar of the wandering shaman/poet, his legacy is not lost on other artists working in many media. For example Murakami Haruki utilises travel in some of his most effective narratives—*Sputonikku no koibito* (*Sputnik Sweetheart*, 1999), *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (*A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1989), and *Dansu, dansu, dansu* (*Dance, Dance, Dance*, 1994) are all centrally concerned with travel as a process of discovery through which a fundamentally alienated character must pass. Modern Japanese cinema has within it, too, well-realized examples of the travel genre which correspond fundamentally to the process of creation of a situated self-identity inherent within the lineage of literary travelers from Saigyō through Bashō and on to Abe and Murakami. This lineage speaks directly to the enduring necessity of travel for urbanites whose daily travels, while often exceeding dozens of kilometres, rarely take them beyond the confines of their city’s underground shopping centres and train systems. For these urban consumers of cultural commodities, travel has the potential to be a liberating technique from the sense of alienating entrapment within an isolated and vaguely defined individual identity—in short, it becomes a means by which the self may be reclaimed as a subjectivity.

**VIBRATOR—THE ROAD TRIP AS SPIRITUAL
JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY**

A case in point is Hiroki Ryuichi's film *Vibrator* (2003), in which the female protagonist, Hayakawa Rei (played by Terajima Shinobu) embarks on a whimsical late-night journey with a truck driver, Takatoshi (Ohmori Nao), whom she has just met. As the film progresses, Rei and Takatoshi travel from the south-central region of Japan to the north, becoming increasingly intimate along the way, revealing more about their pasts and their interior realities, until Rei achieves a breakthrough of self-understanding instigated by a crisis in her relationship with her travelling companion.

As Graburn writes, "tourism is a special form of play involving travel,... affording relaxation from tensions, and for some, the opportunity to temporarily become a nonentity... there is a symbolic link between staying : working and traveling : playing..." (Graburn, p. 22). This is very true for Rei, for whom the opportunity of the road trip becomes an escape from the confining insecurities of her daily life. Yamaguchi Masao has defined travel as a "release from the time of daily life" (Yamaguchi, p. 16), and has suggested that, in that both operate to remove us from the spatial and temporal constrictions of our lives, "festivals and travel resemble each other in their fundamental aspects" (Yamaguchi, p. 16). Festivals—*omatsuri*—Yamaguchi proposes, analogously to the carnival for Bakhtin, are necessities for social beings because they permit a release from the "burden" of "living within a group" (Yamaguchi, p. 16), but Yamaguchi also draws a parallel between even a simple journey to a nearby destination with the journey a deity might make—a journey of only ten or twenty paces—during the course of a *matsuri* (Yamaguchi, p. 16). Thus Yamaguchi proposes the recuperative qualities of spatial and temporal relocation as fundamentally spiritual, but more importantly, as essential for social beings. This has implications for our first encounter with *Vibrator's* protagonist, Rei, whom we meet within one of those inescapable symbols of Japan's urbanity, an all-night convenience store—this location situates Rei very much within her daily life as a social being nonetheless alienated from her fellow members of society. This is made very clear by the repeated and explicit references to 'White Day', that day in March on which Japanese men give chocolates and other small gifts to the women in their lives (Valentine's Day being reserved for *women* to give chocolates and so on to men)—Rei has no one from whom she will receive anything. Her monologue, delivered in voice-over, is very much self-directed, and she seems in several respects fearful of the other shoppers around her.

This social being who lives within a group but who is separated from that group by her alienated interiority is very much haunted by the isolation of her daily life, as is quickly apparent when we *listen* to what it is that she says to herself, and *see* where it is she is: in this convenience store, surrounded by strangers, Rei tells herself in her interior monologue (that occasionally escapes through her lips) that she wants to touch someone (*hito ni sawaritai*) and that she's afraid of people whom she can't touch (*sawarenai hito kowai*). When she catches herself speaking out loud, she tells herself to be quiet, berating herself and wondering what the people around her must think of her. Isolated, lonely, needing contact, but fearing the prying eyes of strangers, Rei tells herself that when she feels threatened she becomes threatening (*kōgeki saresoude dakara kōgeki shisoude*) and that her instinct for self-preservation is so strong she worries she may kill someone (*hito koroshiteshimawanai ka to*).

