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# Ticket to Salvation: Nichiren Buddhism in Miyazawa Kenji's Ginga tetsudō no yoru

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Jon HOLT

## Ticket to Salvation

Nichiren Buddhism in Miyazawa Kenji's *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*

Miyazawa Kenji's *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* is a children's story that explores what heaven is like with very visible Christian themes and images, but the logic and vision underneath is more Buddhist than Christian. In Kenji's prose masterpiece, the author ultimately subsumed Christianity and science into a greater spiritual cosmic vision—Nichiren's all-encompassing principle of three-thousand-realms-in-a-single-thought (*ichinen sanzen*). Among the possible interpretations of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, one must consider that it is an expression of the author's Nichiren Buddhist beliefs, which he long held and explicitly articulated elsewhere in other works and correspondence. Reframing both the scholarship on Kenji's ties to the prominent prewar Nichiren organization, the Kokuchūkai, and the research on Kenji's close friendship with Hosaka Kanai, I demonstrate how the salvation that the protagonist Giovanni finds in the story is shaped by the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*—*ichinen sanzen*—Kokuchūkai—Nichiren Buddhism—proselytizing—*dōwa*

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**G**inga *tetsudō no yoru* 銀河鉄道の夜 (Night on the Milky Way Railway) is generally considered to be Miyazawa Kenji's 宮澤賢治 (1896–1933) masterpiece of children's literature (*dōwa* 童話) by critics (TANIKAWA 1966; IRISAWA AND AMAZAWA 1990).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite its general popularity and numerous printings, and even though it describes a seemingly accessible view of the afterlife, it remains one of Kenji's most difficult works to understand.<sup>2</sup> Written over a ten-year period from the early 1920s through 1932,<sup>3</sup> the story was never published in Miyazawa's lifetime, but shortly after his death it was included in the initial three-volume *zenshū* in 1935 (see BMKZ), only to undergo enormously significant editorial revision, resulting in at least three other versions in the 1950s and 1960s, until 1974 when its "final form" (*saishū-keitai* 最終形態) appeared in Chikuma Shobō's KMKZ (1973–1977) as the definitive version. Different generations of Japanese have read different versions of this difficult story over the last seventy years.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, English-language readers have been exposed to different versions of the story as well as different translations.

1. Tanikawa Tetsuzō, one of the first compilers of Miyazawa's works, argues that even though the story is incomplete, it remains Kenji's "supreme work" (*saikōsaku* 最高作); see TANI-KAWA 1966, 334. For IRISAWA and AMAZAWA, both the text as well as its four-version manuscript layers provide "the way to access the secrets of Kenji's literary composition" (1990, 13).

2. In Kenji Studies, it is common practice, which I follow here, to refer to the author not by his family name but by his personal name.

3. Irisawa and Amazawa, who are two of the main editors of the recent *zenshū* (see SKMKZ) and have specifically analyzed *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, suggest that we can date the progression of the manuscript pages from early to late versions based on the type of paper and pencil or ink pen used by Kenji. But most importantly, they say that Kenji's handwriting itself best illustrates his end-of-Taisho (mid-1920s) to late-period (*bannen* 晩年) (1931–1933) updates to the text. For example, for the third version of the story, "in contrast to the overall tight, settled work within the page parameters and the handwriting traces of the late Taisho period [1920s], in his late-period writing he used black ink pens and made much wider edits over the margins of the text lines." (See the textual notes for the story, "Ginga tetsudō no yoru" ['Ginga tetsudō no yoru' shōgakkei san], in SKMKZ 10(2): 68.) Elsewhere, Irisawa and Amazawa have hypothesized that the earliest date attributable to the text is 1923 or 1924, given that some of the pages of the first manuscript were written on the back of a letter written about the Great Kanto Earthquake, so that these early pages were written "roughly after September 1923" or "probably at least in 1924" (IRISAWA AND AMAZAWA 1990, 144). As for the dating of the final manuscript version, Irisawa concluded that the final fourth version had to be written after 1930. Amazawa slightly more confidently insisted that we should date the final version to either 1931 or 1932 (IRISAWA AND AMAZAWA 1990, 127).

4. For reader convenience, here is a short summary of the different published versions of the story:

To date, the three best English translations are by BESTER (1987), STRONG (1991), and, most recently, PULVERS (1996).<sup>5</sup> What all these versions and translations have in common is a story about a young boy named Giovanni who travels on an intergalactic locomotive through the Milky Way, glimpsing the Christian heaven and other celestial places with his sole good friend Campanella. Campanella vanishes before the train ride ends, leaving Giovanni alone and soon to

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(A) The original 1930s readers learned early on, as did Giovanni, that Campanella had died and that Giovanni had knowledge (active or not) that the Campanella he was travelling with was a ghost or departed soul; furthermore, the story ended with a lecture from Professor Bulcaniro (Burukaniro-*hakase* ブルカニロ博士) about life, death, energy, and epistemology. Giovanni pledges to find happiness for all. “I vow to keep moving in that direction. I surely shall seek True Happiness” (SKMKZ 10: 176 [version 3 of the story]). (MK presents the Titanic victims’ story before the Bird Catcher appeared. In 1940, the editors of the Jūjiya Shoten’s edition (see JMKZ) had corrected the order so the Bird Catcher appeared before the Titanic victims.)

(B) Generations of readers from 1940 through 1957 had a similar experience with “A Generation” (having the story end with the mysterious appearance of and lecture by Professor Bulcaniro); however, the order of the passengers appearing on the train was slightly different. The 1957 edition (see CHMKZ) though posed a problem for its readers: why does Giovanni say, “I know where Campanella is. Campanella and I were travelling together” to Campanella’s mourning father in chapter 5 before their journey has actually started?

(C) In 1964, the editors (Horio Seishi, Miyazawa Seiroku, and Mori Sōichi) began to address that issue with a new *zenshū*. Readers of the 1967–1969 Chikuma Shobō edition (CSMKZ) would have encountered a different text: one in which Giovanni does not learn about Campanella’s death until the end of the story, and would also be aware of significant failures in the texts that the editors pointed out, such as “5 pages missing.” The Bulcaniro ending remained.

(D) Finally, recent generations of readers who have come to the text since the appearance of KMKZ (1973–1977) through the most recent edition, SKMKZ, would encounter a more confident text without editorial guilt or doubt. Like the “c Generation,” (the generation of readers reading the *zenshū* mentioned in [c] above) they learn that Campanella has died only upon reaching the story’s end; unlike the texts seen by previous generations (A through c), the Professor Bulcaniro ending has been completely removed. Thus, post-1974 readers would have had a less explanatory text and one more conducive to reader discovery. In short, the KMKZ edition edited by Miyazawa, Irisawa, and Amazawa made the text less presentational and more representational. Giovanni does not need to be told the secrets of life and death. He, like the reader, could intuit them from the events of the story.

5. Hiroaki Sato, a translator of Kenji’s works, evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of Strong’s and Pulvers’ translations in his review of their books (SATO 1996). Pulvers follows the final version of the story (see previous footnote); Strong provides a translation of both the final version and the earlier (now, alternate or “c”) version; BESTER’s version (1987), now somewhat outdated, follows the earlier version (version c). Julianne NEVILLE’s version (2014) is the most recent addition to the list of English translations of the story and it comes published in a conveniently small paperback format with the inclusion of other “Ginga-”related stories such as “The Nighthawk Star” (“Yodaka no hoshi”) and “Signal and Signal-less” (“Shigunaru to shigunaresu”). I am not yet fully convinced that Neville has faithfully translated the Japanese original to the extent that Pulvers, Strong, and Bester have.

understand that Campanella has actually died by drowning in a river while playing at their town's Milky Way Festival (*Ginga-sai* 銀河祭).<sup>6</sup> The story thus traces Giovanni's development into maturity as he begins to understand concepts of mortality and the afterlife. Although the story has been described and anthologized as a science-fiction story, it is far more a speculative-fiction story that traces the author's thoughts, feelings, and quite likely his subconscious internal conflicts about Christianity, science, and religion in general.<sup>7</sup>

Kenji, a devout Buddhist writer who often employed Buddhist terminology, imagery, and ideas in his stories, did not make any overt references to Buddhism in this highly personal and spiritual story. Far more than Buddhist allusions and iconography, Kenji heavily used Christian (Catholic and Protestant) imagery and themes in the story, from the appearance of the nun in chapter 7, to the various Northern and Southern Cross stations, to the argument Giovanni has with the Titanic survivors about the "one true God" (*hontō no kamisama*) in chapter 9 (SKMKZ 11: 165). UEDA Akira (1992) first posited the idea that *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* exhibited a syncretic Christian-Buddhist world view in his essay on the religious aspects of Kenji's work. Another scholar, MATSUDA Shirō, describes a "syncreticism" of Christianity and Buddhism in *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* that seems possible:

The description of heaven in the story "Hikari no suashi" 光の素足 (The shining feet), which is thought to be the basis for *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, is Buddhist in its design, with the way heaven and hell are described diametrically. Yet that story's poor imagination and sentimental storyline undergo a transformation in "Ginga tetsudō no yoru," and Kenji produced a work of vastly superior fantastic beauty and one with a high level of interior struggle. In these places, we can find a connection to the symbolic world of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

(MATSUDA 1986, 229)

When we consider that Kenji quite often made explicit mention of Buddhist terminology and even invocations (like the Nichirenist *daimoku* 題目) in stories, such as "The Shining Feet" and "Tegami yon" 手紙四 (letter four), and in poems like "Ohōtsuku banka" オホーツク挽歌 (Okhotsk elegy) from the *Haru to shura*

6. Throughout the text, Kenji inconsistently used the terms Milky Way Festival, Star Festival (*Hoshi no matsuri* 星の祭), and Centaur Festival (*Kentauru-sai* ケンタウル祭).

7. ISHIKAWA (1971), who anthologized the story in his 1971 volume of "classic Japanese SF," describes the difference between early (Meiji-Taisho) Japanese SF, which is fiction that utilizes hard science, as opposed to the later, more philosophical science fiction created by Japanese postwar writers. Nonetheless, he groups many canonical modern Japanese literature writers, such as Kenji and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, in a special section of stories normally designated as fiction, but shares the sensibility of later-SF writers, best described by Mishima Yukio, that used SF to "attack common-sense mentality" (ISHIKAWA 1971, 717).

8. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

春と修羅 (Spring and Asura [1924]) collection, there is a conspicuous absence of such terminology in this story, one which is obviously very religious in its theme. MATSUDA, far more Christian-leaning than Ueda, in his discussion of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* and Kenji's children stories as a whole, writes "[they] do not get stuck on dogma from the *Lotus Sutra*" (1986, 226). Here, I propose my reading of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* as one quite different from Matsuda, who feels the story lacks Buddhist messages and overtones. Even without the overt use of clear Buddhist terms or ideas, the story is about two Italian boys who travel on a steam locomotive through the galaxy and it nonetheless strongly projects specific Nichiren Buddhist messages of suffering, salvation, and shared realms of existence, which reflect the author's personal commitment to Nichiren Buddhism and its lay organization, Tanaka Chigaku's 田中智学 Kokuchūkai 国柱会 (Pillar of the Nation Society), which, I will demonstrate, both greatly shaped Kenji's spiritual life and literary production from 1920 through the end of his life. I argue that it is valid to read *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* as a concise reformulation, in the form of a children's story, of Kenji's deep-rooted respect and understanding of both the *Lotus Sutra* and its interpreters, Nichiren and Tanaka Chigaku.

