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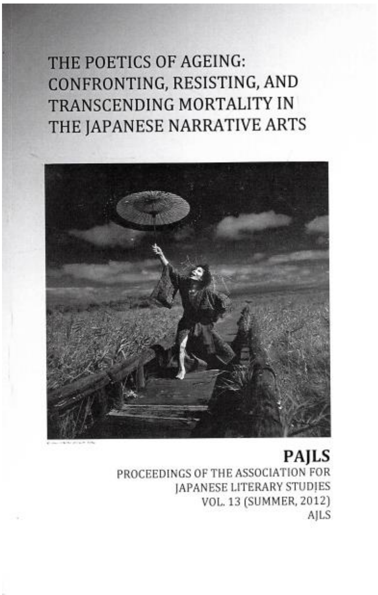
THE POETICS OF AGEING: CONFRONTING, RESISTING, AND TRANSCENDING MORTALITY IN THE JAPANESE NARRATIVE ARTS

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The Transfiguration of Loss: Grief and Aging in the Maboroshi (Spirit Summoner) Chapter of The Tale of Genji[1]

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In The Tale of Genji, descriptions of the effects of aging—the physiological changes, the sense of dislocation that comes with shifts in cultural tastes, the apprehension of time lost—reflect broader discourses of values in tension with one another. Old age is considered a sign of divine blessing, a wise, respectable stage of a life symbolized by auspicious images like the ancient pines of Takasago.[2] At the same time, aging is associated with mutability, the ephemeral human experience, and religious renunciation. In an aristocratic society focused on the here and now as a matter of political necessity, old age is regarded as a period of decline, and elderly men and women who fail to act their proper age are considered unseemly.

One striking example of these negative attitudes toward aging is provided in the Momiji no ga chapter by the character Naishi no suke. Despite being close to sixty years old, she is described as promiscuous and flirtatious. Genji is initially appalled by her, but, given his sexual predilections, he is curious to know what it is like to sleep with a very old woman. One day he finds himself alone with Naishi after she has finished arranging the

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[1] Passages are drawn from my new translation of *The Tale of Genji*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015). Citations follow each passage in parenthesis. The first number in each citation is the page number from my translation. The second set of numbers is the volume and page number from the version of the original text in *Nihon koten bungaku zenshū,* vol. 12~17, Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1970-1976.

[2] For example, when Genji returns from exile, he cedes the Chancellorship to the former Minister of the Left, citing the precedent of elderly ministers in China who, through their sage leadership, bring order back to the state.

Emperor's hairdo. She is done up in an unusually elegant and voluptuous manner.

> So much so that Genji found it a little distasteful that a woman so old would dress in such an inappropriately youthful manner. Even so, he could not let the moment pass without trying to discern what she could be thinking. He tugged on the hem of her robe to get her attention, and she turned toward him. Her face was hidden behind a folding fan that was spread open like a bat's wing and adorned in a most unusual manner with writing and sketches all over it. She coquettishly cast sidelong glances at him. Her eyelids were sunken and drooping darkly, and strands of her wild, straggly hair were visible from behind the fan, which was so bright and gaudy he couldn't help but think that it had been made with a much younger woman in mind.
>
> They exchanged their fans, as was the custom, and that gave Genji the chance to examine hers more closely. The red lacquered ground of the paper was so dark and shiny that it reflected the light and he could see his own face. Over the lacquered ground a sketch of a forest of tall trees had been rendered in gold-powder ink.
>
> Along the side of the drawing, written in a style of brushwork that, while not unaccomplished, was nevertheless out of date, was a snatch from a Kokinshū poem: "Because the grasses beneath the forest of Ōaraki have withered …" Genji couldn't help smiling as he recalled the rest of the poem: "… no colts come here to graze, no man comes to harvest."[3]
>
> What a queer choice of poems, he thought. She definitely has some bizarre proclivities. (164; 12: 408-409)

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[3] *Kokinshū* 892 (Anonymous).

This description of Naishi calls to mind the figure of the yamamba, and Genji is put off. Still, he takes pity on her (as he does with so many women), and they spend a night together. Their tryst, however, turns to farce when Genji's rival, Tō no Chūjō, bursts in and creates a scene.