It is very significant that we first meet Rei shopping for white wine, the “delicious Madonna,” that will help her tolerate her empty nights at home—it helps her sleep and the troublesome voices, hers and others, become quiet (*arukooru wa yoku nemureru; jibun no naka no mono o kangaeru koe, watashi ga kiita dare ka no koe, sonna urusai koe ga nomu to kieru*)—and so become at least temporarily free from her ‘normal identity’ the better to discover her ideality. For Rei, who seeks as she does a spiritual salvation from alienated, lonely, emptiness in the form of alcoholic anaesthetization, the journey upon which the film sends her comes to involve a celebration of her corporeality, as well as a psychological release.

The significance of the white wine Rei is about to buy at the beginning of the film is doubled by the name of the brand she seeks—“Madonna”—and its association in Catholicism with Mary. The voice-over narration of Rei in the convenience store makes apparent the exhibition in the film of the inner reality of this character, and the repeated incantation of *oishii Madonna*, “delicious Madonna,” emphasizes the spirituality of Rei's unfolding journey, while also resonating with the meanings possible in the sound of her name. “Rei” as a name is typically written with the character for ‘gratitude’ but the sound *rei* possesses several interpretations, ranging from ‘habit, custom’ to ‘zero, nought’. Both of these are interpretively rich for this particular character who exists as a woman trapped within a ‘habit’ and who values herself as a ‘nought’, but I feel the most important of these possible meanings, however, is ‘soul, spirit’, as in the word *yūrei*, or ‘ghost’. The journey upon which Rei embarks, a spatial loop through time which returns her to her starting point now calmer, wiser, and more self-

assured, is the journey of a soul's progress through life's stages, returning the soul to the ordinary point, but experienced, worldly, and more complete. Reading Rei's name as a comment on the 'spiritual' progression of the 'habitual' brings with it its own associative resonance, for as Heyd remarks,

enacting a role similar to the shaman's, the traveler fulfills an important function (aside from the bringing or sending back of practical goods or information) in the cultural life of the community. The traveler provides perspective on the here and now (the ephemeral everyday) by reporting on the reality of other, distant places throughout the spread of space. One may say that a place here and now only properly becomes apprehensible as such by receiving a horizon in space (Heyd, p. 294).

The spiritual contextualization of the habitual is a similar process, as is the psychological identification of the self, something made possible by an encounter with the Other, the not-self—this is the process through which Rei travels here, to arrive at her starting point, the habitual, but with a more mature, psychological self-identity reaffirmed by her experiences away, with the Other. For Rei, this encountered Other has two forms, one external, the other internal, but both are *different* from Rei's 'normal', daily self. One of these "Others" is the truck driver, corporeally separate from Rei but tender to her, respectful, sexual—a tangible human being with whom Rei is able to connect in a vital, physical, and reassuring way. The other "Other" is Rei herself but Rei-away-from-home, Rei-the-Other. This Rei is able to connect with another person, is able to be intimate sexually but more importantly psychologically and emotionally—with both the truck driver and with herself, as well. Graburn discusses the renewal of the self through travel in a way which is pertinent for Rei, who becomes changed through this process of leaving her daily life to return to it resituated and rejuvenated: "We step back into our former roles... often with a sense of culture shock. We inherit our past selves like an heir to the estate of a deceased person who has to pick up the threads for we are *not* ourselves. We are a new person who has gone through re-creation and, if we do not feel renewed, the whole point of tourism has been missed" (Graburn, p. 27). In *Vibrator*, Rei does emerge with a renewed sense of self—for her, her 'spiritual tourism' has had its hoped-for effect.

Here it is productive to recall Bashō and once again to think of travel as a type of art, a performance which, like all art forms, contains a goal transcendent of the merely functional aspects of its components. Writing in 1989 on this subject, Judith Adler contends that “Performed as an art, travel becomes one means of ‘worldmaking’... and self-fashioning” (Adler, p. 1368). This movement in “stylistically specified ways” with especial concern for meanings discovered is precisely the movement through space which Rei carries out here, always remaining aware of the function of this journey to take her out of her ordinary setting, permit her an opportunity for self-exploration, and return her to her ‘normal’ state renewed and reformed. Travel here indeed is an art with a very specific, personally recuperative goal.

