

The Honor of Translating *The Tale of Genji*

My title this evening may promise a talk about the honor of translating *The Tale of Genji*, but I must begin by thanking the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture for quite another honor: that of inviting me to give this year's Sen Soshitsu XV Lecture in the first place. Never in my life did I imagine myself being invited to give a public lecture at Columbia.

Actually, when the Donald Keene Center first asked me whether I might be able to be in New York in April 2009, for an unspecified event, I said no. It's just too far, I said. Only months later did I learn what the event was. The message that identified it (the Sen Lecture had never occurred to me) also offered an enticement: Professor Keene, it said, would be especially pleased if I were able to accept. So here I am.

The Center asked me particularly to talk about translating *The Tale of Genji*. After the *Genji* millennium year of 2008 I had been planning not to talk any more about the tale, and in any case, I seldom discuss translation; but this was different. Translating *The Tale of Genji* certainly was quite an experience, and now that that experience is over, and my fifteen or sixteen years of publicly visible preoccupation with the work are slipping into the past, I felt that for the occasion I could indeed look back over it one more time. "Honor" is the first word that came to mind, to sum it up. "Pleasure" came next. "Labor" could have followed, I suppose, but for some reason it didn't occur to me.

I'll start by quoting the sixteenth century poet and man of letters Étienne de la Boétie, the great friend of Michel de Montaigne. La Boétie wrote in the verse preface to a translation from Italian that he did for his wife:

Jamais plaisir je n'ai pris à changer
En nostre langue aucun œuvre estrangeur :
Car à tourner d'une langue estrangere

La peine est grande et la gloire est legere.

To paraphrase him, he said that he didn't enjoy translating from another language into his own because it's a lot of work and you get very little recognition for it. If I'm an exception to his rule about recognition, that's only because of the extraordinarily famous work and author that I translated. In general La Boétie was of course quite right and still is, although fortunately translators keep translating prose and poetry anyway.

La Boétie went on to say that he'd much rather write something of his own, even if it wasn't as good as what he might translate. He wrote:

J'ayme trop mieux de moymesmes ecrire
 Quelque escript mien, encore qu'il soit pire.

I can imagine feeling that way, if I were he. However, I don't seem to be able to write anything of my own. When I was young I wanted to write, but I could never get anything out. Every page remained stubbornly blank, or nearly so. So translating has been for me the only way to work with and discover my own language, somewhat in the manner of a writer.

Of course, translation has also given me a way of exploring and learning the Japanese language, especially Classical Japanese. I first noticed my interest in translation some forty-five years ago, when Donald Keene assigned each student in his "Readings in Noh" course a Noh play to translate. My translation came back largely rewritten in pencil by the master, and with good reason. Nonetheless, I knew that I wanted to keep trying.

Perhaps I would not have translated that much if I had soon learned to read Classical Japanese fluently and accurately. However, translation long remained my only way of discovering in detail what a worthwhile text actually said. This was still true when I accepted the challenge of *The Tale of Genji*. A major reason for doing so was the wish to find out for myself what Murasaki Shikibu had written. Another was, of course, aspiration to higher achievement. *The Tale of Genji* was for me a great mountain, and I wanted very much to climb it if I could.

I had the idea that before translating the tale I should read it through in the original. So I set out to do that. My conscientious policy was never to turn to the next page until I had a good grasp of the page I was on. In this spirit I got about half way through the work. By then the time to begin translating had clearly come, so I went back to the first chapter. That was when I discovered that I hadn't really understood a single line of what I had read. Yes, as they say, the original of *The Tale of Genji* is quite difficult. So by translating it I successfully learned to read it a little better and to express better, in my own language, what I gathered it had to say.

Étienne de la Boétie dismissed translation a little summarily, I think, when he went on, "Little wisdom indeed has he who enriches himself with the wealth of others."

Bien a vrayment celuy peu de sagesse,
Du bien d'autrui qui se fait sa richesse.

But many accomplished poets seem drawn to translation precisely because translation extends and enriches the range of their own thinking and language, and poses a challenge that they feel called to answer. Perhaps fewer established novelists translate novels, but the same must be true when they do. You probably know that several distinguished twentieth-century Japanese writers, including one of my predecessors as a Sen lecturer, devoted years of their lives to translating *The Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese. Two even translated it more than once. The tale has a great deal to give anyone who seeks such intimate acquaintance with it. Sometimes I think that the translator of a great literary work resembles an actor performing a great role, or a soloist performing a great piece of music. Naturally not every performance will satisfy everyone, not even the performer; but it is a fine thing to engage closely with such a work and to seek to do it justice before the world, in a voice that is inevitably one's own.