Genji's ambivalence arises not simply from disgust at the physical decay of Naishi's body, but also from the perceived failure to observe cultural norms that forbid an elderly individual from openly demonstrating sexual desire. Of course, upholding cultural norms is a general aspect of aristocratic life that is not limited to concerns with the decline of mind and body. However, the obsession with behaving appropriately as a value made it easier to justify Genji's cold-hearted reaction to the decline that comes with aging.

Revulsion against signs of physical decay is an extension of a more general bias among Heian courtiers against cultural aging. Characters whose upbringing and behavior are hopelessly out-of-date are often associated with images of decrepitude. Perhaps the best example is the Hitachi Princess—Genji's lady of the safflowers (and hideous nose). Although Genji shows compassion toward her, she is the object of cruel mockery throughout the story. The basis of this ridicule, which turns on both aspects of the Hitachi Princess's looks and manners, is that like an old person she is out of her time, frozen in a past culture that has lost its political relevance and aesthetic charm.

It bears repeating that positive aspects to growing old, especially among the highest nobility, are described in The Tale of Genji. However, as the above examples clearly demonstrate, negative depictions of dotage as a period of life marked by the loss of emotional control and sense of propriety predominate,[4] giving rise to a striking aporia in the rhetorical structure of Murasaki Shikibu's narrative. Concluding the life-story of an individual would seem to be relatively straightforward, since the decline of old age leads inexorably to the closure of death. In the case of The Tale of Genji, however, the preternatural qualities that Murasaki Shikibu ascribed to her Radiant Prince make for a paradox. Genji is consistently described as ageless and always of the present: a man who keenly appreciates the value of his cultural tradition while apprehending the religious truth that this world is an evanescent illusion. Genji is further complicated by his exalted status. Any detailed depiction of his dotage would not only undercut a fundamental aspect of his character by dissolving its contradictory nature, but also be an act of lèse-majesté.

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[4] The Minister of the Left's lachrymose unmanning at the death of his daughter (Genji's first wife), the hoarse voice and coughing of Princess's Asagao's aunt, Princess Ōmiya's failure to control the precocious sexual affair between Genji's son and Kumoinokari, and the efforts of the Bishop of Yokawa's sister, a nun, to act as a go-between for Ukifune are further examples of the kinds of lapses and social faux pas committed by old people in the narrative.

The challenge in devising a narrative resolution through an account of Genji's old age is apparent in the structure of the Maboroshi chapter. The depiction of his personal grief over the loss of his beloved Murasaki gives way to a more general figural representation of the perception of time lost drawn from the language of seasonal associations and the calendar of court rituals. By stilling Genji into art, the chapter's oblique evocation of aging, loss, and death results in an aesthetic and spiritual transfiguration that completes the story without undercutting the complexity of Genji's character.

This transfiguration occurs in the final lines of the chapter:

> It felt lonely knowing that the year was drawing to a close. At that moment, Prince Niou came scampering in, saying, "I have to make loud noises to drive out the demons for the New Year … but what's the best way?"
>
> The thought that a time would come when Genji would no longer be able to look upon the adorable figure of his grandson was too much for him:
>
> Having passed the time in mournful
> longing
> I have lost track of all the months and
> days …

> Have the year and my life both run their
> course[5]
>
> Genji sent out an order that the festivities to mark the beginning of the New Year were to be arranged with special care so that they would be extraordinary. I've been told that the various gifts and stipends that he presented to the princes and high-ranking officials, each one appropriate to the rank of the recipient, were lavish and without precedent. (880; 15: 536)

This is an ambiguous way to write the protagonist out of the story. Genji recognizes his own mortality and yet remains incapable of resisting his impulse to live for the present, to make everything start from the vantage of his cultural moment. The next time he is mentioned—in the opening line of the following chapter, Niou miya—it is to announce his passing. Such a radical turn arrests Genji's life-story at a moment that best illustrates those contradictory motivations that define him as a character. To describe this turn in the context of the narrative modes Murasaki Shikibu employs, the protagonist is simultaneously suspended in the temporal realm of realism while elevated to a mythic realm of cultural memory.[6]