In my consideration of the story, the research of SUGAWARA (1994) and RYŪMONJI (1991) has greatly stimulated my reading. Sugawara, in her examination of Kenji's friendship with Hosaka Kanai 保阪嘉内 (1896–1937), expanded the research of Ozawa Toshiro, who first analyzed the correspondence between the two young men with the help of Hosaka's son, Tsuneo (HOSAKA and OZAWA 1968). Hosaka Kanai was Kenji's classmate when they studied together at Morioka Agricultural and Forestry Higher School from 1916 to 1918. Together, they formed the core of their coterie magazine *Azelea* (*Azaria*) and, even after Hosaka's expulsion from the school, they maintained their close friendship through frequent exchanges of letters. (The letters and postcards Kenji wrote to Hosaka form the third largest body of Kenji's extant correspondence.) SUGAWARA (1994) advanced Ozawa's argument by demonstrating that the intense and rocky personal relationship between the two men, as seen in Kenji's correspondence, helped inspire Kenji's literary works, and she persuasively argued that specific works of Kenji's literature, including *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, resulted from the suppressed pain Kenji felt having been estranged from his good friend Hosaka, with whom Kenji had greatly confided spiritual and literary matters (SUGAWARA 1994). Whereas Sugawara isolates their falling out in 1921 as being a result of a long-standing argument Kenji had with Hosaka about the latter's refusal to become a true believer of the *Lotus Sutra*, I believe one can be more specific in isolating the crucial strain on their relationship that ultimately caused it to fracture and thereby shape Kenji's literature: Hosaka's decision not to become a Kokuchūkai follower. For the cause, Sugawara stresses the lack of Hosaka's belief in the *Lotus Sutra*, but the evidence in Kenji's correspondence with Hosaka more

strongly suggests that Kenji thought it was necessary to become a formal member of the Kokuchūkai, not simply to revere the *Lotus Sutra*. Perhaps hidebound by rules, Kenji nonetheless felt that it was important to have a formal way to practice one's faith, as evidence from his letters and his notebooks will attest. Furthermore, Kenji's renewed interest (or nostalgia) overlaps with the period he penned *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, suggesting that there is a correlation between the Kokuchūkai and the story.

Ryūmonji Bunzo, as a Kokuchūkai adherent and an author of Nichiren studies, has contributed a uniquely informed perspective to the accumulated analysis of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* that helps tie the Kokuchūkai to the story. He demonstrates how Kenji's 1921 experiences at Kokuchūkai headquarters in Tokyo shaped the crucial imagery of the story through his examination of clues in specific images, such as Giovanni's ticket. Being greatly familiar with Kokuchūkai practices, beliefs, and the history of the organization, Ryūmonji skillfully isolates details and scenes in the story that reflect aspects of Kenji's seven-month stay in Tokyo and affiliation with the organization. In Ryūmonji's view, "Kenji wrote the story reminiscing about his life in Tokyo at the Kokuchūkai. The poor, lonely boy Giovanni is a subconscious expression of Kenji's Kokuchūkai experiences that were dormant within him for many years" (RYŪMONJI 1991, 104). In this article, I reframe Ryūmonji's Kokuchūkai findings and Sugawara's theory of the Kenji-Hosaka connection in order to demonstrate how Giovanni finds salvation in *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* through the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism.

### *Nichiren Buddhism under the Surface*

A close reading of the themes in the story demonstrates the presence of Buddhist concepts and particular Nichiren Buddhist teachings. To begin with, one of the ways the story's religious framework is more Buddhist than Christian is the way in which Giovanni's "journey" is circular. The cosmic train ultimately returns Giovanni back to his starting point. Unlike the other Christian passengers who disembark at their various heavenly stations, Giovanni returns full circle and finds his own "heaven" back on earth. Jacqueline Stone, in her work on the *Lotus Sutra* and Nichiren, identifies a common theme shared overall in Mahayana philosophical thought, namely that "this world and the pure land are not, ultimately, separate places but are in fact nondual: a deluded mind sees the world as a place of suffering, while an awakened person sees it as the buddha realm" (STONE 2009, 211). Later, in my discussion of Kenji's utilization of Nichiren's concept of *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千 (three thousand realms in a single thought moment), I will demonstrate how Giovanni's perceptions about life, death, and the afterlife have changed by the end of the story to the point

where he can imagine a Christian heaven, scientific notions of time and space, and even the ghost of his friend all being part of a larger cosmic design, one underpinned by Nichiren's concepts. Although Kenji does not overtly attribute Giovanni's new understanding to Nichiren's *ichinen sanzen*, I will demonstrate how Kenji blended Nichiren's teachings into Giovanni's experiences and altered world view.

Another aspect of Nichiren Buddhism seen in the story is how Giovanni's actions are changed once his perceptions have been reshaped by the experience of the train ride. One of Nichiren's contributions to the spread and understanding of the *Lotus Sutra* in Japan is advocacy of the "third doctrine" (*daisan no hōmon* 第三の法門) of the Buddha's teaching. TAMURA Yoshirō describes this concept: "The teachings in this realm of the *Lotus Sutra* emphasize the need to endure the trials of life and to practice the true law. In short, they advocate human activity in the real world, or bodhisattva practices" (1989, 43). In an earlier draft, at the story's end Kenji has Professor Bulcaniro help Giovanni return from his dreamlike experience on the train, and understand how his mission on this earth is to help all people achieve true happiness. In the final version of the story, Kenji completely removed the professor from the story. Giovanni internalizes Campanella's death before dashing off to bring milk back home to his sick mother. The text implies that Giovanni has a renewed sense of purpose to dedicate himself to helping others, keeping the spirit of an earlier version of the story with its overt "bodhisattva practices" message. Thus, although the final version of the story may not contain explicit Buddhist references, I argue that there is a strong case to adopt a Nichiren Buddhist reading of the text.

Scholar and critic YOSHIMOTO Takaaki has written on a number of occasions how the story is "*Lotus Sutra*-like" (*Hokkekyō-teki* 法華經的) or "Nichiren-Buddhist-like" (*Nichirensū-teki* 日蓮宗的) (2012, 62). The way that Kenji describes death in the story is one example. On another occasion, Yoshimoto even suggested that the story of the two boys and their relationship to their parents is a modern variation on the story in chapter twenty-seven of the *Lotus Sutra* (The former affairs of the King Fine Adornment), where the brothers help their father become a devotee of the *Lotus* in order to save him (YOSHIMOTO 2012, 273). Yoshimoto describes how Kenji twisted the *Lotus* story by having Giovanni and Campanella, though not brothers, worry about the respect for their mothers (Giovanni's sick mother and Campanella's presumably dead mother in the Coal Sack), not for their fathers (YOSHIMOTO 2012, 274). While not running counter to Christian teachings, filial piety, which is particularly stressed by Nichiren, strongly guided Kenji. Yoshimoto has elsewhere pointed out that filial piety is one of the main lessons Kenji took from the Nichiren in his struggle to convert his own mother and father from Pure Land Buddhism



to Nichiren Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> Yoshimoto has stressed on several occasions how the story's message of salvation overlaps with that of Nichiren's, but he did not fully explain how either Giovanni's ticket to salvation or the train ride is an expression of Nichiren's teachings.

The common opinion among most Kenji scholars is that when Kenji failed to convert his parents and his friend Hosaka Kanai to his faith, he stopped being a "fanatic" Kokuchūkai member sometime after 1921. One finds this designation in Horio Seishi's biography of Kenji, which has not only maintained its dominance in Kenji Studies, but also is now included as the authoritative biography within the most recent *zenshū* (SKMKZ 16: 2). Sakai Tadaichi, another important biographer and scholar of Kenji, like Horio, helped perpetuate the view that Kenji transcended his fanatic period and then found his ideas and inspiration in a more generic idealism: "We can say that rather than the teachings from the Kokuchūkai, Kenji's faith was grounded in the individualistic idealism of the Taisho period" (SAKAI 1968, 102). The bias against Kokuchūkai is also visible in other scholarly works such as HARA (1997). For example, although the language of the entry for "Tanaka Chigaku" in Hara's dictionary has been updated in the 1997 version ("Research on the connections between [Tanaka, the Kokuchūkai, and Kenji] still is insufficient") from the original 1989 edition, the final point of both versions of the entry is the same: "The mindset [*naimen*] of Kenji, which resulted from being drummed up by Tanaka's stance on proselytizing practices, is still a great point of discussion. Kenji was enthralled [*keitōburi*] with Chigaku to an extent that seems abnormal from what we can see in his correspondence" (HARA 1989, 443; 1997, 453).

What is worse is that there is a tendency in scholarship on Kenji's religious outlook to omit and gloss over Kenji's specific ties to Nichiren Buddhism. Instead of creating a rounded understanding of Kenji's faith, these scholars have promoted a view that Kenji's faith was that of a "relationship" with a "timeless dehistoricized Buddhism," as IGUCHI has keenly observed (2006, 135). This general consensus has negatively shaped the reception of Kenji's works as being generically Buddhist or generically religious, and, like Iguchi, I would argue it is deleterious to our understanding of Kenji's works. For years, it has

9. Yoshimoto says, "In the *Kaimokushō* [The opening of the eyes], Nichiren's criticism broadened and deepened. All of the founders [of Japanese Buddhist sects], except for Saichō, from Kūkai through the disciples of Hōnen, become targets to refute. If you do not place the *Lotus Sutra* as the King among all of the sutras, then in Nichiren's faith you are slandering the law. Once Kenji saw things the way Nichiren did, he had to passionately see his father Masajirō as a part of a sect that slandered the *Lotus*. But, according to Nichiren, filial piety is the first and foremost duty among all of the teachings of the Great Vehicle. The deeper young Kenji immersed himself into Nichiren's faith, the more he had to see the absolute contradiction of this" (YOSHIMOTO 1996, 24).

been far more politically correct to say Kenji created his own faith rather than try to examine how Kenji, a devout believer in the *Lotus Sutra* and, most likely, a lifelong Kokuchūkai practitioner of the faith, could write a story like *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* and how the story might then express those specific beliefs. Thus, the story sometimes has been taken to reflect the author's "syncretic" view of religion even though he had not frequented Christian churches since he was an elementary school student, far from the time in the late 1920s and 1930s when he was writing the story. One can trace back the origins of this bias by looking at the influence Horio has had on the 1964 *zenshū* (MKDZ) and all subsequent editions. In MKZ, the editors make such a claim, asserting Kenji quickly moved on from his "fanatic" phase after 1921.<sup>10</sup> This claim is noticeably toned down from a statement originally made in 1966 by Horio, who was an earlier *zenshū* editor:

[Kenji's] faith remained steadfast in his life and he did continue to create works of *Lotus* literature, but as for his involvement with the Kokuchūkai, after his initial joining [in 1920] it gradually changed and cooled. He became critical [of it] but that never appeared on the surface [of his writing]. That was because the Kokuchūkai's activities were becoming more focused on nationalism [*kokutai-shugi* 国体主義] and they were carrying out a role in making the faith more fascist ... Kenji remained a devoted believer in the *Lotus Sutra*, but separated himself from the Kokuchūkai and attempted to single-handedly create his own beliefs. (HORIO 1991, 157)

Ueda Akira criticized Horio, pointing out that he offers no evidence whatsoever to support his claim that "Kenji separated himself from the Kokuchūkai and attempted to single-handedly create his own beliefs" (UEDA 1992, 633). Moreover, Ueda, through his research on the Kokuchūkai house organ, *Heavenly Task People's Gazette* (*Tengyō minpō* 天業民報, hereafter *HTPG*), finds that the Kokuchūkai did not become more fascistic over time, as one might infer from Horio's description, but one does find that in the years of Kenji's most enthusiastic and "fanatic" embrace of the organization the tabloid ran articles on the front page asserting the close relationship between Nichirenism and Japanese imperialist expansion. Ueda charged that Horio twisted the facts and overlooked evidence. "This is not the attitude," UEDA writes, "one expects from a scholar of the humanities" (1992, 634).

Despite Ueda's complaint, even today there is a notable bias in research on Kenji's works where mainstream scholars, following Horio's lead, acknowledge yet do not explore the depth of Kenji's ties to the Kokuchūkai. For example, despite Irisawa and Amazawa's thorough examination of the story, they discuss

10. "Kenji's fanaticism soon died down and one sees no traces of the Kokuchūkai in his letters in later years" (MKZ 9: 243).

only too briefly how the *Lotus Sutra* may have factored into the world view of Kenji's story and obfuscate the topic.<sup>11</sup> Yoshimoto, although he acknowledged the "Nichiren-Buddhist-like" elements in the story, made the following pronouncement, which best exemplifies the anti-Kokuchūkai bias in Kenji scholarship.