My ambition to translate *The Tale of Genji* seems to have been blessed from the start. Naturally there were difficulties along the way, but for some unfathomable reason the gods seemed eager time and again to make sure that everything went well in the end.

For one thing, like any translator into English I had such a large potential audience. There are so many people who read English. For most languages, one translation of *The Tale of Genji* would be plenty, but English has room for three, and there will no doubt be more. I can't help thinking of my friend Kai Niemenen, who is translating the tale into Finnish. Now *that* is true dedication to the art of literary translation. And for another thing, I was following in the footsteps of Arthur Waley, whose genius established the tale long ago in English as great literature, and to whom every subsequent English translator remains indebted. In this connection I think of the Russian translator, Tatiana Sokolova-Delyusina. Tatiana had no prepared soil to plant her work in, and by now it is unfortunately out of print.

More than anything else, though, I doubt that any translator into any language has enjoyed the kind of support and good fortune that kept coming my way. It all started with my initial visit to the then Penguin Classics editor in London. He was far more interested than I expected him to be, and on leaving the building I felt as though I were setting out toward a new life. Then I boarded a tube train. In the sterile, fluorescently lit space of the car I found myself sitting opposite an indescribably beautiful woman. I could hardly believe my eyes. She was smiling gently to herself. Her astonishing presence there suggested some sort of divine approval.

Not that things went smoothly right away. For some time administration kept me from the work that I longed to do. But to my amazement, and to that of my colleagues, I soon received a three-year Australian Research Council grant to pursue the translation. This *was* a miracle. Even more miraculous was being given teaching relief, since normally these grants gave the so-called "principal investigator" only lab equipment and research assistant time. I got three half-years off teaching. I still had to apply for a research assistant, though, just to be able to reach the minimum grant threshold. Alas, my wife, Susan, was the only qualified candidate. She more than earned her salary.

A second three-year term of the same grant was another miracle. I had hit precisely the right years to apply. No application either earlier or later would have yielded anything. And in the meantime, thanks to Barbara Ruch and the late Kawai Hayao I was invited to spend 1997 at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, to continue my translation work full-time. Unfortunately, Susan had to stay behind on our farm in Australia, between Canberra and sea. It was a year of drought so severe that she had to dig a pit in the creek bed to get water—drought punctuated by a huge rainstorm that left her flooded in for days and by a lightning strike that melted the telephone.

Meanwhile, things were not going that well with Penguin in London. The Classics Editor of the time seemed to have emigrated to the dark side of the moon. I'd all but given up when a senior editor I knew at Penguin in New York did what needed to be done. Wendy Wolf felt so strongly about the project that she simply announced to Penguin in London that she was taking it over. After that, everything changed.

Penguin was then beginning to revamp its old Classics line and to publish major classics in a high-quality format. Until then my *Genji* translation had been due to come out in several standard Classics volumes, and I'd been hoping to find outside funding for some simple illustrations. But Wendy wanted to do better than that, and the success of Robert Fagles's Homer convinced the publisher to agree. Suddenly, there was money for the illustrations I wanted and for a two-volume hard-back boxed set, to be followed by the high-quality paperback that you know.

An advance copy of the hard-back edition was sitting in the Hudson Street offices of Penguin USA, ready to mail to me, on the morning of September 11, 2001. Needless to say, it stayed where it was for some time. After receiving it I visited New York as soon as I could, and met the whole editing and production team. It was a moving occasion, especially under those circumstances. Everyone involved told me what a pleasure it had been to work on *The Tale of Genji*. The chief copy editor, who had worked for years in Tokyo, described it as a once-in-a-lifetime

experience. The production manager had called in a favor to upgrade the quality of the paper. The art director had spent all night digitizing the cover material I was able to send him at the very last minute, and he did a wonderful job. And Wendy Wolf had outdone herself in orchestrating the entire effort.