TRAVEL, BREAKDOWN, TRANSCENDENCE: HUMOUR

Vibrator presents travel as a rather serious affair (no pun intended!) but here I’d like to turn to a work that blends a tremendous satirical attitude towards social propriety with a profound insight into the function of travel as a restorative, redemptive, and recuperative process able to bring together the present and the past in an empowering resolution— additionally, it is an extremely funny film, whose humor rests upon a series of incongruities of character, setting, and action. This is *Drive* by Sabu (Tanaka Hiroyuki) from 2002. The plot is quite simple—a pharmaceutical supply salesman named Asakura Ken’ichi (Tsutsumi Shin’ichi) one day while absentmindedly gazing at a beautiful woman (Shibasaki Kou) is carjacked by three thieves fleeing from a robbery, in pursuit of their fourth partner who has betrayed them and absconded with the loot for himself. The film follows these characters as they try to track down their missing money, but along the way, each of the thieves discovers his “true calling” and splits off from the group—one, Arai Jyoun (Terajima Susumu), leaving to join a punk-rock band; another, Makoto (Ando Masanobu), being recruited by a professional baseball scout; and the third, Goro, (Osugi Ren) leaving to take his dying wife home from the hospital. The protagonist, Asakura, is a remarkably straight-laced man who, among other things, refuses to drive above the speed limit, and who, when stabbed by the carjackers, makes a careful note of the bandages he’s used to bind his wound, in order to reimburse his company, but he, too, along the way discovers depths of personal strength he had never imagined within himself. At the film’s close he meets once again the beautiful woman he had been watching when the thieves carjacked him, but now he has the courage to speak with her and set in motion their relationship. Within this simple plot, the film is able to

weave together compelling visual and narrative elements to present a powerful meditation on the relationship between travel and self-discovery, the past and the present, tradition and memory, spirituality and responsibility both social and personal, and, with all of these, love.

The film opens with the shot of an X-ray of a human head, while a voice from off-screen explains the two basic types of migraine, functional or dispositional, from which someone can suffer. This X-ray is of the protagonist as he sits in his doctor's office, complaining of stress-induced migraine, but the shot makes explicit the central focus of the film as interiority and psychological, rather than social, reality. As the doctor discusses the types of reactions to stress which animals undergo—for example, the reaction of turtles to danger, to pull their heads into their shells—we see a very young Asakura in flashback, holding a turtle while his father practices *kendo*, the Japanese martial art of the sword. Asakura's mother looks on approvingly, wearing *kimono*, while the father, clothed in traditional Japanese attire and practicing in a small traditional garden behind his home, strikes at an invisible opponent. The father then settles to read the newspaper—an article headline tells us that he has been implicated in a business scandal, while the camera cuts to two traditional swords in their holders. As the camera pulls back we see that the father has hanged himself; the mother next follows him into death by plunging from a cliff, clutching against her breast a photograph of herself and her husband.

This sequence, beginning with the X-ray and ending with Asakura practicing stress-reducing exercises in his company car, signals the presence of several layers within the film—the first is the inward nature of the journey about to be taken, but this journey also has a nostalgic dimension of memories revisited, as well. It is from this aspect that the film engages the issue of social change over time—while *Tony Takitani* approached the issue of Japan's increasing Westernization through the technique of left to right camera movement, *Drive* approaches the same discursive opportunity from the aspect of the protagonist's uneasy relationship with the legacy of discipline left to him by his explicitly severe parents. This legacy is something to which one of the carjacking thieves, Arai Jyoun (Terajima Susumu), refers when he tells Asakura that a "spirit" is on him, an angry relative who has not passed over, who stays with Asakura because he wants him to fight in ways that the spirit itself had never been able to. Arai Jyoun (literally "Rough John") knows this because he is the son of a Buddhist priest and so has access to the spirit world—in fact, this character, the first to leave the band of robbers, sees himself very much as a proselytizer, as someone whose mission it is in

life to spread Buddha's message of self-respect and social service—he goes on to do so by becoming the lead singer in the punk band, the “Fuck Masters,” and screaming at his audience to follow Buddha's path by leading their lives having found the one thing they love to do, and doing it wholeheartedly. We have here in this early exchange between these two characters the explicitly overlapping layers of spiritual growth and personal reconciliation with memories of the past, made possible through travel—that the ‘travel’ in this case is forced upon Asakura is germane to the theme, for life, after all, is something which inevitability has thrust upon us all.