Kenji was drawn to the Nichiren's thought and the *Lotus Sutra* through Tanaka Chigaku's Kokuchūkai, but later he abandoned the Nichirenism of Tanaka Chigaku and moved towards his own physical experiences with *Lotus* faith through more direct contact with Nichiren. And then, at the very end, he went to a place where it was just him and the *Lotus Sutra*. That was when he discovered that science and religion were one. (YOSHIMOTO 1996, 16)

Here, Yoshimoto does not deny that Kenji remained a steadfast devotee of the *Lotus Sutra*, but he confidently claims that Kenji rejected Tanaka Chigaku's version of it. In my interpretation of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, I find elements of Nichiren's teachings in the story as well as other textual evidence produced around the time of the story's composition that suggests Kenji's involvement with Kokuchūkai factored into the story's direction and ideas.

Among the possible interpretations of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, one must consider that it is an expression of Nichiren Buddhist beliefs, which the author held and overtly articulated elsewhere in other works, notes, and correspondence. Two memos Kenji wrote to himself in the last five to six years of his life, most likely overlapping with the final period he wrote the story, suggest that he was consciously creating "*Lotus* [Sutra] literature." The mention of "*Lotus* literature" is found in the notebook he kept from late September 1931. This "Ame ni mo makezu" (Never losing to the rain) notebook, named so because it contains his signature poem, contains many transcriptions of the Kokuchūkai textual mandala (the Go-Honzon 御本尊) as well as a note about "the recommendation of [Kokuchūkai leader] Takachio Chiyō 高知尾智耀 to 'create *Lotus* literature' (*hokke bungaku no sōsaku* 法華文学の創作)," a memory of his meetings with Takachio a decade before. Takachiō, one of Tanaka Chigaku's lieutenants, explains the meaning of

11. The following excerpt from their published interview (*taidan*) indicates how these esteemed scholars dodge the subject of the role of the *Lotus Sutra* in the story:

Irisawa: Ah, in the end, [the story] is connected to the world of the *Lotus Sutra*, right? ... What we call scripture that is written is, ultimately, a book. What's more, what we call the sutras are not the sutras per se, because they are written expressions of various things about the virtues of the sutras. The sutra consists of [the act] of writing about the sutra.

Amazawa: That is certainly the case with the *Lotus Sutra*. Once you start asking what is the true form of a sutra, then all you do is peel away layers of the onion to learn more about the sutra.

Irisawa: That's what this work [*Ginga tetsudō no yoru*] is, it is that kind of text.

(IRISAWA and AMAZAWA 1990, 53)

this note in an essay. Recalling the time when Kenji met him, Takachio said he told Kenji,

When one has entered into the faith of the *Lotus* ... to spread its word each person takes one's own correct path to do it: the farmer, the plow; the merchant, the abacus; the writer, the pen; in the Latter Days of the Law [*mappō* 末法], this is the correct form of practice. (TAKACHIO 1992, 620)

Tkachio later commented that this is what Kenji internalized as “the creation of *Lotus* literature.” In the “Brothers and Sisters” notebook, which Kenji used until mid-September 1931 before switching to the “Ame ni mo makezu” one, he wrote this note in English, dating the story: “The Great Milky Way Rail Road. 9.6.1931.” Mentions of the Kokuchūkai and the story in these two consecutively used notebooks suggests Kenji was composing his cosmic story at the same time he continued to reflect on Kokuchūkai principles as well as practice Buddhism according to Tanaka's guidelines. Notwithstanding fluctuations in Kenji's connections with the Kokuchūkai, he may have attempted to use the story as a vehicle to make Buddhist teachings, a “*Lotus* literature,” accessible to a younger audience as “boys' stories” (*shōnen shōsetsu* 少年小説) as seen in memos the author made toward the end of his life.<sup>12</sup>

Giovanni's journey also is a reflection of the author's life, on his own failure to convince his good friend Hosaka to accept Nichiren's teachings. “Ginga tetsudō no

12. Two notes help contextualize as “boys' literature” the story in Kenji's oeuvre timeline. The first, “Creative Note 53” (“Zō 53” 造 53, [SKMKZ 13(2): 330]), written in the margin of the first page of *Tanka Manuscript B*, is titled “Boys' Stories” and is a list of four stories thought to be written in the last few years of Kenji's life. “Milky Way Station” (*Ginga sutēshon* 銀河ステーション) seems to be an alternative title or shorthand for “Ginga tetsudō no yoru.” “Creative Note 54” (“Zō 54” 造 54), another note written in the margins of a poem, lacks a title, but in it Kenji lists the same four stories that seem to be designed by Kenji as “long pieces” (*chōhen* 長編) and are grouped with “Ozbel [and the Elephant]” (“Otsuberu [to zō]” オツベルと象) and “General Son-Bayu [and the Three Brothers Physicians]” (“[Sannin kyōdai no isha to] Hokushu shogun” [三人兄弟の医者と]北守將軍). Another note (“Zō 56”) lists the same four stories with the memo “rewrite ms.” It also lists five other stories including “The Restaurant of Many Orders” (“Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” 注文の多い料理店) and “Gorsch the Cellist” (“Cero-hiki no Gōshu” セロ弾きのゴージュ) (see SKMKZ 13[2]: 332–33). In this memo, Kenji lists the story as “Ginga tetsudō” (Milky Way railway). He wrote this note on the back of the seventh page of the manuscript of the story “University Scholar Aoki's Bivouac” (“Aoki daigaku-shi no nojuku” 青木大学士の野宿). Kenji recycled the paper for this story and another, “General Son-Bayu and the Three Brothers Physicians” (published in July 1931), in order to add on the first three chapters of “Ginga tetsudō no yoru.” Quite likely, there was a progression of the story titles in Kenji's mind from “Ginga sutēshon” to “Ginga tetsudō” to “Ginga tetsudō no yoru.”

These two “creative” memos, combined with the content of two 1931 notebooks, collectively provide a portrait of the author who was attempting to regroup after a debilitating two-year sickness and come back as a writer of lengthy, more mature children's stories, including *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*—with renewed purpose to carry out the Kokuchūkai directive to write “*Lotus* literature.”

yoru” is likewise a narrative of the failure of Giovanni to realize his dream of having Campanella stay with him on the miraculous journey, just as Kenji failed to convince Hosaka Kanai to become a Kokuchūkai convert and join him on the path to spiritual salvation. Giovanni, like Kenji, is unable to realize his spiritual quest with an important friendship, and, in turn, he understands that he must accept loneliness. This crisis the protagonist feels is similar to the lonely struggle for salvation that Nichiren described, making the pain and isolation of this children’s story all the more understandable when placed within the context of Nichiren’s teachings.

### *Real Rivers, Cosmic Rivers, and Interspatial Rivers*

To first understand the Nichiren Buddhist elements of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, one must examine how Kenji layered multiple levels of religious symbols in the story’s two settings of the two rivers, the unnamed river of the town and the “Silver River” (*Ginga* 銀河, or the Milky Way galaxy). Much of the story’s “river” imagery is more earthly than cosmic. In the heavens of Kenji’s “Milky Way” the cosmic train runs along a river visiting island-like stations. Upon the boys’ visit to the Pliocene Coast (chapter 7), they can sense the invisible current of the cosmic river through which their train travels, and they are able to hold this “Silver River” (*Ginga*) sediment in their hands—no ordinary silt, but cosmic stardust. The only actual river in the town, which goes unnamed in the story, is an important place upon which the children float their “crow lanterns” (*karasu-uri* 烏瓜) at the climax of the Centaur Festival. Nonetheless, the town’s river is marked with danger. Giovanni’s mother warns him to have fun floating lanterns at the festival, but in chapter 3 she tells him, “Do not go into the river” (SKMKZ 11: 129). Zanelli and Campanella of course do so at their own risk and the latter dies trying to save his friend. Real rivers are hazardous, potentially deadly places. The imaginary river in the sky is one of discoveries and marvels. Thus, the juxtaposition of life and death is reproduced in the juxtaposition of the imaginary and real rivers in this story, yet by the story’s end the boundary between life and death, like the one between the real river and the imaginary river, becomes blurred. The Centaur Festival creates a short window of time where Giovanni and the reader can glimpse the dissolution of the boundary between death and life as these river settings—the real town river below and the “River of Heaven” above—briefly overlap. However, Kenji was updating and internationalizing the traditional Japanese festivals of Tanabata and O-Bon, where festival participants have long enjoyed imagining rivers as places where the living and the spirits come together. Thus, in order to understand how the religious dimension of Nichiren Buddhism frames this story, it is necessary to first examine how Kenji transformed traditional Japanese notions of the river as a liquid boundary between life and death into a more modern, science-fictional model, through

which Giovanni and Campanella travel to experience realms of both life and death.

Even in this cosmic story, Kenji prominently uses the earthly image of water, or more specifically, the river, an image with multiple Japanese traditional spiritual connotations. The title of the story in Japanese is “Ginga tetsudō no yoru” or “Night on the Silver River Railway.” Silver River, or *Ginga*, is an old word for the Milky Way, borrowed from the Chinese. “Ama no gawa” (or “Ama no kawa”—“River of Heaven”) is the more traditional Japanese expression. One can find the latter expression in poems as old as this one by Hitomaro (active 689–700) from *The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves* (*Man'yōshū* [ca. 785]):

<i>Ama no kawa</i>	Tell my beloved
<i>Yasu no watari ni</i>	That I wait, my boat in the water
<i>Fune ukete</i>	At Yasu Crossing
<i>Akitachi matsu to</i>	Ready the moment autumn comes
<i>Imo ni tsuge koso</i>	To launch upon the River in the Sky.

(CRANSTON 1993, 216)

Edwin CRANSTON explains this that poem is an early mention of Tanabata, a mid-year observance of the Milky Way imported from Tang China and “a large number of Man'yō poems were written on this theme” (1993, 216). The Tanabata festival celebrates the two lover stars, Vega (in Japanese, Tanabata—the Weaving Maid) and Altair (Hikiboshi). Taking place on the seventh day of the seventh month (of the lunar calendar, although today in Japan it is held on 7 July), the festival celebrates these great lovers on the one night they are permitted to leave their places in the heavens, coming together across the Milky Way, or “Ama no gawa,” on a bridge of magpies to share a night of love.

A similar poetic celebration of Tanabata is found in Bashō's famous *hokku* (or haiku) from the thirty-eighth section (“Echigo-ji”) of his travel diary, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (see BB 46: 91), where he celebrates his awe of both the cosmos and the sea.

荒海や佐渡に横たふ天の河  
*araumi ya / Sado ni yokotau / Ama no gawa*  
 Wild Sea! --  
 River of Heaven  
 that crosses over to Sado Island

In Bashō's *hokku* poem, the cosmos and the Sea of Japan share something in common: they seem to equally dwarf Bashō the viewer. In his imagination, the beautifully white stream of stars allows him to focus his eyes in the darkness on the distant island of Sado. At this point in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Bashō, aged forty-five, has crossed over the middle of the northern part

of Japan and comes down into present-day Niigata prefecture. He complains of chronic fatigue and being soaked, having walked through nine days of rain. One senses that the distant shores of Sado symbolize a resting place for his weary soul. Across the sea and across the sky above there was some sense of peace waiting for him. Haruo Shirane notes that Bashō originally reached this point on the fourth day of the Seventh Month (the lunar calendar) and wrote this poem, but later when he compiled it into a travel record he changed it to the sixth day of the Seventh Month, “thereby associating the Milky Way with Tanabata.” Shirane explains, “in this larger context, the island surrounded by ‘wild seas’ also embodies the longing of the exiles (and implicitly that of the poet) for their distant loved ones” (SHIRANE 1998, 243). Thus, from seventh-century Man’yō poems through Bashō’s seventeen-syllable verse of the Edo period (1600–1868), Tanabata has long been celebrated in traditional Japanese verse where poets described the “river of heaven” together with real or imagined bodies of water. Kenji’s story is a modern literary take on these festivals, reaffirming their connection to watery bodies.