By pure coincidence, my translation came out just before the world premiere, in Los Angeles, of a blockbuster anniversary production by one of the major Japanese movie studios: *Genji monogatari sennen no koi* (“The Tale of Genji: A Thousand Years of Love”). In reality, that overseas premiere was a domestic Japanese publicity event, and, alas, *Sennen no koi* turned out to be a truly awful movie. It was all quite exciting at the time, though. I even thought of attending the premiere. Fortunately, I didn’t.

And the *Genji* tide rolled on. Just as I had never imagined the release of *Sennen no koi* in 2001, I had never imagined, either, the *Genji* millennium of 2008. Over a thousand events of all kinds were held in Japan to mark the occasion. The millennium brought together many of us with *Genji* connections to Kyoto, from sixteen different countries. That was quite an event.

People have often asked me what was most difficult about translating *The Tale of Genji*. I usually start with the poetry. In Japan, questioners want particularly to know how I handled the word plays in the poems. I confess immediately that there are no word plays—*kakekotoba* and so on—in my poem translations. I did not even try. I felt that the chances of success were too slim, and besides, I did not want to distract the reader with unfamiliar, unexpected difficulties. In the Japan of the past, the poems were often seen as more important than the prose, but in English for a general audience, and even perhaps in modern Japanese, the balance is the other way round. I aimed only to give each poem sufficient distinction of form and style that it stood out a little against the background of the surrounding prose.

The main problem was finding the right form. At first I doubted my ability to translate the poems effectively, and so I tried to make them as discreet as

possible. Unfortunately, while translating Chapter 42 I realized that I had painted myself into a corner, fallen into a hopeless rut, etc. I was bored to death with the way I was handling the poems. So I went back to the beginning and redid them. I decided to adopt the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable-count format of the original, not because I thought that it would succeed particularly well, but because it would at least show that I had tried. I also laid it out in two lines rather than five so as not to break up the prose too much. Some readers probably never notice the syllable-count format of the poems, especially since the count does not always work properly unless the translation is voiced right. But that can't be helped. Some of the poems turned out much better than I had imagined, but of course there are failures, too.

The prose was a challenge, as I've said. Still, I usually tell people quite truthfully that an even greater challenge was working out the right way to say in my language what I already knew the original meant. There are so many, many ways to express the simplest thought, and each gives that thought a more or less distinct character. I had an idea of the character I wanted to give my translation—an idea of how the whole should sound—but the right note for any particular phrase was often difficult to catch, if I could catch it at all. Sometimes I felt as though I just didn't have an adequate command of English.

If the original Japanese often challenged me less than the English, that is only because I had so much help. As far as I know, Arthur Waley had little to go on except his innate genius and the glosses in the late seventeenth-century *Kogetsushô* edition of the text. *Kogetsushô* is a remarkable work for its time, but I still have no idea how he achieved what he did. Edward Seidensticker had a more resources, especially the old *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* edition from the late 1950s, but even so I can only admire what he managed to do. I had three recent, state-of-the-art editions, one of which includes an authoritative modern Japanese translation designed to help the reader understand the original line by line. At first I resolutely avoided looking at this translation, which appears in smaller type directly under the original. Nonetheless, my eye sometimes wandered down to it, and now and again what I found there surprised me. After confidently

translating a passage, I'd notice at the bottom of the page a thoroughly unfamiliar counterpart line. Sure enough, I'd gotten lost. These early experiences were a salutary warning to accept all the help I could get.

I soon learned also to be grateful for the work of the scholars of the past. Many notes in even the most recent editions convey information or suggest readings first proposed centuries ago. *Genji* scholarship is at least eight hundred years old. As I sought to bring a passage into focus, it was a pleasure to look back over such depths of time and to realize how many predecessors had done the same and left their understanding to later generations.

One more frequently asked question, especially in Japan, concerns my favorite heroine in the tale. Who is she? I always say Murasaki. I gave that answer once at a lunch with several women who belonged to a linked verse circle. "Aha!" the questioner snorted, "you would, wouldn't you! Men always do." That brought me up short. "What's wrong with liking Murasaki?" I wanted to protest, but I was already feeling guilty, and I suspected that I knew the answer anyway. So I stayed out of the gender wars and let the matter drop. I'll add, though, that for me the lady from Akashi is a particularly moving, fascinating figure. So is Rokujô, of course. So is Utsusemi in her way. And, yes, Suetsumuhana, and the rest—with the exception, perhaps, of the Third Princess. And I cannot leave this subject without mentioning Fujitsubo. I know something about Fujitsubo from my own experience, and I often wondered, while translating the early chapters, how the author managed to understand such things so perfectly.