Travel here restores Asakura, but it does so in a very complex way that signals the relationship between this urban “every-salaryman” with not only his personal, family history, but also with the history of Japan and with the natural world, as well. Throughout the film Asakura has been approaching his ‘breakthrough’, the moment at which he realizes and accepts his self-identity confidently and completely, but the film consistently defers the arrival of this moment, preferring instead to grant the epiphanal instance first to the other ‘travellers’ who have accompanied Asakura. At the close, however, Asakura's moment finally does arrive—the cell phone which one of the thieves has forgotten in Asakura's car rings, with a call from the fourth, betraying thief, asking for help and giving his location. Asakura drives to the designated spot, but as he nears the place, his car enters into an odd fog through which, apparently, radio signals cannot penetrate—the car radio stops working, as Asakura slows, coming to a halt at a crossroad. Mysteriously, the car turn-signal flashes a right turn, which Asakura makes. He comes upon and parks behind the fourth thief's car, and then stumbles upon him in the dark field where he has been trapped, his arm stuck in a hole in the ground, for many hours. The thief insists, at gun point, that Asakura pull him out—Asakura does so, but the thief is beset by one final hallucination, and in terror he shoots of his own arm. After he has staggered away, Asakura sees emerging from the darkness the figure of a samurai (amusingly but semiotically importantly, also played by Tsutsumi Shin'ichi, the actor playing Asakura), clad completely in white, who earlier had appeared before the fourth thief, but who had committed ritual suicide in what ostensibly had been a terrifying hallucination. This samurai asks Asakura for a duel. Asakura, surrounded by other figures from the thief's hallucinations—samurai and soldiers—engages the white-clad spirit, finally defeating him. The ghostly figures vanish, leaving Asakura dumbfounded but released from his inhibitions—he shouts and screeches at the top of his lungs, slashing at the tall grasses

growing in the abandoned field in which this episode had taken place, as the dawn slowly breaks, revealing the grey factories which surround the open space.

The complexity of this scene arises from the explicit juxtaposition of memory, reality, hallucination, tradition, nature, and urbanity within the site of Asakura's liberation from his restricted, conflicted, afflicted daily self—the culmination of the journey, manifestly urban, which he has just undergone. Here we have a character whose travels have taken him through the modern, urban space of his quotidian life to a place at which the personal memories of his severe parents, specifically his father's strictness and early training in the traditional martial art of *kendo*, are able to fuse with the hallucinatory necessity to fight, to produce an allegorical encounter with a spirit capable of inspiring within Asakura the self-knowledge of his own martial character. That this encounter with the past is situated within what passes for nature within modern urbanity—an abandoned field ringed by factories—is of course significant for it locates the encounter of the self with its innermost identity in that place where, traditionally, the shaman/poets of the pre-modern world themselves discovered their transcendent, direct experiences of reality. This act of location, while potentially nostalgic for a time when nature was not subjugated to industrial considerations, is not sentimental—it accepts the possibility for transcendence within *any* space and so, even though falling short of celebrating the urban, accepts the validity of even the modern urban space as a workable location for self-discovery. Asakura's journey, even though it ends in this field, has always been an *inner-directed* journey, a travel back into not only his past but Japan's, as well, to reincorporate a traditional *bushi* (warrior) attitude—embodied in the white-clad samurai—of self-confidence, loyalty, and, most importantly, self-acceptance, into the modern, urban world. This reincorporation should not be construed as nationalistic—there is no reference to Japan's global relations—but rather as redemptive and recuperative, on a level far more personal than national. In this way both Saigyō's and Bashō's own journeys, too, were not 'nationalistic' but were recuperative of the traditions and lineages which inspired them. In *Drive* we find a tacit acknowledgment of the 'idea' of Japan, an idea which, while rooted in the traditions and nature of the past, is flexible enough to perceive within the modern and the urban a continuation of itself, and through this continuation is able to inspire the modern, urban dweller through an ecstatic encounter with his or her innermost self—and certainly it is quite important that Asakura in fact wins the duel, driving his sword through the spirit who declares himself "satisfied" (*manzoku da*) with the result.

Asakura returns to his normal life—he returns the stolen money to the bank, having claimed for himself only the small expenses for the bandages he'd used to bind his wound—but now he is not himself, he is not the same inhibited man whom he had been. He is made anew, as had been Hayakawa Rei. Travel, the removal of the self from the ordinary in order to permit the self to discover its innermost truth, has here, too, proven its effectiveness as a source for liberation, redemption, and resituation. These characters have emerged as resituated, as reconstituted within a world which, while superficially identical with their starting points, is substantively different. Travel, as Adler suggested earlier, is indeed the process of worldmaking and of refashioning ourselves to inhabit this new world, linked with the past, but anticipating the future.

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