More than Tanabata, perhaps O-Bon is the festival upon which Kenji more closely modeled details of his Centaur Festival to create the backdrop for his story of religious awakening on the cosmic river. Today, O-Bon occurs on 15 July or 15 August. O-Bon is a three-day festival welcoming one’s dead ancestors to come back to visit and stay in one’s house before symbolically releasing them back to the world of the dead by floating lighted lanterns, their spirits, across streams, rivers, and lakes (*tōrō-nagashi* 灯籠流し). It is no wonder that Campanella—who drowns in the river trying to save Zanelli when the latter fumbles getting his lantern into the water—materializes on Kenji’s locomotive to the stars. In the water he dies, and through space he travels to his afterlife destination, riding on the illuminated night train. O-Bon, with its triple connection of water, night, and death, is more likely the Japanese festival from which Kenji fashioned his Centaur Festival. For Kenji, in this story and in other works, water and space are overlapping realms through which we must journey after death.

Although we have these traditional precedents for the setting of the story, Kenji decidedly modernizes the “Silver River” (*Ginga*) in this story, which is set in a town that is somewhat Japanese, somewhat foreign. In addition to the story having characters with Italian names, Kenji emphasizes the milkiness of the galaxy, which comes from its name in English. In a note from 6 September 1931, Kenji wrote in English: “Mental Sketch Modified: The Great Milky Way Rail Road / Kenji [sic] Miyazawa.” Milk is one of the themes, or as poet and scholar Amazawa Taijirō calls it, a “leitmotif” of the story (AMAZAWA 1990, 68). Addressing scenes from the teacher’s afternoon lecture in chapter 1, in which he compares the galaxy to a “a giant stream of milk ... even more like a river, and the stars become minute fatty globules floating inside the white liquid” (PULVERS 1996, 17), to the small plot line of Giovanni’s mother’s missing milk,

Amazawa playfully argues about the importance of the first three chapters, being generated only at the end of the composition process, effectively making them an introduction to the *honban* (main act) of the text that begins with chapter 4. “Had there not been the coincidence of the milk not being delivered to Giovanni’s mother, would Giovanni have dreamt of the Milky Way Train?” (AMAZAWA 1990, 68). Thus, by making the “Silver River” more “milky,” Kenji made his story about space more modern and international. While depicting images of traditional Japanese customs (such as the use of the word *Ginga*, the similarities of the Centaur Festival to Japanese O-Bon, and so on), the story also prominently veers into new territory by renaming or reframing the Japanese landscape with exotic markers.

Perhaps it is no surprise that Kenji, who grew up and lived his adult life in rural Iwate, not in urban centers like Tokyo or Osaka, would often write about rivers and mountains. Although Kenji was more of a mountain climber and hiker than a fisherman, he loved to write about the rivers of Iwate prefecture. He poetically described the Nakatsu River in Morioka and the Kitakami River in Hanamaki in a number of his works. Since Kenji lived in an inland (*bonchi* 盆地) area of Iwate, he did not see the ocean until he was fifteen years old at Jōdo-ga-hama 浄土ヶ浜, at Miyako, one of the places later devastated by the 11 March 2011 tsunami.<sup>13</sup> In the story, Kenji makes a number of distinctions between rivers and the sea; the most important reference to the sea is the cruel mention by Giovanni’s classmates of the otter coat (*rakko no uwagi* らっこの上着) present from his father. Since Giovanni’s father is a fisherman on the “edges of Northern sea . . . in the Pacific,” the coat his father is bringing him must be made from sea otter pelts (SKMKZ 11: 154). The otter coat is a stigma for Giovanni and prevents him from joining in harmoniously with the group of boys, perhaps, as NAKAMURA suggests, because of the class difference between these upper-class children and Giovanni, whose family is working class (1992, 132–33). Elsewhere, in earlier versions of the story, Kenji’s characters express an interest in the ocean, but mainly they prefer to see their cosmic landscape of the Milky Way as that of the river. For example, in the

13. HORIO believes Kenji wrote this poem when he saw the ocean at Miyako for the first time in May 1912 when he and his classmates took a school trip to the coast (1991, 55). Poem 10 from the *Kakō B* (歌稿 B) collection captures his first ocean encounter (SKMKZ 1: 105).

まほろしとうつつとわかずなみがしら  
 きほひ寄するをあやしみりたり  
 Not knowing if they are real  
 or illusion,  
 the wavecaps—  
 I stand there feeling strange  
 watching them surge into me



first manuscript, Kenji describes in detail the sea creatures that inhabit the Silver River, which I shall provisionally call the “sea creatures debate” (SKMKZ 10: 17 [version 1] and 10: 119 [version 2]). The children, including the Titanic victims, see porpoises (*iruka* 海豚) and whales (*kujira* 鯨) in the ether-like cosmic waves. At one point, nettled by Campanella and the girl discussing the possibilities of sea animals living in the “freshwater” cosmos, Giovanni says, “I don’t care if I’ve never seen a whale before, let’s just get out of here” (SKMKZ 11: 157 [version 4]). Although Kenji later excised the sea creatures debate by the third (manuscript) version, this line escaped his notice and it makes no sense in the story’s definitive version today. Over the four manuscript versions of the story, the sea was a source of shame and confusion, whereas the river consistently remained one of wonder and discovery. With only these few exceptions, Kenji shifted the imagery of water from that of the sea to that of the river.

Usually, rivers and oceans in Buddhism are symbolically used to indicate the “other shore” (*kanata*) of the afterlife, but Kenji used rivers, more than oceans, as places where two worlds, the living and the dead, coexist, and thereby established rivers as his own personal symbol for the principle of nonduality. Stone explains that Nichiren had incorporated the teaching of nonduality of the Chinese Tiantai scholars with “the effect of valorizing the present, phenomenal world, not as a place of suffering to be escaped but as inseparable from the realm of ultimate principle” (STONE 2009, 213). Nichiren expresses the concept of nonduality in *On the Contemplation of the Mind and the Object of Worship* (*Kanjin honzon shō* 観心本尊抄 [1273]): “This [world] is none other than the three realms, which encompass the three thousand realms of one’s mind” (YAMPOLSKY 1990, 150). STONE writes that, for Nichiren, the immanent buddha realm is an “ever-present reality that one can enter through faith” (2009, 221).

This teaching of nonduality resonated in Kenji’s writing and in his communications with his peers. Writing to Hosaka Kanai, Kenji described how the world of hell existed within him as a black river, in this disturbing letter written sometime in late 1918:

In my world, a black river with a fast current flows. Many people—both the dead and the blue living ones—make their journey down this river. The blue people stretch out their long arms and violently thrash about, but with the flow of the river they go. The blue people extend their long, long arms and grab the legs of the people floating in front of them. Some grab their hair, drowning them, and float themselves up to the front. Others, full of anger, claw at the bodies and bite into them. The anger of the drowned transforms into a gas of black iron color and envelops from all sides those floating in the river. Am I one of the floating people? Whether I am or not, I do not know. Anyway, these days I feel exactly like the people in that black river.

(SKMKZ 15: 107 [letter 89])

Kenji's letter to Hosaka expresses how the author cannot separate his own existence from the existence of others. Our lives interpenetrate even with the denizens of death. Later, when Kenji wrote *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, he reprised that sense of desperate flailing in the river when Marceau tells Giovanni of Campanella's attempt to save Zanelli: "Zanelli was trying to push a lantern down the river from the boat... Campanella dove right in after him and he pushed Zanelli back to the boat, and Kato got a hold of him, but then nobody could see Campanella after that" (PULVERS 1996, 229). Giovanni temporarily coexists with dead people—Campanella as well as the other drowning victims, the Titanic passengers—on the Milky Way train, a special vehicle that travels through the River of Heaven.

Kenji used the same gothic and gloomy scenery from his letter in a tanka sequence (*rensaku* 連作), entitled "Flowing Current of Blue People" (*Aobito no nagare* 青びとのながれ), which provides an early example of what would become a common trope in his poems and stories: the river as a place where human and inhuman realms overlap. According to the dating system in his *Tanka Manuscript A* (*Kakō A* 歌稿 A), Kenji wrote these poems "sometime after May 1918," a period that overlaps with the previous letter to Hosaka. The language and imagery of the poem are quite similar, suggesting a continuity in Kenji's personal vocabulary of river imagery, upon which he would later expand in "Ginga tetsudō no yoru":

ああこはこれいづちの河のけしきぞや人と死びととむれながれたり

Ah! What river  
has scenery like this?  
Living and dead people  
flow down in groups

うすしろなるひとは青うでさしのべて前行くものあしをつかめり

People of pale white color  
extend their pale arms  
grabbing onto the legs  
of those that float ahead of them

あたまのみわれをはなれてはぎしりつ白きながれをよぎり行くなり

there goes  
just a head  
floating away from me  
its teeth grit together  
going down the pale white stream<sup>14</sup>

Transforming the prose description of his "black river" into tanka poetry, Kenji identified his poetic persona with death, suffering, and the river. In these

14. See SKMKZ 1: 89–90, poems 680, 683, and 689 (an earlier version).

poems, these grotesque and inhuman bodies, such as the decapitated head “floating away from me,” only become more intensely felt and internalized within the poetic speaker. The floating head with its “teeth grit together” also reminds one of Kenji’s alter-ego, the Asura, which he developed in later years, appearing in his 1922 poem, “Spring and Asura (mental sketch modified)” (“Haru to shura”).<sup>15</sup> These “Flowing Current” tanka, like the “Black River” letter, reveal how in Kenji’s early literary development, the river was an image imbued with a gloomy sense of death-in-life and life-in-death. Kenji continued to use such imagery for both the real river and the imaginary cosmic- and real-river settings of “Ginga tetsudō no yoru.”

In his tanka, produced in a ten-year period from 1911 through 1921, Kenji normally sketched nature instead of human drama—and there are few poems in the tanka corpus that are as dramatic as these scenes of dead, almost zombie-like, drowning victims. Unlike the depiction of Campanella’s death in “Ginga tetsudō no yoru,” the poor souls in this poetic sequence are unusually grotesque.

肩せなか喰みつくされししにびとのよみがへり来ていかりなげきし

As it started returning to life  
the dead person  
angrily bemoaned  
having its shoulders and back  
chewed upon

(SKMKZ 1: 90 [Poem 687])

Hirasawa, following Ozawa Toshirō, comments that unlike the famous “Hell and Heaven Map” (“Jigoku gokuraku zu” 地獄極楽図) tanka *rensaku* by Saitō Mokichi 斎藤茂吉 in his 1913 collection *Red Light* (*Shakkō* 赤光), certainly a possible literary influence, Kenji’s world in these river poems becomes the “undifferentiated realm shared by the living and dead” (*shōshi mibunka* 生死未分化) (HIRASAWA 1993, 102). Hirasawa argues that Kenji’s early world view, as seen in his tanka writing (from 1911 to 1921), is one concerned with the world in which the differentiation between the living and the dead breaks down and becomes one “undifferentiated realm.” “Thus, even the ‘dead people’ in the poems can ‘return to life’ and ‘lament and rage’—this is the ‘form of the world’ that Kenji entitled ‘The Flowing Current of Blue People’” (HIRASAWA 1993, 102). The “undifferentiated realm” shared by the living and dead seen in these poems is quite similar to the later story’s setting of the Milky Way and its interstellar train, especially since

15. Kenji internalizes the Asura, the third of the six Buddhist realms of rebirth, as seen in this except of the poem: “The blue color and bitter taste of Wrath / He walks gnashing his teeth, spitting, and pacing back and forth / through the bottom of the light of April’s atmospheric layer / This solitary Asura is me” (SKMKZ 2: 22). For more on Kenji’s use of the Asura as his alter-ego, see HOLT 2013.

many of the passengers on the train—Campanella and the Titanic victims—have come to be on the train because they drowned. Those characters, like the floating blue people in the 1918 tanka sequence, are trapped somewhere between life and death. Although Kenji describes the drowning victims in his story with far more dignity, the connection between their shared limbo-like states is that they gather at their respective rivers, the Black and the Milky. The river, in Kenji's oeuvre, is a place where the dead and the living commingle and suffer together.