Sometimes people also ask me what is my favorite chapter. I have two: "Suetsumuhana" ("The Safflower") and "Minori" ("The Law," or, in Edward Seidensticker's translation, "The Rites"). The former, mingling as it does wit with sympathy, is an example of the very highest kind of comic writing. As for "Minori," it is the deeply moving chapter that describes Murasaki's death.

However, relatively few chapters in the tale lend themselves to being isolated this way from the rest. Some contain memorable passages but do not stand well

on their own, and sometimes an important theme surfaces sporadically in a succession of chapters. That is why it is difficult to explain coherently why I feel so strongly about the part of the tale that aroused my greatest enthusiasm. I had been studiously translating away, line by line, for hundreds of pages by the time I reached Chapter 36 (“Kashiwagi,” “The Oak Tree”), without ever registering the cumulative effect that then burst into my consciousness. I was overwhelmed. I remember rushing out of my study and exclaiming to my wife, “This is beyond anything! If *The Tale of Genji* is famous for anything at all, it should be famous for *this*! *This* is what lifts it into the company of the few greatest books ever written!” That moment was, for me, the high point of the whole process of translating the tale. A great deal in *The Tale of Genji* is moving, witty, impressive, or variously attractive, but the story told in the middle part of the book, building as it does on all that precedes it, left an impression—no, an *experience*—of extraordinary depth and tragic grandeur. It convinced me that the tale’s intrinsic quality is even greater than its high reputation.

Anyway, after this interlude I’ll return now to the business of understanding the original well enough to be able to translate it properly. I think of this problem in terms of diction and meaning.

Two translations equally accurate in lexical and grammatical meaning—translations of a passage of speech, for example—can convey very different impressions. Which impression, then, is the right one? Is the speaker the self-centered twit of translation one, or the well-intentioned gentleman of translation two? Word choice and diction can make that much difference. Perhaps neither is demonstrably truer to an original written in a dead language, countless nuances of which were forgotten centuries ago. Still, the translator must make take a position on the issue. Is an utterance ironic, or not? Does it convey vulgarity, or mockery? If it does, then the translation should do so, too. But does it? The decision is bound up with interpretation of what the author meant to say and of the way the original audience might have taken the passage, and it can profoundly affect reading in the long run. So I would like to plead for including

diction and tone under the heading of accuracy, imponderable though these may often be.

Actually, diction and tone are not unrelated to lexical accuracy. The vocabulary of *The Tale of Genji* is relatively restricted. Some common words function more variously in the narrative than any single English word could possibly do, and relatively low lexical variety may make it difficult, centuries after the author's time, to know exactly what shade or flavor of meaning is intended. Relationships between words, and between especially significant words and their wider context, seem open in character and indeterminate in outline. Hence, I suppose, the famous "suggestiveness" of this language, which really does invite, in fact require, reader participation in the attribution of flavor and meaning.

Perhaps this is partly why scholars who quote *The Tale of Genji* in English often provide their own translation of the quoted passage. It is not necessarily that they disapprove of the existing translations. Rather, the passage in question does not say in those translations exactly what the scholar quoting it wants it to say—or, better, believes that it *does* say. This discrepancy also explains the occasional practice of quoting one passage in one established translation and the next passage in another, depending on how well either supports the writer's argument.

I say all this without reproach to anyone, because I have done the same thing as the scholars who make their own translations. I translated every page as carefully as I could, but whenever I then focused on a particular passage, for the purpose of quoting it in an essay, I found my wording somewhat blurred and inadequate. Each time I felt the need to sharpen the focus in order to bring out more clearly what I believed the passage really said. Or should that be, "to bring out more clearly what I *wanted* it to say"? Again and again I pondered this question, confident that no one could charge me with mistranslation, yet uncertain whether the author herself, and certainly her intended audience, would have recognized such sparkling precision. Often my thoughts went to the author of the eleventh-century *Sarashina nikki* ("As I Crossed a Bridge of

Dreams” in Ivan Morris’s translation) and her account of herself as a young girl, deeply absorbed in reading *The Tale of Genji*. What was *she* getting out of it? Probably not *la fine fleur* of interpretation nursed into intricate bloom by eight hundred years of devoted scholarship. So where to draw the line between sober accuracy and informed but somewhat eager imagination?