Medieval receptions make it clear how ambiguous this handling of Genji's aging seemed to earlier generations of readers. By the end of the twelfth century certain copies of the text contained a chapter following Maboroshi that was entirely blank except for the title, Kumogakure (Hidden by the Clouds). The image of imperial radiance eclipsed suggests inexorable decline and death, but details are absent and the narrative picks up eight years later in Niou miya. Several explanations may be offered for the lack of an explicit resolution of Genji's life: 1) the text of Kumogakure (or of some chapter depicting Genji's old age) was lost; 2) Murasaki Shikibu never wrote such a chapter either because her own conception of the protagonist made it impossible for her to write it or because she felt such an account was rendered superfluous by the details of Genji's last years that appear in later chapters; 3) Murasaki Shikibu in fact intended for the Kumogakure chapter to be blank: a highly abstract and calculated move that emphasizes the ineffable nature of certain types of human experience.

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[5] In settling on a format for the poetry I made the decision to forego all punctuation marks with two exceptions: for a weak caesura (or a grammatically marked break between phrases) I use a comma, and for a strong caesura I use an ellipsis.

[6] One might compare the effect of this *stilling* to the effect created by the ending of George Roy Hill's film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,* which does not show the deaths of the heroes, but freezes them in an extremely dynamic pose that fades to a sepia-tinted frame redolent of myth and nostalgia.

Unfortunately, no conclusive evidence supports any of these suppositions. Barring the unlikely discovery of a very early copy of a chapter with credible provenance that depicts Genji's death, the safest explanation is that Kumogakure, even as an empty chapter, is the product of a reader or copyist who was frustrated by the ending—a kind of medieval Japanese fan fiction written to fill in the blanks. Such an impulse toward completion is not only understandable (one only has to look to Marguerite Yourcenar's story "The Last Love of Prince Genji" to see a modern instance of the impulse), but also clearly supported by the historical evidence. A number of spurious chapters (Yatsuhashi, Sakurahito, Sagano parts 1 and 2, Sumori, and Hibariko to name a few) were written not only to complete the story of Genji's life, but also to fill in that apparently troublesome eight-year gap.

To make sense of the depiction of Genji's aging, then, it is best to start from the assumption that the general structure of the narrative as we have it now is probably close to Murasaki Shikibu's conception. There are, after all, other major temporal jumps and gaps in the story. Moreover, the notion that certain emotions or realities are fundamentally inexpressible in words—a concept that had both aesthetic and religious antecedents the author drew upon—is referenced frequently throughout the text and may well have prompted Murasaki Shikibu to leave aside the details of Genji's last years so that she could get on with her story. One only has to think of the effects achieved by the blank chapters eighteen and nineteen in Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy to see how cleverly manipulative such a narrative technique can be.

Since Murasaki Shikibu incorporated the recognition of the limits of language as a crucial element of her storytelling, the suspended fate of Genji at the end of the Maboroshi chapter, which cleared a space for the story to continue without destroying Genji's mystique, suggests not so much a reluctance to deal with aging as a desire to find the right words to describe the last years of a man who is otherwise depicted as ageless.

Genji's resistance to the process of aging is stressed at several points, especially in the tale of his relationship with Tamakazura. For the most part the tone of the narrative is explicitly critical of Genji's sexual interest in Tamakazura, and his unwanted advances toward her are deemed inappropriate. However, his behavior is inappropriate not because he is too old, but because he is acting as her father. Indeed, her ladies-in-waiting remark that he looks to be the same age as their mistress and would make an ideal romantic match for her—an explicit statement of the conceit of Genji's agelessness.

This conceit appears again in the Wakana chapter (part 1) when Tamakazura (now safely married to the Major Captain) presents Genji with a New Year's offering of early spring greens in celebration of his fortieth year. These greens are meant to acknowledge Genji's youthful vigor and stamina and preserve them (as a kind of Heian-period Viagra). As it turns out, he is going to need all the virility he can muster to fulfill his marital responsibilities to a new, much younger wife, the Third Princess.

Throughout the tale of his marriage to the Third Princess, the narrative goes out of its way to maintain the pretense of Genji's agelessness by focusing on the contrast between his mature youthfulness and the callow personality of the bride. After all, it is her childishness, not his age, that leads to her disastrous affair with Kashiwagi. And even after this betrayal, Genji remains vital and in control of the plot because he knows everything that happened. As a result, a striking inversion occurs in which the Third Princess and Kashiwagi undergo an unnaturally premature aging and decline: she ages culturally by becoming a nun, while he ages physically (and eventually dies) by wasting away.