Even in Kenji's life, as attested by his correspondence and his autobiographical stories, rivers greatly fascinated him for their power. Although Kenji was not an athletic swimmer, he did like to swim. Nonetheless, a number of times he mentions drowning in his writings, revealing an anxiety he felt about river swimming. Employed as an agricultural teacher from 1921 to 1926, Kenji often took his teenage students for leisurely swims in the nearby Kitakami River in Hanamaki. In "The English Coast" ("Igirisu kaigan" イギリス海岸), a collection of vignettes about his trips with his students to the Kitakami, he recalls with shame how he once ridiculed the area patrolman, who also served as a lifeguard for the river. "Until that day, when I listened to him, I had been saying to myself that if any member of my class happened to be drowned in the water, I could do nothing for him, but only plunge into the water to death with him" (TAKAHASHI 2005, 27). Like the unnamed river in "Ginga tetsudō no yoru," in Kenji's time the Kitakami was a powerful river, one of the biggest rivers in the prefecture.<sup>16</sup> In Kenji's life, the Kitakami River was a place where he felt a sense of shared community with his students, but at the same time he was fearful of its power to kill. In "Ginga tetsudō no yoru," Giovanni's mother warns him not to go into the river lest he drown, suggesting a connection between this unnamed river and Kenji's Kitakami River, the river next to his "English Coast."

Judging from Kenji's early poetic period (for example, these 1918 poems) through his late prose-writing phase, as represented first by "English Coast" and then "Ginga tetsudō no yoru," the pattern of rivers as an "undifferentiated realm," discovered by Hirasawa, runs across more than a decade of Kenji's writing. Hirasawa credits Kenji for creating this complex world view, but most likely Kenji borrowed this view of overlapping or interpenetrating realms from Nichiren's teaching of *ichinen sanzen*.

*Nichiren's Ichinen Sanzen and Kenji's "Switching the Places of History and Religion"*

Nichiren stressed the importance of the teaching of interpenetrating worlds, which came to be called by interpreters of the *Lotus Sutra* as "three-thousand

16. His brother Miyazawa Seiroku recalls how it had become quite polluted years after Kenji's death; see MIYAZAWA 1991, 149. Visitors to the "English coast" these days would find a shallower stream than the powerful river Kenji described in his works.

realms in a single thought moment” (*ichinen sanzen*). This teaching is important because it suggests how all beings, even insentient beings (like plants), are all connected together and whose karma is also in turn connected. Quoting from Zhiyi’s *Great Concentration and Insight* (Jp. *Makashikan* 摩訶止觀), Nichiren opens *The Object of Worship* with this definition of the term: “The mind at each moment is endowed with the Ten Worlds. At the same time, each of the Ten Worlds is endowed with all the others, so that one mind actually possesses one hundred worlds. Each of these worlds in turn possesses thirty realms, which means that in the one hundred worlds there are three thousand realms. These three thousand realms of existence are all possessed by the mind in a single moment” (YAMPOLSKY 1990, 150). The ten worlds consist of the six realms of reincarnation (*rokudō* 六道: hell, hungry spirits, animals, asuras, humans, and heavenly beings) and the four realms of enlightened beings (voice hearers, the self-enlightened ones, the bodhisattvas, and the buddhas).

Nichiren explained how each of the ten realms exist simultaneously within us, with the analogy of the range of emotions one can see on a person’s face. Acknowledging that “if [*ichinen sanzen*] were easy for you to believe in, it would not be the Buddha’s true teaching,” he nonetheless provides a simple way for us to understand how in our own lives we can sense being interpenetrated by the Ten Worlds:

When we look from time to time at a person’s face, we find him sometimes joyful, sometimes enraged, and sometimes calm. At times greed appears in the person’s face, at times foolishness, and at times perversity. Rage is the world of Hell, greed is that of Hungry Ghosts, foolishness is that of Animals, perversity is that of Asura, joy is that of heaven, and calmness is that of Humans. These worlds, the six paths, are all present in the physical appearance of the person’s face. The remaining four noble worlds are hidden and dormant and do not appear in the face, but if we search carefully, we can tell that they are there.

(YAMPOLSKY 1990, 155)

Although Nichiren’s explanation may seem to be nothing more than a medieval description of emotional states or a comment on psychology, his emphasis on *ichinen sanzen* is important because the concept provides the basis in his teachings for salvation from suffering. Salvation is not something for which we have to strive, instead we are born with the potential to be saved. Jacqueline Stone explains the importance of this concept for Nichiren in the context of thirteenth-century Japanese religion. “For Nichiren as for his Tendai contemporaries, the ultimate teaching (which he identifies as ‘the three thousand realms in a single thought-movement in actuality’) represents a shift in perspective, in which enlightenment is understood, not as the fruit of a process of cultivation having beginning, middle, and end, but as inherent from the outset” (STONE 1999, 266). “Without *ichinen sanzen*,” Nichiren wrote, “the seed of enlightenment, sen-

tient beings cannot attain enlightenment, and any statue or image would be an object of worship in name alone” (YAMPOLSKY 1990, 164). With this connection, Nichiren also established the doctrinal basis for the use of the Object of Worship (the Go-Honzon, 御本尊), the textual mandala or concrete object used for religious practices, because it transmits the essence of the *Lotus Sutra* since it equally possesses *ichinen sanzen*, and thus can lead the believer to enlightenment. Kenji highly prized his copy of the Go-Honzon, given to him upon joining the Kokuchūkai, and he kept it close to him and often copied it in his notebooks.

*Ichinen sanzen* was particularly valued by Nichiren, who expressed contempt for the Kegon and Shingon schools, who took this concept, which was derived from the *Lotus Sutra*, yet they did not revere the *Lotus* as their primary teaching. “How pitiful that T’ien-t’ai’s successors allowed those thieves ... to steal the priceless gem of *ichinen sanzen* and then, ironically, became their followers!” (YAMPOLSKY 1990, 152). For Nichiren, only the *Lotus Sutra* contained the “jewel which is the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*” (141). To believe and study the concept of *ichinen sanzen* without upholding the *Lotus Sutra* was tantamount to a sin.

These Tendai and Shingon leaders in their present existence will fall into the realm of Hungry Ghosts, and after death will find themselves in the Avici Hell. *Even if they retire to the mountain forests and meditate intensively on ichinen sanzen, or retire to a quiet spot and devote themselves to the three mysteries, if they do not understand the times or the people’s capacity and perceive which of the two methods, shōju 撰受 [peaceful practices] or shakubuku 折伏 [forceful conversions], is appropriate, then they can never free themselves from the sufferings of birth and death.* (YAMPOLSKY 1990, 145)

I emphasized the final part of this quote from Nichiren’s *The Opening of the Eyes* because that statement is one of the many passages from Nichiren’s works Kenji excised.<sup>17</sup> Among his extant notes, there is a set in which Kenji compiled quotes from Nichiren and other scriptural material, which he entitled “The Writings on *Shōju* and *Shakubuku*: Critique of the Priests and Laity” (*Shōshaku go-mon, Sōzoku go-han* 撰折御文僧俗御判). Presumably Kenji assembled his reference notes from Tanaka Chigaku’s *Theory of Our Nichiren School’s Peaceful and Violent Proselytizing Practices* (*Honke shōshaku-ron* 本化撰折論 [1902]) in order to effectively proselytize the Nichiren faith as formulized by Tanaka Chigaku. The concept of *ichinen sanzen* runs from Nichiren through Tanaka Chigaku to Kenji, who reformulated it into an accessible metaphor of a journey through wondrous places in his “Ginga tetsudō no yoru.”

17. See SKMKZ 14: 310. In the companion book for that volume, the editors present research from Ogura Toyofumi who suggests these notes were probably written in the summer of 1920 or at the latest of autumn or winter of that year; see SKMKZ 14 (2): 277.

At the Pliocene Coast, Kenji uses the comic figure of the archeologist to express *ichinen sanzen*, although the character yearns to prove his own scientific and historical point of view as correct. Although the religious views, such as those of Christianity, far outnumber those of scientific rationalism in the text, he adds science to the number of perspectives on existence that Campanella and Giovanni sample before returning to their seats on the train. The archeologist's lesson to the boys is that time, like space, is a relative concept, strongly affected by the biases of the observer. Our existence is just as relative as that of the *bos*, the giant bovine whose bones Giovanni and Campanella stumble over at the Pliocene Coast. "No," he says,

We need him as evidence. You see, we know this place is a magnificent thick stratum, and we've got all the proof we need that it was formed 1,200,000 years ago. But some others don't see it in that light, claiming that it might be just wind, water or empty sky. Follow?  
(PULVERS 1996, 103)

Among the "others [who] don't see it in that light," we can count Nichiren's followers, including Kenji. Kenji is playfully teasing the opposition, the proponents of scientific objectivity, here with his comic treatment of their representative, the archeologist. On the other hand, the archeologist allows for a greater, almost spiritual relativism, by suggesting that his archeological dig site should not simply be some museum piece confirming our human-centric view of history. Instead it will prompt others to reconsider their own self-centered perspective. In other words, there is no reason to believe we will remain the dominant form of life. Beings from other realms will replace us in time. Even for this archeologist, science gives way to faith. "The professor's finds serve as proof of the validity of another usually unseen dimension of existence," Sarah STRONG explains in the reader's guide for her translation. "This quasi-scientific yet metaphysical 'fourth dimension' is of the utmost importance to Kenji as he pursues the course of the Milky Way Railway" (1991, 100). Unlike Strong, I argue that Kenji's "metaphysical" concerns can be understood in specific terms: Nichiren's *ichinen sanzen*. The archeologist's lesson is reaffirmed in Kenji's poems and stories, where he often imagined places as overlapping multiple spaces, shared by humans and nonhumans. Kenji had voiced a similar faith-based epistemological view, grounded in *ichinen sanzen*, to challenge the assumption of human primacy in his *Spring and Asura* collection.

Prefiguring the archeologist's speech, the following excerpts from the "Poem Preface" ("Jo" 序) of *Spring and Asura*, dated 20 January 1924, reaffirm not only how Kenji consistently viewed life, but also indicate influence from Nichiren's articulation of *ichinen sanzen*.

*About these things then, while people and the Milky Way (Ginga) and Asuras (shura) and sea cucumbers and such  
eat cosmic dust, or, breathe the air or blue water and such  
each in their own ways are probably thinking up fresh ontologies*

but in the end *they all are part of a unified landscape of our feelings*.  
 It is just that these landscapes, which are carefully recorded,  
 are these landscapes recorded exactly as they looked and felt  
 so if it shows nihil then nihil itself appears as it is,  
 to such an extent that I think *they will share things in common with everyone*.

(SKMKZ 2: 8)

In this early section of the poem (marked with my emphasis), although Kenji does not enumerate as many as three thousand realms, he lists exemplars such as the realms of the Asura, the Milky Way, humans, and even the lowly sea cucumber all ending up as parts in the “unified landscape of our feelings,” or one single thought moment, shared “in common with everyone.” Later in the poetic preface, Kenji describes how we too might be discovered in the “layer of frozen nitrogen” by later generations of scientists. This poetic preamble is a precursor to the type of lesson Kenji has the archeologist give in the story. Most likely, Kenji wrote this five to six years before the story. Both express the view that humanity’s existence, like that of the *bos*, could be differently interpreted by successive generations of possibly nonhuman beings:

For example, somewhere in about two thousand years from now  
 a considerably different kind of geology will be popular  
 and evidence deemed considerable will be uncovered from the successive  
 layers of the past  
 All of the people then will think that, some 2,000 years prior,  
 colorless peacocks filled the sky blue  
 and professors of cutting-edge universities will uncover  
 amazing fossils from the most gorgeous layer of frozen nitrogen.  
 Or perhaps, on the surface layer of Cretaceous sandstone  
 they might discover the giant footprint  
 of transparent humans.