Still, something must be done in any translation, into any language, to give the narrative a clarity of outline that it may very well have had, after all, for an original audience with living access to the court lore and idiom of the early eleventh century. In any case, English requires choices between singular and plural, definite or indefinite article, “he” or “she,” and so on. So the translator constantly makes informed decisions—or, occasionally, fails to notice that a decision is needed. A decision made or missed may make a significant difference for any reader disposed to give the narrative and its content careful thought.

One such moment comes in Chapter 2 (“Hahakigi,” “The Broom Tree”). It is famous, and I apologize to those of you who know all about it already. That devastatingly charming young scoundrel, Genji, has carried Utsusemi, a married woman, into the neighboring room, where the obvious next move either does or does not follow. Do they, or don’t they? Sex has long been as delicate a subject in Japan as elsewhere, and perhaps in order to uphold the respectability of the work, some of the old commentaries deny that they do. Others say nothing. Modern materials on the subject are often discreet, and translations may tread a middle path, leaving the matter up to the reader. The question hangs on a single verb that occurs in Genji’s thoughts about what has, or has not, just taken place. Does this verb mean clearly that they *didn’t* make love? Is it irreducibly ambiguous? Or is it unambiguously explicit? I racked my brains over this one for a long time. There was something wrong with the picture. Finally it came to me. This utterly general-purpose verb, used precisely that way, in that precise context, was perfectly clear. Genji was not feeling glad to have met Utsusemi, to have been able to spend time with her, and so on. He was glad to have possessed her. Recent scholarship on the tale, as I was then relieved to discover, openly reads the verb this way. I tell this story only in order to comment on the

apparent “suggestiveness” of the tale’s language. Sometimes it is indeed mainly in the eye of the reader, and due largely to incomplete grasp of idiom and context.

Another example illustrates how significant, and yet how slippery, the most innocuous-looking phrase can be. You remember that, in the next-to-last chapter of the tale, some monks come across a young woman known as Ukifune. They find her lying on the ground in a sort of trance. Now, when the reader last saw Ukifune, she seriously meant to drown herself that night in the nearby river. But here she is. Apparently she didn’t drown after all. So what *did* happen to her? Soon, in a flicker of lucidity, she asks those looking after her either to throw her (for the first time) into the river, or to throw her *back* into the river. There is no “back” in the original, but that proves nothing, because the language has no casually spoken way to say it. In other words, there would be no “back” even if “back” were meant. For this reason there is absolutely nothing wrong with Edward Seidensticker’s translation, “throw me back in the river.” It is completely legitimate. Understanding of the original phrase depends entirely on the perceived context—that is, on how the reader or translator understands what actually happened to Ukifune. When Professor Seidensticker made his translation virtually all readers, including scholars, seem to have taken it for granted that Ukifune threw herself into the river but was swept downstream by the current and washed ashore, alive, at the spot where the monks found her. No wonder he shared that view. Most general readers still do. However, specialist opinion now disagrees, and that change can affect one’s understanding of Ukifune and her fate. I only wish we could ask the young lady evoked in *Sarashina nikki* what *she* thought about all this.

I have been talking about precision, discovered or perhaps sometimes, just possibly, imagined. Now I will turn for a moment to imprecision, indirection, or studied discretion. While translating the tale I often avoided precise usage or explicit vocabulary in order not to misrepresent the original. Discretion and indirect, or euphemistic, expression are fundamental to aristocratic discourse, in *The Tale of Genji* as elsewhere. It was not always easy to convey them fairly. Calling a spade a spade is much easier than suggesting a spade without naming it.

The idea of “marriage” is an example. Although the narrative is often concerned with absorbing issues surrounding marriage, it has no single lexical item for either “marry” or “marriage.” Therefore my translation has none, either. Perhaps marriage, like the spade, was too sensitive an issue even to name. The same seems to have been true, in *Genji* language at least, of the desire to leave the world and enter religion. Genji thinks repeatedly about leaving the world, although he never actually does so. The language offers a specific word for this step, but that word does not occur in the tale. Instead, the original text has Genji think about “acting on his long-standing desire.” The light, unassuming word for this “long-standing desire,” *hoi*, is as close as the author wished to come to naming the spade. I respected her discretion. Genji’s brother, Suzaku, conceived the same desire and acted on it in the end. I will never forget my astonishment when I discovered that, in her modern Japanese translation published in 1939, a famous Japanese writer had had Suzaku “enter upon the life of religious faith.” The four-character compound she used, directly imported from modern intellectual discourse, weighed rhetorically like a teaspoonful of neutron star.