Genji's cuckolding is nevertheless a severe blow that, in echoing his own youthful transgression against his father, exposes the vulnerabilities caused by aging. That blow, however, was made possible by an even more serious crisis that arose when Murasaki is possessed by the spirit of the Rokujō lady and begins a steady decline that leads to her death. The two events—Murasaki's possession and Genji's cuckolding—are inextricably linked, and these losses eventually overwhelm Genji, since the one thing above all that sustained his quality of agelessness was his marriage to Murasaki. Their relationship began when she was only ten years old, and for the first four years their marriage was a kind of child's play centered on court dolls, painting, and games. Even after their relationship becomes sexual, they remain youthful and childless, and eventually their play extends to raising real-life princes and princesses (Genji's grandchildren).

The challenge of narrating Genji's decline without undercutting his essential characteristics is reflected in the stages of Genji's mourning, which occurs over a single calendar year. The first stage is the most intimately detailed and psychologically realistic. Significantly, this stage covers the months of spring—the season most closely associated with Murasaki. As the New Year begins, Genji has withdrawn from the world.

> When Sochinomiya arrived, Genji sent out a message saying he preferred to meet in a private room in the interior of the residence. He included a poem with his note:
>
> The one who always lavished praise
> Upon these blossoms here is gone …
> Why should spring care to visit me
>
> Tears welled up in Sochinomiya's eyes. He replied:
>
> Does the spring seek in vain the fragrance
> Of the red plum … are you suggesting
> It comes for common blossoms only
>
> Genji experienced a sense of deep nostalgia as he watched his younger brother strolling beneath the red plum trees. Does anyone

> appreciate such beauty as deeply as Sochinomiya? The blossoms were just barely open, and their fragrant glow was delightful. There was no music or entertainment this year—indeed, the celebrations were very different. (865; 15: 507-508)

Genji has withdrawn because his tears and grief are unmanly and show poor form. Still, he is tormented every night, even in his dreams, by his desire to see Murasaki. One dawn he overhears a female attendant remarking on how heavily it snowed during the night. Her words transport Genji back to another dawn, the one following the night when he finalized his marriage to the Third Princess. He recalls the profound loneliness he felt when he awoke and realized his beloved Murasaki was not beside him. Rushing back to her quarters—a serious breach of etiquette against the Third Princess—he is forced to wait outside in a freezing snow before he is finally able to arouse the attendants. Once inside Murasaki proves again that she is his ideal love by comforting him. The memory is utterly shattering and prompts a verse:

> I long to melt like snow, to disappear
> From this world of sadness … but snow still falls
> And I still live on against my wishes (866; 15: 510)

Desperate to hold onto such memories and find solace in them, he falls into the habit of conversing with his ladies-in-waiting in moments of solitude. These conversations mark a subtle but profound change in his temperament that suggests he is in decline, for we learn that while he never considered these women ordinary or common in any way, the sexual tension that previously marked his interactions with them has faded:

> He had known one of the women, Chūjō, from the time she was a child. She had once been an object of his desire, and it must have been awkward for her when she first came to attend Murasaki, for soon after she began keeping her distance from

> Genji. For his part, he remembered how much Murasaki favored Chūjō over the other ladies-in-waiting, and it touched him to think of her now as a memento of his late beloved. Though he no longer considered her a sexual intimate, she had retained her attractive looks and personality. Indeed, because she resembled Murasaki a little, she was a living memorial, an evergreen planted beside a grave, and thus dearer to him than the other ladies-in-waiting. (867; 15: 512-513)

The loss of desire is accompanied by intimations of mortality that push Genji ever closer to the long-postponed step of taking religious vows. The decision to write himself out of court society is made after two encounters with his little grandson, Prince Niou. The first occurs in the second month when Genji's daughter, the Akashi Empress, returns to the palace and leaves Niou behind to comfort his lonely grandfather. The boy announces that he is determined to carry out the promise he made to Murasaki to look after the red plum in the garden that fronts the west hall of the Nijō villa. Genji is touched and, hearing a warbler singing in the red plum tree outside the west hall, he steps out to have a look. Walking about, he murmurs a poem:

> Feigning ignorance of her passing, the warbler
> Still comes to the house of the lady who planted
> This red plum tree and admired its fragrant blossoms (868; 15: 514)

The second encounter occurs in the third month as the cherry blossoms—the flower that symbolized Murasaki's beauty—are beginning to fade and scatter. The garden is also a living memento of Genji's lost beloved, planned by Muraskai so that every season would be filled with splendid fragrance and colors. Now, however, the garden that reflects her aesthetic sensibility is transformed to a ghostly reminder of painful loss.