(SKMKZ 2: 9–10)

Borrowing again from Hirasawa’s idea of the river being a “undifferentiated realm shared by the living and the dead” (HIRASAWA 1993, 102), one notes how the different realms of Buddhist existence, namely humans and the old Vedic demigods, the asuras, overlap at this place where water and land meet. Another nickname Kenji had for the Kitakami riverbank was “Asura’s Beach” (*Shura no nagisa* 修羅の渚), which adds to the number of overlapping realms the poet saw in this area of his hometown. In “The English Coast,” Kenji described how he enjoyed imagining the banks of the Kitakami River as the coast of Dover in England. This elegant visual conceit (or *mitate* 見立て) is actually a tripled image of Hanamaki’s Kitakami River, the Dover Coast, and the world as it looked in the Jurassic period some 1,200,000 years ago. In the early and late works of Kenji’s oeuvre, one often finds river imagery used to mark a dangerously liquid boundary



between life and death. Judging from his works, the river also has a powerful association in Kenji's mind as a place where the flow of time can be seen and keenly felt. Time is not just linear time, but cyclical time where the worlds of older living creatures (the *bos* of the Jurassic period) can be sensed by humans of the present age (and we too, will perhaps be similarly imagined by future earth dwellers). These examples of conflated time and space, as focalized in the river, from "Ginga tetsudō no yoru" as well as those from other stories and poems, demonstrate Kenji's penchant to complicate, or saturate, landscapes with multiple perspectives and in most of these instances he does so using overt or implied Buddhist terms or ideas. These poetic associations were born out of a time when Kenji was a fervent believer and proselytizer for the Nichiren faith in 1921 and it is reasonable to believe that they continued to guide him in the writing of his late-period prose masterpiece, *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*. The mutual overlapping of spaces—real, historical, and imagined—much like the Buddhist realms of life, death, and rebirth—is a key that helps us understand how the images and concepts of *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* are filtered through the Nichiren Buddhist idea of *ichinen sanzen*.

Although Kenji was extremely religious, he was also a trained scientist. His letters, stories, and poems reveal that he keenly felt religion and science were not mutually exclusive perspectives on life. He sought to integrate religion and science but also to tip the balance in religion's—Nichiren Buddhism's—favor. Thus, in the story, the visions of life and death, as envisioned by both science and Christianity, are simply more "worlds" ultimately interpreted together on this single night train, or "one vehicle" of Nichiren Buddhism. Nichiren's concept of *ichinen sanzen* connects and therefore frames all of the interpreted worlds, or, to borrow an image from the text, *ichinen sanzen* links these visited worlds on the tracks of the Milky Way night train. Through the metaphor of the Milky Way railway, Kenji created an epistemological order, with Nichiren's *Lotus*-based faith (with the principle of *ichinen sanzen*) ultimately subsuming science and other religions.

As evidence of Kenji's desire to promote religion over empiricism, he wrote various notes and letters on his thoughts on religion and its place vis-à-vis history and the sciences. One memo indicates the continuity, again, in Kenji's Nichiren-influenced faith from 1920 through his later years. In this memo, dated to sometime after April 1924, Kenji writes out a four-step plan to presumably defend "faith from the threat of science."<sup>18</sup> He outlines the problem and remedy. The subtitle of this memo, explaining his goal, is "to make the [existence of] Ten

18. See "Deliberation Memos" (*Shisaku memo* 思索メモ), number 1, in SKMKZ 13(2): 262. The memo is found on the back of the manuscript of poem 74, "Eastern Cloud Quickly Burns with Honey Color" ("Higashi no kumo wa hayaku mo mitsu no iro ni moe" 東の雲はやくも蜜のいろに燃え), which is dated 20 April 1924 and part of Kenji's planned second volume of *Spring and Asura*, a collection he had worked on from 1924 through 1926. The poem is found in SKMKZ 3: 48–49.

Worlds undeniable,” referring to the ten-realms (*jikkai* 十界) of Buddhist cosmology. In point one of the memo, he writes: “The existence of Other Spaces: the Heavenly Beings (*ten* 天) and Hungry Ghosts (*gaki* 餓鬼) realms.” There is a side note that explains: “From Hallucinations to Dreams and our Existence (*gensō oyobi yume to jitsuzai* 幻想及夢と実在).” Ryūmonji argues there is a connection here with “*Ginga tetsudō no yoru*,” explaining why Giovanni is able to board the Milky Way Railway once he slipped into a dream in chapter 4 and why he returns to the human realm, waking up at the end of chapter 9 (RYŪMONJI 1991, 71). Like Nichiren, who felt *ichinen sanzen* was difficult to understand yet tried to help his audience understand it, Kenji similarly notes the difficulty in visualizing the Ten Worlds by indicating that science constrains the imaginative powers of faith and that people only understand the realm of the Devas (Heavenly Beings) and Hungry Ghosts as dreams and hallucinations. Taken within the whole of Kenji’s oeuvre, the memo, dated sometime after 1924, seems to be a self-directed prescription for Kenji to situate the Buddhist realms of ontological order in a way that makes them understandable to his modern, scientifically minded audience. Perhaps “*Ginga tetsudō no yoru*” is Kenji’s effort to carry out this directive and to do so in the form of “boys’ literature.” The story shows how through dreams, Giovanni will encounter alternate realms of existence—Christian Heaven and scientific objectivity—as seen through the lens of Buddhist epistemology.

In point two of the memo, Kenji explains that “the existence of the environmental conditions [*eshō* 依正] of the other Eight Realms including those of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha” are “proven through introspection and practice.” Ryūmonji argues that this is to be expected from Kenji, a fervent believer of the *Lotus Sutra* and Kokuchūkai member and one who knew well Nichiren’s interpretation of chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra* (“Expedient Means” or “Hōben” chapter), when the Buddha explains that all the “Ten Truths” are each a part of a larger truth of the One Great Law of Cause and Effect (*ichidaiji innen* 一大事因縁), that is the *daimoku* (Namu myōhō renge kyō 南無妙法蓮華經 [“Hail to the *Lotus Sutra* of the Wonderful Law”]; RYŪMONJI 1991, 71). Seen thusly, all realms can be subsumed within the larger track or framework of the “one vehicle” of the *Lotus Sutra* (and the Night Train), through the principle of *ichinen sanzen*, that will save people from further rebirths and suffering.

Kenji’s letters to friends also attest to his view of the primacy of faith over science. They demonstrate that throughout the 1920s, when Kenji was also writing *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, he strongly felt that science had unfortunately gained the higher ground. And so, in a letter to Mori Sōichi on 9 February 1925, Kenji wrote that he wanted to “change the places of history and religion” (SKMKZ 15: 222 [letter #200]). He wrote to a fellow Nichirenist, Takahashi Tsuyu, in 1929 (Manuscript “c” of letter #252):

I hope you'll also make your [marriage] choice, most importantly, having done so without giving up your faith. *We are now at a point in time when science has reached our faith.* I hope that you won't let your faith degrade.

(SKMKZ 15-2: 272, emphasis mine)

In a separate draft of the letter to Takahashi, Kenji specifically reveals his view of his place in the cosmos, the language of which is strikingly congruent with Giovanni and Campanella's dialogues in *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*.

Yet the one thing I cannot give up on is this: *if there is thing called a cosmic will then how does one bring about True Happiness for all living creatures?* Or, is the world nothing but blindness and coincidence? With those two options, namely faith and science, which do you choose? For me, you have to take the former position [faith]. Namely, in our cosmos, there are truly many states of consciousness; *those at the end [of those states] are the ones who have freed themselves from delusion and are working for the ultimate Happiness for all living beings.*

(SKMKZ 15-2: 144, emphasis mine)

These remarks on science and history vis-à-vis religion stretch across 1925 and 1929 while Kenji was writing *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*. The combined evidence of these letters, notes, and the story indicate that in the last ten-year period of his life, Nichiren Buddhist doctrine shaped his epistemological view and inspired his fiction and poetry. Even in the late 1920s, Kenji's Nichirenist faith was still active, and perhaps *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* would serve as the vehicle to help him make Nichiren's message understandable to a new audience.

#### *Nichiren Buddhism, Proselytizing, and False Heavens*

Considering the "Heavenly River" through which Giovanni's train runs as a part of a larger Buddhist cosmos: how did Kenji envision heaven and hell, or joy and suffering in the story and in his writings? Why do the children argue so fiercely about the true heaven at the story's end? Giovanni glimpses many heavens in his journey; he also shows concern to help others attain true happiness (*hontō no kōfuku* 本当の幸福), but he is also quick to denounce the "false god" (*uso no kamisama*) of the Titanic victims and argue that "heaven is nothing like a place you have to go to" (*tenjō e nanka ikanakutatte ii ja nai ka* 天上へなんか行かなくたっていいじゃないか; SKMKZ 11: 165). Although their childish squabble is appropriate within a children's story, the tone of their debate matches that of Kenji's attempts, as an adult, to proselytize his family and friends, especially when he was most clearly influenced by Tanaka Chigaku. Letters to friends, particularly his close friend Hosaka Kanai, are crucial in helping us understand how Kenji perceived the world as one with overlapping realms of heavenly beings, struggling humans, and damned souls all walking the earth. The letters also help us

measure how intensely fervent a follower and proselytizer of Nichiren Buddhism Kenji was in his life and thus we may understand how to situate *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* in the history of his oeuvre, especially with regard to how the Kokuchūkai might have influenced his writing.

From 1918 through 1920, then greatly intensifying in 1921, Kenji desperately tried to convert his friend Hosaka to the Nichiren Buddhist faith. Since Hosaka lived alternately in Tokyo and his hometown in Yamanashi prefecture, Kenji had to rely upon letters and postcards to communicate with his friend. In the 26 June 1918 letter, he attempts to persuade Hosaka of the efficacy of being a Nichiren Buddhist, offering Hosaka a way to save the soul of his recently deceased mother. The notion of achieving merit for oneself or transferring it to others is an important facet of Mahayana Buddhism, that is, working for the salvation of others, but Kenji argues it must be done the way Nichiren taught.

Take the red sutra [Shimaji Taitō's Japanese translation of the *Lotus Sutra*] and with your own hand write out the [sixteenth] chapter "The Life-span of the Thus Come One" and dedicate on behalf of your mother.

Your writing it will be the same as your mother's having written it, so says Great Bodhisattva Nichiren.

*Each character of the Sutra you write, one by one, will free your mother of suffering through its amazing supernatural power. Should she be walking in a dark place, it will become light; should she be in the among flames (ah, this is surely just an assumption), it will become water; and perhaps she will be treated to the dharma by one who has thirty-two golden features.*

*While you are next to your mother's coffin, you must not seek your own enlightenment.* (SKMKZ 15: 91 [letter #75], emphasis mine)

Incidentally, Kenji's description here of the flames of hell transforming into a soothing pool of water resembles descriptions of overlapping realms also seen in the story, such as when Campanella describes how he sees little flames in the sand particles of the "Silver River." More importantly, at the end of the letter, Kenji admonishes Hosaka not to seek his own salvation first; Kenji's concern here is particularly helpful in understanding his story's message of working for the happiness of others. Nichiren reminded his followers that Sariputra and Mahakasyapa, who thought they had attained nirvana for themselves, should nonetheless have known the teachings of the Buddha and "also observe the ideal of filial piety." And because they "did nothing to benefit others . . . they had led their parents to a path whereby they could never attain Buddhahood" (YAMPOLSKY 1990, 63–64). Kenji similarly reminds Hosaka that he cannot achieve enlightenment (*satori* 悟り), or happiness, before it is attained by others. In other words, he is urging Hosaka to do "bodhisattva practices." Kenji reformulated Nichiren's idea again for a larger audience of Hanamaki farmers later in his "Agricultural

Arts Theory Summary” (*Nōmin geijutsu gairon kōyō* 農民芸術概論綱要): “While the world lacks happiness, individual happiness cannot be attained” (SKMKZ 13 [1]: 9). From such a deeply emotional letter, we can understand that for Kenji, individual salvation is ultimately tied up with the salvation of others. No one is independent. We all depend on each other to reach happiness and be freed from suffering. In Kenji’s view, no individual stands alone. Our existences “double” or overlap like the realms of the living and the dead, in the “undifferentiated realm” of the Black River, or, the Milky Way.

The next month, on 18 July 1918, Kenji kept trying to persuade Hosaka to convert to the Kokuchūkai. Perhaps excusing his annoyingly persistent efforts or minimizing how much proselytizing Hosaka, as a new convert, would have to conduct, Kenji wrote that “For us, *shakubuku* is a very, very small part.” *Shakubuku*, or violent proselytizing, is one of the two methods that, according to chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra*, believers should use to spread its truth. As a member of Tanaka Chigaku’s nationalist Nichiren sect, the Kokuchūkai, Kenji was very familiar with the emphasis this lay Buddhist leader put on *shakubuku* as the only true method of spreading the faith in twentieth-century Japan, in an age of degraded Buddhism or *Mappō*. Furthermore, in the letter Kenji advocates that they should mutually embrace the faith and travel together on this spiritual journey: “Why don’t we sincerely seek our individual paths?” (*tada morotomo ni shishin ni mizukara no michi o motomeyō de wa arimasen ka* 只諸共に至心に自らの道を求めやうではありませんか; SKMKZ 15: 95 [letter #78]). Giovanni similarly tells Campanella of his desire to keep travelling together at the end of the story: “I’m not scared of all that dark. I’m going to get to the bottom of everything and find out what will make people happy. We’ll go there together, Campanella, as far as we can go” (PULVERS 1996, 221).