My most pervasively visible effort to respect the discretion and perspective of the tale’s narrator appears in my treatment of names and other personal appellations. Having discussed this topic in the introduction to my translation, I won’t say much about it here. I knew that I was taking a risk, even though I did all I could think of to keep the conscientious reader fully informed. Sure enough, some readers complained, although I know that others approved. Given the way I approached the tale, I couldn’t have done otherwise, and so I have no regrets. There certainly were some tight spots, though. I especially remember the first meeting between Murasaki and the lady from Akashi, neither of whom of course had a name. Feminine pronouns were about all I had to work with. I still wonder whether I really got away with that one.

My approach to the text forced this treatment of the names on me because I could not help understanding and situating every word in the context of the narrative as a whole. I was too acutely conscious of how, in the terms of the text itself, the convenient, traditional nicknames would affect the relations between

the characters. This matter, too, I have explained in print. I mention it only because my approach to reading affected not only my treatment of the names, but also the way I understood, hence translated, certain words and expressions.

I don't always remember that well the works I translate from Japanese or, once, from French. Fiction, folktales, literary scholarship—their content floats in my memory in dwindling, disconnected fragments. Sometimes, however, something vital stirs in me, deeper down. This happened with the texts of the Noh theater, as it did with *The Tale of Genji*. In these cases I began to detect, at first unconsciously, the workings of a spacious, informing intelligence. I glimpsed, or felt I glimpsed, subterranean patterns. With respect to Noh, I came to see in the plays associated with Zeami a coherent network of themes and imagery quite distinct from the work of any other Noh playwright, and somehow more fully alive. No doubt my vision was subjective and unscholarly, but it was also fascinating.

Something like that also happened with *The Tale of Genji*. I began glimpsing in it large-scale patterns that affected the way I translated, or, in the case I am about to discuss, *should* have translated even discreet phrases. For me, these patterns give depth and coherence to a work that readers often see as fragmented and episodic. They also fill me with admiration, as they did in the case of Zeami, for the genius of the author.

So I now have a translator's story to tell. It concerns Genji and his elder brother, Emperor and then Retired Emperor Suzaku.

Last July I re-read Chapter 34 in the original. "Spring Shoots I," the first "Wakana" chapter, is long and contains some of the author's greatest writing. It begins with all the complexities that lead Genji to marry Suzaku's favorite daughter, the Third Princess. In the process, Suzaku first considers marrying her to Genji's son, Yûgiri; and while talking to Yûgiri with this outcome in mind, he looks back over the past. A few words particularly caught my attention, and I checked my

published translation to see what I had done with them. In my printed version, Suzaku had said,

As Emperor myself, however, I discovered limits to what I could do,
and while your father still meant a great deal to me personally, a little
slip of his came to earn me his displeasure...

The footnote that glossed “a little slip of his” explained, “Presumably Genji’s misadventure with Oborozukiyo.” (I trust you remember the moment when Oborozukiyo’s father discovers Genji in bed with his daughter.)

What? I exclaimed to myself. Why, that’s *wrong!* By then, you see, I had more experience reading the language of the tale than I did when I wrote those words, and I had also thought more about the work. I just *knew* (or so I felt) what those words meant: not “a little slip of *his*,” but “a little slip of *mine*,” or “a little fault on *my* part.” I also *knew* that the “little” was a euphemism—a kind of euphemism that the speaker can use only of something serious that *he* has done against his better judgment. For these reasons I now heard Suzaku saying, “...a most unfortunate error of mine came to earn me your father’s displeasure.” He was referring not to Genji’s escapade with Oborozukiyo, but to his own failure toward Genji. Far from honoring the solemn injunction of their father, the Kiritsubo Emperor, to honor Genji and seek his advice, Suzaku as reigning emperor had failed utterly to stand up to his mother and resist her fury against his brother—a fury that had stripped Genji of rank and office and driven him into exile; and Suzaku had failed again whenever he wanted to recall Genji to the Capital, and his mother prevented him from doing so.