> "My cherry tree is in bloom," Niou declared, referring to the one Murasaki had planted. "I'd

> hate it if the petals fell! There has to be some way to protect them … I know! I'll put a curtain around the tree, and so long as the cloth stays up, the wind won't be able to touch it!" The little boy's face showed just how clever he considered his plan to be. He was so precious-looking that Genji couldn't help but smile. "That's quite a good idea," he told his grandson. "You're much cleverer than the man who wanted to cover the sky with his sleeves!"[7] Genji considered this prince his sole pleasure in life.
>
> "We won't have much time to get to know one another. Life being what it is, regardless of how much time we may have together, the day will come when I'm no longer with you." Seeing his sentimental grandfather tear up as he was so wont to do recently, the boy was put off. "Grandmama Murasaki was always talking that way … I don't like it." Niou turned his face away, fingering his sleeves as he tried to hide his own tears. (869; 15: 515-516)

Looking around the garden and Murasaki's old quarter, Genji is moved to compose a verse:

> After I have renounced this world of woe
> Will it fall to ruin, this springtime hedge
> My departed love tenderly nurtured (869; 15: 516)

The transformations of character that grief brings about—Genji's withdrawal, his unmanning, his melancholy focus on the past rather than the present and future—are fully depicted in brief encounters with two of his ladies. Feeling bored, he calls on the Third Princess and is embarrassed that his own resolve to follow a religious life should be inferior to such a shallow woman's.

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[7] *Gosenshū* 64 (Anonymous): "If only I had sleeves wide enough to cover the heavens, I would not leave spring blossoms to the mercy of the wind."

However, her insensitivity makes him long all the more for Murasaki, and so he moves on to talk with Murasaki's rival, the Akashi lady, whose daughter has ensured Genji's lasting hold on power. They spend an evening reminiscing about their life together, but he chooses not to sleep with her. He leaves early and sets about his regular nightly devotions. The following morning he sends a letter to her with this poem:

> Crying on and on, wild geese head north, longing to return …
> I weep as well, longing to return, but in this sad world
> Nothing remains as it was and there is no place to rest (872; 15: 522)

The Akashi lady had resented being abandoned the previous night, but upon seeing how much pain Genji was in, she realized that he was no longer himself. Putting her own feelings aside, she tearfully replies in a poem that remarks on his decline:

> The water in the seedling paddy
> Where wild geese once gathered disappears
> And with it the flower's reflection (872; 15:522)

Following the season of his most profound grief, the narrative shifts noticeably in the fourth month from depicting detailed, personal memories as the ground for Genji's sense of loss—memories that reinforce the reality of aging and decline by re-enacting in outline the story of his life—to a more impersonal, poetic evocation of loss.

> From her quarters in the northeast residence Hanachirusato sent new summer robes for the change of season. A poem was attached:
>
> This day brings the start of the season …
> Will your heart be filled with memories
> As your old robes are exchanged for new

Genji replied:

> From this day forward, each time I put on
> these robes
> Diaphanous as cicada wings, the sorrows
> Of this fragile, fleeting world will only
> deepen (872-73;15: 523)

This exchange, which does not reference a specific past, serves to depict Genji's mourning as a turn away from worldly attachments. The desire for release from loss serves as a figural substitute for any explicit description of his decline.

The shift to a more conventional discourse of grief, which continues to the end of the chapter, is highlighted by several interludes. One occurs during the period of the Kamo Festival, as if the progression of the seasons itself makes it impossible to fully sustain an atmosphere of unremitting gloom.