By October of that year, Kenji may have realized that pushing his friend into the faith may have backfired. Moreover, as Kenji’s and Hosaka’s fortunes reversed, Kenji may have found it difficult to advocate a superior way of living and thinking. (Having to serve as a shop clerk in his father’s pawnshop was utterly depressing for this upper-school graduate.) Unlike the letters from May, June, and July, now Kenji speaks of the bleak world of the “Black River” in which the dead and living prey on each other. Instead of being energized about creating a new path in life, Kenji seems to have resigned himself to a passive, gloomy world where there is no separation between the dead and living. Again, we see how Kenji cannot separate individual existence (here, his own) from the existence of others. His own salvation may be dependent on his saving Hosaka.

In two years time, at his wits’ end because of his inability to decide his career for himself (and seeing Hosaka positively change his fortune), Kenji passive-aggressively reminded his friend of their intimate moments together when they were at Morioka Agricultural and Forestry Higher School (1916–1918) and the

promises they made to each other. In a letter most likely written in May 1920, Kenji remarks on the closeness these two young men shared, recalling a July 1917 night at Mt. Iwate when they lost the light and heat of their torches:

*We could see the Milky Way (ginga) among the patches of clouds in the Southern sky. Numa-mori [Swamp Hills] were snoozing underneath the faint light. The embers of the torch glowed like the smallest palms of a baby or like red flowers in the night. It was then that we saw lanterns come from far away toward us.*

“Aren’t you both going to the Museum [a moviehouse]?” They said such stupid things while going down into the valley.

*Night became dawn. A giant lizard cloud, and manifold Mesozoic creatures all hovered in the cold and yellow vacuum of the sky.*

(SKMKZ 15: 185 [letter #164], emphasis mine)

In this letter, Kenji strongly appeals to his good friend, a person upon whom he counted to share his understanding that their fates overlapped and were strongly linked. Like his later literary creations of Giovanni and Campanella, these two young men, lost in the high altitude of Mt. Iwate on a night in July 1917, discovered that their cooperative imagining of a brighter landscape (the Milky Way, the clouds, the Southern sky) could save them from the despair of utter darkness and cold. Perhaps Kenji managed that night to persuade Hosaka to promise he would convert to the Nichiren faith. “My Friend Hosaka Kanai, My Friend Hosaka Kanai, don’t abandon me” (SKMKZ 15: 197 [letter #178, early December 1920]). Like Kenji, Giovanni pleads with his friend Campanella not to leave him behind after they part ways with the other children at Southern Cross station: “Let’s stay together until the ends of the earth, okay?” (PULVERS 1996, 219).

The letters that Kenji wrote to friends like Hosaka show a consistent adherence to Nichiren Buddhism and indicate a picture of Kenji’s steadfast faith quite different from the image of a “quickly weaken[ing]” faith the editors of the *zenshū* promote (seen in comments inside the MKZ edition). Sugawara has strongly argued that Giovanni and Campanella’s relationship is based on Kenji and Hosaka’s strained friendship. Her argument is far more persuasive than the earlier theory that the boys’ painful separation is modeled on Kenji’s mourning his sister Toshi (1898–1922), as suggested by Irisawa.<sup>19</sup> What is lacking from Sugawara’s theory is the specific reason why Kenji felt that he lost Hosaka. A close reading of their correspondence indicates that Kenji felt estranged from Hosaka when Hosaka refused to become a Kokuchūkai member and proselytize, rather than simply refusing to believe in the *Lotus Sutra*. Kenji’s ticket to salvation—membership in the Kokuchūkai—was one, like Giovanni’s ticket, that would allow him to go anywhere. In the second

19. See “Ginga tetsudō no yoru’ no hassō ni tsuite” 「銀河鉄道の夜」の発想について in IRISAWA and AMAZAWA 1990.

draft of the story, Giovanni felt that he had a two-person ticket (“Ah, by chance maybe I have a two-person ticket”) capable of allowing both Giovanni and Campanella (who had no ticket) to travel on the train (SKMKZ 10: 111, translation mine). Ryūmonji suggests that Kenji also made the two-person ticket in Version Two “green and the size of a four-ways folded up handkerchief” (RYŪMONJI 1991, 111) because he was referring to the Kokuchūkai publication, *HTPG*, which Kenji often suggested to others was the best way to learn about Tanaka Chigaku and Nichiren Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> The correspondence and development of the tickets in the text suggests that Nichiren Buddhist beliefs and Kokuchūkai membership ultimately provided the subtext for the relationship between the boys in the story.

At the story’s end, Giovanni reconciles the loss of his friend Campanella to the void of the Coal Sack as Kenji similarly reconciled his failure to convert Hosaka to Nichiren Buddhism. “Crying, I write this,” Kenji attempted to persuade Hosaka one last time; Giovanni, seeing only the seat cushion where Campanella sat, shouts out Campanella’s name, howling in agony. Although Hosaka did not die during Kenji’s lifetime, Kenji failed to convert him and thereby Kenji lost his one true friend—whom he often said was the only person who truly understood him.<sup>21</sup> Desperate in the thought he was losing Hosaka, Kenji pleaded once more for Hosaka to join him in the faith in a 1920 letter. Kenji describes how Hosaka and Kenji had ended up “standing on the cusp of two worlds.” That expression and other ones like it in the letter prefigure the description of the final scene in the story where Campanella and Giovanni drift apart in space.

Truly, if the heart of you in the past—that person whose feelings you showed a sense of home in your tanka—the person who vowed in the middle of our summer journey up Mt. Iwate—if that heart has now come undone, then I, without a single friend, must continue my pathetic struggle against myself and others....

20. Ryūmonji’s explanation of why Giovanni’s ticket is both green and so big is very persuasive. As it turns out, in the beginning of its publication, the *HTPG* was both green and tabloid-size. Tanaka Chigaku explained in the first issue why he both renamed the organization’s house organ title and why he chose to use the color green—it was chosen because it represented “the color of hope, the color of new life, the life of the Japanese People [*kokutai*] and sign of *Nichiren’s Principles* [*Nichiren shōnin no kyōgi* 日蓮聖人の教義, 1910],” the latter being Tanaka’s exegesis of Nichiren’s teachings (RYŪMONJI 1991, 93). Kenji greatly favored this green-covered book, as seen in a December 1920 letter he wrote to Hosaka: “I know without a doubt that *Nichiren’s Principles* and *Lessons of the Lotus Sect* as well as the Tokyo Uguisudani Kokuchūkai Hall will truly make you cry tears of joy” (SKMKZ 15: 197 [letter #178]). By the last manuscript of the story, version four, Kenji had made Giovanni’s ticket for one person only and reduced it to the size of a postcard, but the ticket remained green through all manuscript versions. Kenji advises friends to read *HTPG* in other letters. See letters #188, 188a, 191, and 258 in SKMKZ 15.

21. “You are the only person who knows that which caused these four vows to be awakened by my loud voice and to be born out of his helpless body” (SKMKZ 15: 121 [letter #102a]).

If you would kindly read these next two pages with an open heart, even if we ultimately become separated from each other in infinite space [*mugen no kūkan* 無限の空間], I would regret nothing.

We stand at the cusp of two worlds [*futatsu no sakai* 二つの堺]: you ask yourself that should you attain the power of a glittering body, attain the numerous supernatural abilities, and finally can strongly make others and yourself advance to the path of the bodhisattva; or, do you fall into the great fire of a darkness where there is no life, into that place locked away for millions of kalpas all because of one's own actions? Make no mistake. These two options are determined by whether one believes in this sutra, or, if while reading the sutra, if while hearing its great name just once, one decides to abandon it.

Hosaka. I now shed tears while writing this. This is about you. It is no deception. Your god lacks the power [to save you].... And of course, I lack the power [to save you].

Please accept this Sutra.

(SKMKZ 15: 122–23 [letter #102a])

The path Kenji had to walk alone was his faith in Nichiren Buddhism. In the end, Kenji was unable to save Hosaka. Much like Giovanni, he was separated from his good friend.

The language here in this early letter recalls the God argument in the last chapter of the story, where Giovanni tells the Titanic children, “Who says you have to go to Heaven? My teacher says we have to create a place that’s even better than heaven right here ... [your] God is a phony god!” This important moment of development in the story is completely effaced in Sugii Gisaburō’s 1985 anime adaptation, *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, which had a disastrous effect on the film’s storyline and pacing. Not only do Sugii’s Titanic children depart without any sense of dramatic closure, but also the viewers have no sense of the intense emotions brewing in Giovanni. The lack of the God argument in Sugii’s film is a clear example of the trend to minimize the discussion of the religious nature of Kenji’s stories. In the original story, the God argument serves as an important plot development, as well as revealing the still-present character of Kenji’s faith, the importance of proselytizing Nichiren Buddhism. The children’s tutor stumps Giovanni by saying (in PULVERS’ translation, 1996, 211; SKMKZ 11: 165): “Of course the real God is only one God” (*hontō no kamisama wa mochiron tatta hitori desu* 本当の神様はもちろんたった一人です). The passage could also be translated with a Nichirenist twist, implying that the Christians are wrong in thinking that God is outside of the self, instead heaven is within us: “The only real god is of course simply one person.” If Kenji did indeed finish the story sometime in 1931 and 1932, then this passage indicates that Kenji could view this earlier “fanatic” phase with apperception. Nonetheless, the tutor’s parrying of Giovanni’s claims does not necessarily mean that Kenji had given up his faith in Nichiren Buddhism or



his allegiance to the Kokuchūkai. After all, at the end of the story, the last man standing is Giovanni, not the Christian tutor.

After Kenji decided to pursue his faith by running away from home to Tokyo and work at the Kokuchūkai headquarters there in January 1921, the righteous tone of his voice resurges in his correspondence. In a letter dated 10 March 1921, written to a former agricultural school colleague, Miyamoto Tomoichi, Kenji described the kind of hell (the lower 3 realms, actually) that awaited one who poorly chose one's faith. This letter, like the previous letter to Hosaka, reminds us again of the God argument from *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*. Kenji tries to persuade Miyamoto that Tanaka Chigaku's Nichirenism is the only true choice.

Hands together in prayer, I salute you.

I read your letter.

Since a good research introduction is the separate volume of the *Chōkkyō genji*, so I think you should completely rely on it. Currently the most important [way] is probably the *Tengyō minpō*.

Please pass along greetings to Nobu-san. The time now is so important. I keenly hope and pray that you'll feel awakened.

I absolutely refuse [to believe] that the ends are the same no matter what religion [you belong to]. People who fail to choose the right religion fall into hell, become demonic ilk, or are reborn as animals.

Now, for my own part, I have travelled to Tokyo and forsaken my family in order to convert my mother and father [to the *Lotus* sect]. This has become a great burden to them as I have made them greatly worry. Now, I am commuting to [my job at] a printing shop only in the mornings, and from the afternoons until 11 at night I help out at the Kokuchūkai offices, and here I am still clutching the pen [to write to you]. I just got home.

I'm not joking. I ask you to be firm and focus, focus!

Taisho 10 [1921] 10 March, Night.

(SKMKZ 15: 191)

If Kenji was at his most "fanatic" in 1921, that fanaticism must be characterized by the kind of fire and brimstone proselytizing (*shakubuku*) he was engaged in, as seen in this letter to Miyamoto. Certainly, as the years advanced, Kenji relied less and less on such forceful *shakubuku* tactics to motivate potential converts as there are fewer mentions of the hellish realms in his subsequent letters.