You understand, I’m sure, that no pronoun or other grammatical device in the original specifies whose fault, still less what fault, is meant. The precision that another language might convey grammatically is instead, I believe, communicated entirely by the narrative context and the understanding of social practice shared by the author’s intended audience. Retired Emperor Suzaku is a modest, honorable man who knows his own limitations, but who also understands the role and dignity of the sovereign. Now he is about to leave the world and become a monk, in order to be able spend his remaining days praying

for rebirth in Amida's paradise. Before he does so, however, he must find a suitable husband for the daughter whom he loves more than anything else in the world. Yûgiri is a promising candidate. Would Suzaku allude under such circumstances to an old misdeed of Yûgiri's father? Would he not, rather, discreetly acknowledge responsibility for a graver one of his own, long ago, *toward* the young man's father, in the hope of now laying all that past to rest for himself, for Genji, and for Yûgiri? I could go on this way for some time, taking other aspects of the distant and proximate context into account. Perhaps that much will do, however, to suggest what is at stake in this pair of contrasting translations. The first issue is Suzaku's character in the narrative as a whole and at this stage in his life. The second is the nature of the relationship between him and Genji—the longest relationship between Genji and any other figure in the tale.

The mistake—at least as I saw it—seemed so obvious on this re-reading that I wondered why I had ever made it. So I consulted the annotated edition that I had relied on most. Sure enough, the note at that spot identified the lapse, or fault, as Genji's carrying on with Oborozukiyo. Then I checked the other authoritative edition, the one that I had used less often. The note identified the fault as Suzaku's in exiling Genji. The note in the first edition now seemed to me simply wrong.

The issue being significant, I posted a message on an e-mail discussion list devoted to pre-modern Japanese studies, acknowledging and explaining what I described as a translation error. A long debate followed—one so intense that some of the participants must sometimes have struggled, as I did, in order to restrain their tempers.

Some saw no reason to believe that Suzaku was responsible for *any* wrong done to Genji, since Suzaku was then too much under his mother's influence to have any effective power at all. One voice held that Genji's escapade with Oborozukiyo *must* be the issue, if any, considering how Suzaku himself felt about Oborozukiyo. However, the most interesting objection, sustained through thick and thin by the

most vocal combatant, was that Suzaku was not blaming Genji or himself for anything in particular. Instead, he was merely acknowledging vaguely that unspecified errors had been committed by parties unnamed. Supporting his position by citing medieval commentaries, and arguing that counter-citations from the same commentaries did not mean what they seemed to mean, this learned opponent accused modern scholars of over-interpreting the tale and introducing into their glosses a degree of precision imagined neither by the author nor by the scholarly readers of a time after all far closer to the author's than ours. It was flattering to be caught up in this mass arrest, for fraud, of the gods of modern *Genji* studies. As I said earlier, however, I was sensitive to the possibility of over-interpretation, and secretly I respected my opponent's caution.

I didn't let on, though. And it's true: I wasn't convinced. Neither side budged, and eventually the debate just died. But there the problem is. In the absence of grammatical and lexical precision, only context can further define the meaning of this passage. But what *is* the relevant context? What does it include? How far does it go? Is it confined to the bounds of the sentence? Does it take in the whole scene? Does its fabric stretch back, chapter after chapter, to events—but which ones?—that now are painful memories from years ago? Does it reach even into the accepted manners of the court, that is to say, into questions of what can or cannot properly be said, and when, by or to whom?

For me, being the person I am, it stretches far and wide, to take in much of the tale and its world. So I stand by my correction, not because vocabulary or grammar conclusively prove it right, since they do not, or because some authorities favor it after all, but because it is plausible, fruitful, and a credit to the author and her work. To catch it, even too late, is a translator's pleasure and privilege, and to speak of it is to declare again the scope and greatness of the tale.

With that, I will close my talk. As always when I discuss *The Tale of Genji*, I feel as though I have left too much out. But perhaps I have managed at least to convey how absorbing the experience of translating the tale was, and how it continued to absorb me even after the job was done. Only now, seven and a half years after

publication, do I feel that I have done everything I could, within my limits, to requite the honor of spending eight years putting this masterpiece into my own, imperfect words.