> Chūjō was taking a nap on the eastern side of Genji's quarters. When he stepped out and saw her lying there she got up, looking very dainty and adorable. The expression on her face was fresh and bright, and her hair, mussed from sleep, cascaded down and hid her face in a most charming fashion. Her trousers were dyed a scarlet hue tinged with yellow; her singlet was burnt orange and over it was an outer robe of dark gray and black. Her robes were not properly layered, since she had just got up from her nap, and her train and jacket had slipped down. While she casually pulled them back up, Genji picked up some of the sprigs of wild ginger she had set aside in preparation for the festival. "What are these called?" he asked. "I've completely forgotten their name." Chūjō responded with a poem:
>
> Gods do not reveal themselves in a vessel
> choked with weeds

> Nor do you show yourself … so I adorned
> my hair with leaves
> That promise a tryst, only to find you
> forgot their name[8]
>
> She seemed embarrassed as she spoke. Genji realized that what she said was true and felt sorry for her:
>
> Having now forsaken the things of this
> world
> Including the ways of love, is it sinful
> Of me to pluck off these leaves of wild
> ginger
>
> Apparently Chūjō alone remained an object of Genji's affection. (873; 15: 523-524)

The return of Genji as the prototype of the amorous male courtier reasserts a defining feature of his character, but it does so in a highly conventional, stylized manner that intensifies the perception of the protagonist's ambivalent status at this point in the story.

This interlude is a brief respite that acts to emphasize Genji's awareness of his tendency to break down over every little thing. He thus tries to avoid bringing up the past, but this proves impossible. The rainy season in the fifth month puts Genji in a pensive mood. One evening, as he is viewing the moon with his son, he discusses plans for Murasaki's first-year memorial services. Genji's son is struck by how old his father looks—an edgy observation, given the deep longing for Murasaki the son once shared with his sire. This tension is resolved by a poignant exchange:

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[8] In addition to the oft-used play on the word *aoi* ("wild ginger" and "the day we will meet"), the poem refers to a *yorube*, a sacred vessel containing water used in Shinto rituals to draw a god to its reflection. The comparison of Genji to a deity in this context is sexually suggestive; and though the original text is coy, it leaves no doubt that he accepts the invitation, for in his reply poem he plays on the word *tsumi*, which means both "sin" and "to pluck."

> Just then, the cuckoo they had been waiting for gave a faint cry. Upon hearing it, Genji was unusually moved and whispered a line of verse: "How could it have known?"[9]
>
> Is it yearning for the one who is gone
> That leads you back here, O mountain
> cuckoo
> Soaked by a sudden evening shower
>
> Genji looked up ever more intently into the sky. His son replied:
>
> Take this message with you, mountain
> cuckoo
> To one who is beloved of me … tell her
> The orange tree at home is in full bloom
> (875; 15: 527)

Following these interludes, the passage of narrative time picks up speed. Descriptions of Genji's mourning become shorter and more inter-textual, employing allusions that appear earlier in the narrative. For example, the sixth month, the hottest season of the year, finds Genji secluded in a room cooled by a nearby pond. The poetic voice is now solitary.

> Looking at the lotus blooming profusely, the dew covering the many flowers brought back a line from a poem by Lady Ise: "How can there be so many tears?"[10] He remained distracted, lost in

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[9] *Kokin rokujō* 2804: "As we talked of things that happened long ago, a cuckoo cried out in that same voice of old … how did it know we were here?"

[10] *Tales of Ise* section 176 [also *Kokin rokujō* 2479]: "My sorrow grows ever more intense … how can there be so many tears for one person?"

> his thoughts until the sun went down. Amidst the shrill cries of the cicadas, he sat by himself observing the pinks in the garden, which were aglow in the slanting light at sunset.[11] But they were no comfort to him:
>
> Do these cicadas take this summer day
> A day I pass in idleness and tears
> As a pretext for incessant crying
>
> Swarms of fireflies reminded Genji of a line spoken by the emperor in Bai Juyi's Song of Everlasting Sorrow: "Here in the evening pavilion fireflies flit about, and I long for Yang Guifei." Reciting lines like this from old Chinese verse had now become habitual for him:
>
> They at least know it is night, these
> flickering fireflies …
> But because my grief and sorrow are with
> me always
> I can no longer distinguish between night
> and day (875-76; 15: 528-529)

This solitary voice continues into the seventh month. Genji does not have the heart to celebrate the meeting of the celestial weaver maiden and oxherd at Tanabata with the customary composition of verses in Chinese and Japanese. He does not call for music, but instead whiles away the time gazing outside in idle reverie.