The fierce debate of the "False God" argument in "Ginga tetsudō no yoru" is reminiscent of these letters. If we are persuaded by Ryūmonji's case, then the story's God argument, like other memories of this time in his life, reflects Kenji's nostalgia for the early 1920s when he passionately argued with others about the supremacy of his faith. However, Ryūmonji does not argue that the traces of nostalgia in the text meant that Kenji had abandoned Tanaka Chigaku and Nichiren's teachings. Thus, "Ginga tetsudō no yoru" should be understood as an affirmation of Kenji's belief in the teachings of not only Nichiren, but also those of Tanaka Chigaku.

Although the train runs through the realms of heaven in the “Silver River” (*Ginga*) or “River of Heaven” (*Ama no gawa*), ultimately Giovanni rides it back to earth. His heaven is on this earth. For him, earth is not separate from heaven (nor from the “hell” of Campanella’s death). Nichiren spoke of the “Land of Tranquil Light” but that heaven is to be realized here on earth, that a paradisaical state of life in the Buddha realms is, in Stone’s view, “ever-present reality that one can enter through faith” (STONE 2009, 221). Likewise, Kenji’s story ultimately upholds that there is no other world, like heaven, beyond earth. In the earlier drafts of the story and pre-1974 versions of the story, Giovanni understands that even without Campanella, he has a mission to work for the happiness of others and he promises the wise Professor Bulcaniro to dedicate himself to that path. “Oh Magellan Nebula! Here I say, I will surely seek the truest true happiness [*hontō no hondō no kōfuku* 本当の本当の幸福], for myself, for my mother, for Campanella, and for everyone” (SKMKZ 10: 176). In the final version of the story, Kenji changed this ending. Instead, the last thing Giovanni says about happiness before he wakes up from the dream is his promise to suffer anything for happiness, even though he doesn’t know what it is. “I wouldn’t care if my body burned up a hundred times like that scorpion if it was all for the sake of everyone’s True Happiness ... but, what is True Happiness, I wonder?” (SKMKZ 11: 167). As Kenji moved from the presentational, lecture-heavy approach of the early manuscripts of the story to this final version, he opened up his “boy’s story” to permit a wide array of answers to Giovanni’s question. Admittedly, in that sense, the message in the final version of the story is less didactic and has less of the proselytizing tone than seen in the earlier draft and other places in Kenji’s correspondence. How then is happiness to be obtained for oneself or for others, according to the story? In what ways does Giovanni’s journey demonstrate an interpretation that overlaps with Nichiren’s teachings? Those questions can be answered with a brief look at the role the Bird Catcher serves to exemplify Nichiren Buddhist concepts.

### *The Bird Catcher*

In the story, the Bird Catcher is a sympathetic character who grows on the boys even though he is only with them for a short while. His character is emblematic of the concept of karma and reincarnation, as his fate is closely linked to the animals upon whose lives he takes. In Buddhism, there have long been prohibitions against the taking of lives, even animals. Kenji, too, was a vegetarian since 1918. His sensitivity and respect for animals is clearly felt in the story. Moreover, although the Bird Catcher essentially kills these astral birds by ripping them from the sky and transmuting them into chocolate-tasting sweets, Kenji portrays him as a tradesman who does not take delight in their deaths and instead he is a sympathetic character who seems destined to live a transgressive life.

He is a transgressive character because his business is the taking of animal lives for their consumption by human beings. The boys at first are somewhat shocked and, perhaps like their vegetarian creator, reluctant to eat the bird bodies. Kenji once wrote to Hosaka Kanai about his failure to stick to his vegetarian diet when he had some tuna sashimi.

If the fish that were going to be eaten were standing behind and looking at me, I wonder if they might be thinking something like this:

“What little life I had, but I must taste like crap judging from the way this guy is eating me.”

“He’s eating me while he’s in such an angry state!”

“Look at the desperation of this guy eating me!”

“I think he’s thinking of me while he’s bringing my fatty flesh to his tongue, softly praying ‘Mr. Fish, how about you and me at some point come together for a journey?’”

“What the hell!? He’s wolfing me down!”

It really depends on the fish as to what they might be thinking.

(SKMKZ 15: 69 [letter #63])

In the story when the boys hesitate before partaking of the Bird Catcher’s wares, they reveal a similar sense of guilt, like Kenji had, in eating animal flesh.

The Bird Catcher seemingly works, dies, and is re-substantiated all in this one scene in the story. Kenji describes the completion of his task as being “like a soldier who had been hit by a bullet and was on his last legs ... when, in a flash, there was no sign of him outside” (PULVERS 1996, 127). The Bird Catcher essentially dies and that death is flashed into Giovanni’s mind, caught in a freeze frame, and certainly meant to evoke sympathy in the boys, who, after having tasted the “bodies” of his birds, understand the wages of the Bird Catcher’s sin and are perhaps even tangentially caught up in his karmic crime. This moment marks the beginning of Giovanni’s sympathy for the Bird Catcher as one who cannot escape the repeated cycle of karmic sin. Although in the Buddhist view of the Six Realms of Rebirth, the human was best equipped to hear the Buddha’s message and thereby could advance to one of the higher Realms of Enlightened Beings, the Bird Catcher, obsessed with his trade of taking lives, is stuck in his loop of rebirth. It is no wonder that he can return to his place on the train after seemingly been “hit by a bullet.” He returns to his spot on the train and his previous existence because, he says, he “wanted to, that’s how” (PULVERS 1996, 127). Desire traps beings in the circular world of illusion. The Bird Catcher’s next expression of circular logic nonetheless provides comfort to the boys when he asks them where they come from. The boys are unable to answer so the Bird Catcher empathizes with them by kindly surmising and answering for them that it must be “a long, long way off, anyway.” Unlike any other passenger on the train, the Bird Catcher “seems to know all about it”

(*wakatta to iu yō ni*), making him the one character on the train with whom the boys share much in common, that is, a fundamentally Buddhist sensibility. When Giovanni is later asked by the Tutor about his religion during the God argument, the boy should at least be able to say that he is Buddhist.

The boys' appreciation of the Bird Catcher grows even though they have a hard time expressing it. In fact, just as the Bird Catcher sympathized with them, they in turn learn how to feel compassionate for an outsider like him. Giovanni's growth as a compassionate human being is marked at the point in the story when the Bird Catcher disappears for good. The way in which Giovanni's compassion is expressed echoes the way Kenji himself articulated his love and concern for Hosaka Kanai, as we have seen in his letters. "Giovanni, without knowing why, felt very sorry for the [B]ird [C]atcher.... If it would make the [B]ird [C]atcher happy, he would even stand for a hundred years at a time in the shining field of the Milky Way and catch his birds for him" (PULVERS 1996, 141). Kenji advised Hosaka to work for his dead mother's rebirth by writing chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sutra* in order to help her gain merit for her next life. In the story, Giovanni tells Campanella that he is willing to stand in for the Bird Catcher and help him defray the cost of his sins so that he can find happiness and enlightenment. However, Giovanni, still trying to verbalize his thoughts, fails to find out what would make the Bird Catcher happy because the man has already vanished. Missing his chance to articulate his compassion for the Bird Catcher, Giovanni realizes that he "had never felt odd in quite that way and certainly had never been able to express it" (PULVERS 1996, 142). In the story, Giovanni's newly discovered sense of his past actions indicates that he has finally developed a sense of future action, or purpose—"bodhisattva practices" as advocated by Nichiren.

By contrast, Sugii's 1985 film adaptation, which nearly always avoids using Giovanni's monologue in a voice over, fails to capitalize on this important moment and instead closes the scene with an abbreviated version of Giovanni and Campanella's dialogue: "I feel bad" (*tsurai*). As with the omission of the God argument in the film, there is a detectable pattern throughout this two-hour film to dilute the original story's examination of religion, particularly, as I have argued, its Nichiren Buddhist messages. Awarded the Ministry of Education cultural prize (Monbushō *tokusen* 文部省特選) in 1985, this film nonetheless demonstrates the dangerous trend, which I described in the introduction, of Kenji's scholars and interpreters to avoid—or worse, disallow—the possibility that Nichiren Buddhism greatly informs Kenji's stories and poems. For the film, these tragic errors result in a story that completely leaves its viewers in the dark as to whether Giovanni has benefited from his ride on the Milky Way Train. Had Sugii and his screenwriters not avoided the religious elements in the story, Giovanni's compassion, shaped by *ichinen sanzen* and expressed as bodhisattva practices, would have strongly resonated in the film. Without any spiritual growth, Sugii's Giovanni, from the

start and end of the story, utterly remains a lonely and depressed boy. Is that the point of Kenji's original story? Certainly I cannot be alone among Kenji's readers in being disappointed with this bloodless take on Kenji's masterpiece.

### *Conclusion*

*Ginga tetsudō no yoru* is more than a children's story that describes a wondrous journey through space, time, and religious heavens. The story offers a wealth of clues to help us understand Kenji's writing as well as his Buddhist view of life. That view of life is one shaped by the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* and the religious leaders who expounded it. By reading *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* as having a Nichiren Buddhism subtext, I conclude that this story—a work written from the mid-1920s through at least 1932—prominently attests that Kenji sustained not only strong hopes for this story but also a close adherence he had to the teachings of Nichiren and Tanaka Chigaku.

Giovanni's story is the story of Kenji, Nichiren, and the Kokuchūkai. It is the story of Kenji, a good son who never fit into society and struggled to help others in their community (farming life) and spiritual life (converting people to Nichiren Buddhism). However, Giovanni's story is also Nichiren's story. Persecuted for propagating the truth of the *Lotus Sutra*, he, like Kenji, sought to help others achieve the "true happiness" in the face of great resistance. Giovanni understands this kind of loneliness—the suffering one must endure in order to help bring happiness to the world. Ryūmonji's thesis is that the details of the story, such as Giovanni's green ticket (like the green newspaper HTPG), point to Kenji's strongly nostalgic longing for the time when he was vigorously engaged in proselytizing the Kokuchūkai's message in Tokyo in 1921. Horio Seishi, Kenji's biographer and a scholar who closely worked with Kenji's brother, Miyazawa Seiroku, on MKZS, wrote that Kenji kept the *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* manuscript by his bedside even in his final days in 1933, which indicates that the story greatly occupied Kenji's mind.<sup>22</sup> In his deathbed wish to his father, Kenji asked that one thousand copies of Shimaji Taitō's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* be printed and disseminated to friends and family. This episode of Kenji's life adds evidence to support the idea that Kenji was still a deeply devout Nichiren Buddhist while

22. In this short essay, HORIO describes how he, Seiroku, and Mori decided to undertake a new revision of the text that would be published in the subsequent Chikuma Shobō *zenshū* of 1967–1969; see HORIO 1964, 4. Looking at Kenji's correspondence in his final year, 1933, less than a month before he died, he confides to a former student, Yanagihara Shōetsu, about a story he's still working on "every day"—could this story be *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*? "As for the various stories you remember I wrote, I probably don't have it in me any time soon to write, but instead, I do indeed have something I'd like to work on and am furiously working at it every day" (SKMKZ 15: 459 [letter #488, 11 September 1933]).

working on *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* in his final years.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, one can conclude, even if Horio does not, that from 1931 through his death in September 1933, the writing of the *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* story overlapped with the Kokuchūkai's still-strong influence on Kenji, most likely shaping his late literary projects.

More importantly, the story's ideas and themes, far from being solely nostalgic, also ring with the larger Nichiren Buddhist message of the interconnectedness of ontological realms, the Ten Realms from Hell and Heavenly Beings to Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. Certainly *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* is a story in which Kenji explored Christian themes and images, but he ultimately subsumed Christianity, like science, into a greater spiritual cosmic vision—Nichiren's all-encompassing principle of three-thousand-realms-in-a-single-thought (*ichinen sanzen*). Thus, it can be said that *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* combines both Kenji's Kokuchūkai nostalgia with the lessons he learned from both Nichiren and Tanaka Chigaku of the interconnectedness of all peoples and religions of the world inside the cosmological framework, outlined in the *Lotus Sutra* and expounded by its strongest proponents.

23. Ryūmonji points out that, due to an error on Kenji's father's part, it was not Shimaji's version, the one Kenji originally read in 1914 and kept by his bedside all his life, but Yamakawa Chiō's more recent version that his parents ultimately privately published and circulated (RYŪMONJI 1991, 111).

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