> Late at night Genji arose by himself in the dark and pushed open the hinged door at the corner of the hall. Dew had drenched the garden just below the veranda. He passed through the door into the walkway and, after looking around, went outside:

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[11] *Kokinshū* 244 (Sosei): "Am I the only one who finds them moving … these Japanese pinks aglow in the light of sunset when crickets cry?"

I look up to observe the heavenly lovers
But their tryst belongs to a world beyond
the clouds …
In this garden of parting only dew
remains (876; 15: 529)

The eighth month arrives, and the language of loss becomes increasingly conventional. The autumn wind possesses an unusually lonely tone for Genji as he prepares the memorial service for Murasaki, at which he dedicates a mandala of Amida's paradise that his lost beloved had commissioned. Later that day, while performing his evening devotions, Chūjō comes in, bringing water for the ritual ablutions. Noticing a poem on her fan, Genji picks it up and reads:

These tears of longing for one I loved
Flow endlessly … how, then, can this day
Be thought to mark the end of mourning

Genji replied:

Yearning for my lost beloved,
I have reached the end of life …
Yet so many tears remain (876-77; 15: 530)

On the ninth day of the ninth month, the day of the Chrysanthemum Festival, Genji observes the flowers wrapped in cotton cloth to catch the dew.[12]

Together we would rise on this festive morning
To place cotton cloth over the chrysanthemums …
Today the autumn dew clings to my sleeves alone
(877; 15: 530)

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[12] Chrysanthemums were thought to possess properties that ensured a long life. The damp cloth was subsequently rubbed over the body as an anti-aging treatment.

The narrative then jumps immediately to the tenth month and the season of chill rains. Observing the scenery at dusk, Genji is indescribably despondent, and at this moment of heightened sensitivity the story of his life comes full circle and his grief achieves total identification with the loss his father experienced at the death of Genji's mother.

> He whispered to himself, "Though the rains fall as they always have …." He stared enviously at a flock of wild geese, each bird winging its way across the sky with its mate.
>
> > Taoist summoner[13] who wanders heavenly realms
> > I beseech you, seek the spirit of my lost love
> > Who does not show herself to me even in dreams
>
> No matter what he did, no matter how many months and days passed, he could find no solace. (877; 15: 530-531)

The last interlude, which pulls the reader back from this moment of potential closure, occurs in the eleventh month, when Genji catches sight of revelers preparing to celebrate the Gosechi festival. They remind him of a youthful tryst with a certain Gosechi dancer who wore the traditional headband of bluish-green corded silk.[14] Genji is moved to compose a poem:

> While princes rush to celebrate with wine-flushed
> faces
> The Feast of the Glowing Harvest, must I pass the
> day

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[13] *Maboroshi* ("spirit summoner") refers to a Taoist priest who has special powers to travel to the Heavens and summon spirits of the dead. The word also appears in the *Kiritsubo* chapter in a poem by Genji's father composed on the loss of Genji's mother. The evocation of grief thus comes full circle.

[14] *Hikage* refers to a garland worn on the head of the maidens of the dance, but it is also a homophone for sunlight. The *hikage* garland takes its name from a plant called *hikagegusa* – coral evergreen – originally used to adorn the dancers' headdresses at the Gosechi festival.

> Observing neither the sun nor those headbands of
> silk (878;15: 531)

Having passed through the year bearing up under his grief, Genji realizes that the time has come when he must renounce the world. Even so, his sorrow is not exhausted, and privately he continues to mull over all the things he needs to do before taking vows.

The final act of mourning is overtly literary in nature. If Genji is to write himself out of the narrative, he must also erase all traces of writing by the woman who is the one attachment that will keep him fettered to this world. He is now completely exhausted, literally as a man who has reached the end of life and figuratively as a character who has nothing more to give to the narrative. The act of consigning to flames the words of his beloved is an act of self-immolation.

> It is quite moving to look upon the writings of someone who has died … even the writings of someone who may not be all that closely connected to the reader. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Genji had such a powerful reaction to Murasaki's letters. Everything went dark before his eyes, and in his heart he worried that the flow of his tears would merge with the stream of her words and cause the ink to run, smearing the letters so that they would no longer be legible. Ashamed to be displaying such unmanliness in front of these women, he pushed the letters away.
>
> Though I tried to keep my eyes on her tracks
> Thinking to follow the one who has crossed
> The Mountain of Death, I have lost my way
>
> …. It was all too much to bear, and because the turmoil in his heart would surely have exposed him to the shame of appearing womanish and weak, he stopped reading the letters, and instead wrote a poem in small characters along the margins of one of them:
>
> Why collect these letters, gathering words

> Like so much seaweed … consign them to flames
> Let their smoke rise with hers to the heavens

And so they burned all of Murasaki's letters. (878-79; 15: 533-534)

The chapter ends with Genji making his first public appearance in over a year at the three-day observance of the Invocation of the Holy Names, which was held in the Shōkyōden at the imperial palace. Genji is moved by the sight of a venerable priest he has known for many years. The priest's hair is now white, a final reminder to Genji of his own imminent demise. The narrator breaks in at this moment:

> Lest I forget, I should mention that when Genji offered the wine cup to the priest, he composed a poem:
>
> We know not if we'll survive till the
> spring
> So for today let's decorate our caps
> With twigs of plum budding amidst the
> snow
>
> The priest replied:
>
> I pray you may live to view these
> blossoms
> For a thousand springs … my years have
> piled up
> Like this drifting snow, turning my hair
> white (880; 15: 535)

It is fitting that the final image for Genji's aging is someone else's snow-white hair. By obliquely referring to his old age and impending death in this manner, the narrative transfigures him aesthetically and religiously so that he comes to embody the ideal of an ephemeral sublime—the ineffable beauty of decline and death that, because it cannot be fully comprehended, fully taken in, overwhelms the powers of the intellect and the power of language to contain it. Whiteness is of course traditionally associated with death and purity, its totalizing power as an image suggesting absence and obliteration, and that association is no doubt at work here. However, the image of whiteness in this instance has a more specific function in that it recalls Genji's own peculiar preference for the ephemeral sublime. In the Asagao chapter he clearly enunciates that preference:

> Snow had piled up deeply in the garden, and as it continued to flurry in the twilight the transformation of the pines and the bamboo was a marvel. Genji's features seemed more radiant than usual.
>
> "The cherry blossoms and the autumn foliage at their peak no doubt stir the human heart in their respective seasons," he said, "but the sky of a winter night, when a full, clear moon illuminates the snow, is more profoundly moving than either, even though there is an eerie lack of color. It transports my thoughts to things beyond this world … it provides a moment when one can appreciate beauty and sadness to the full. Those who would claim that an evening like this is an example of something coldly forbidding have a shallow understanding of beauty."
>
> He had the blinds rolled up, and moonlight streamed into every corner of the chamber, bathing it in a uniformly whitish glow. The poor withered plants in the garden were sagging beneath the weight of the snow, the burbling of the garden stream sounded as if it were sobbing in grief, and the ice on the pond was indescribably desolate. (420; 13: 480-481)

In order to stay true and consistent to the portrait of her protagonist, Murasaki Shikibu had no alternative but to keep him suspended in an ambivalent state at the end, and she accomplishes this with the reference to whiteness, an image that presages the coming annihilation of death, otherwise inexpressible, in terms that she had Genji himself enunciate.

The oblique depiction of aging in the Maboroshi chapter creates a multi-vocal narrative that serves specific rhetorical functions within the fictional world of the court (such as establishing the motives and subjectivity of the characters) as well as the author's larger aesthetic and moral aims. The multi-vocal element of her stylistics shares the quality of 'double-voicing' that Bakhtin argued was the distinctive feature of the Western novel.[15] That double-voicing is especially noticeable at those moments when the pain of loss and the torment of personal memories that Genji suffers is depicted as so overwhelming, so sublime that the only recourse he has to give expression to his feelings is to let other voices speak for him—voices provided by the poetic tradition, by court ritual, and by the order of nature itself—that transfigure aging and grief by stilling them into art.

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[15] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263. Heterorglossia is a term coined by Bakhtin to describe what he sees as a distinctive feature of the novel: namely, a diversity of types of speech (or discourse) that "permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships." Heteroglossia is "*another's* speech in another's language," speech that creates a "*double-voiced discourse*" by serving both the direct intentions of a fictional character and the indirect, or refracted, aims of the author. See p. 324. Italics are Bakhtin's.