Genji and After: A Translator Looks Back

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Rather than celebrate *The Tale of Genji* explicitly in my talk this evening—after all, so many have already done so, for so long, and in so many ways—I will allow myself to glance back over my career as a translator of Classical Japanese literature. Since this career began over fifty years ago, I will omit the early decades and go straight to the phase of it that matters most. Almost needless to say, that phase began when I understook to translate *The Tale of Genji*, published sixteen years ago. I will then spend a little time on my post-*Genji* work, which, as it happens, has just come to a natural end.

In 1990 my wife and I moved to ANU from the University of Oslo, in Norway. Two years later I decided, with considerable trepidation, to translate *Genji monogatari*. The American expression "go for broke" came to mind at the time, but I prefer now the one favored by our friend Grant, a cattle farmer who until last year was our neighbor near Braidwood. Grant owned the property next to ours. "Go for your life!" Grant used to say in the days when he longed to free himself from working for the local council. So I went for my life. Grant started out with just a few poddie calves, but thanks to hard work and a keen eye for every chance he recently bought a large, first-class beef cattle property in our area. He is now the king of his castle. As for me, I well knew that translation does not advance an academic career, but I was getting on already, and I did not care. I was ambitious in another way. Eight years later, just before my *Genji* translation came out, I retired.

At first I doubted my linguistic and literary adequacy for the task. I was also keenly aware of being the third, not the first, to translate the complete tale into English. I imagined people wondering who I thought I was, to challenge the achievements of my illustrious predecessors. I also suspected that the third English *Genji*, being no novelty, might have relatively little impact. Still, I could do nothing else: *Genji* was the path before me, and I felt somehow responsible for taking that path.

The sixteenth-century French poet Étienne de la Boétie once translated, for his wife, something from Italian. He then reflected, in verse, on the business of translation. I will read his French first, then my functional translation of it into English.

Jamais plaisir je n'ay pris à changer

En nostre langue aucun œuvre estranger:
Car à tourner d'une langue estrangere
La peine est grande et la gloire est legere.
Never did I much enjoy changing
a foreign work into our own language:
for translating from a foreign language
is hard work and earns but little glory.

In short, translation means a lot of work for little recognition. Perhaps La Boétie was right in general—but not, as it turned out, for me. He went on:

J'ayme trop mieux de moymesmes ecrire
Quelque escript mien, encore qu'il soit pire.
I far prefer to write all on my own
something of my own, even if less good.

In fact, he also wrote:

De chanter rien d'autruy meshuy qu'ay je que faire?
Car de chanter pour moi je n'ay que trop à faire.
Why should I wish now to sing others' songs?
I have enough trouble singing my own.

La Boétie has too much of his own to say, to bother with translating works written by other people. I understand. I might well have felt the same way if I had had his gift. But no. Long ago I aspired to write, but the words did not come. The page remained blank. That is one reason why I became a translator. Translation has given me after all a way to work with my own language and to explore its possibilities.

Finally, La Boétie went so far as to write:

Bien a vrayment celuy peu de sagesse,
Du bien d'autruy qui se fait sa richesse.
Little wisdom has he, in truth,
who enriches himself with the wealth of others.

But no. With that, I cannot agree. Translation not only gave me what mastery I have of my own language, it also opened for me the riches of Japanese literature.

I awoke to translation in graduate school, over fifty years ago, when Donald Keene gave each of his students a Noh play to translate. My translation came back largely rewritten, and rightly, by the master, but I soon tried again. Over the years I might have translated less if I had soon learned to read Classical Japanese fluently and accurately. However, translation remained for me the only way to discover in detail what a great text actually said. This was still true when I turned to *Genji monogatari*. I wanted to find out for myself what Murasaki Shikibu had written. Moreover, *Genji monogatari* was to me a mountain, there before me to climb if I could. In the end luck and the gods favored me, and I climbed it successfully. Doing so changed my life.

I first assumed that duty required me to read the original text before translating it. I therefore made up my mind never to turn to the next page until I had fully understood the page I was on, and that spirit I got about a third of the way through the tale. However, time kept passing, and I realized that I had better get on with the job if I was ever to finish it. My attempt actually to translate the first few pages taught me that, in reality, I had understood little of what I had read.

My reading skill gradually improved, but I always remained grateful for the help that modern editions provide, and I never forgot how pervasively this help, founded on centuries of *Genji* scholarship, intervened between me and the text proper. I often thought of the Heian writer known as Takasue no Musume. In her *Sarashina nikki*, Takasue's Daughter described the intense pleasure of reading *Genji* as a young girl. But what did *she* get from it? Perhaps not the detailed clarity that translation into a European language requires nearly a thousand years later. If I achieved this clarity, though, where did *I* get it? As much as from the notes and commentary as from the misty original. I still doubt that I have really and truly *read*, through no eyes but my own, all of *Genji monogatari*.

The poetry and the prose of the tale were difficult in different ways. Unsure of my ability to breathe life into the tale's 795 poems, and uncertain how much most readers would care about them anyway, I kept my translations as discreet as possible, until I came to Chapter 42 ("Niou Miya") and saw at last that I had reached a dead end. My poem translations bored even me. So I went back to the beginning and redid them all.

I adopted the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable count of the original, not because I expected great success with it, but because I felt that doing so would at least show that I had tried. I laid the poems out in two lines rather than five so as not to interrupt the

prose too much. In the original, the poems stand out in various ways from the surrounding prose and require a different kind of attention, so I strove to give my translations, too, a distinctive character. I avoided obscurity but did not hesitate to let a poem invite a second glance. In the end some of my poem translations worked quite well, I think. They were also good practice for translating more classical Japanese poetry later on.

Beyond the difficulty of understanding the prose lay the greater one of conveying its meaning in the right English words. There are so many ways to express the simplest thought. Each may mean "the same thing" in a dictionary sense, but even so they are all different. Each has its particular implications, its larger resonance, its flavor: that is to say, its own attunement, or lack of it, to character and context. An example is the moment in the "Miotsukushi" chapter when Murasaki, protesting Genji's obvious feeling for the Akashi Lady, silently says to herself, *Ware wa ware*! In current English an ordinary young woman would say, "I'm *me*!" However, for several reasons Murasaki is by no means ordinary. I therefore had her say instead, "I am I!"—a phrasing that better conveys, I feel, her personal distinction.

In the introduction to his superb translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney wrote of the need to find "the note and pitch for the overall music of the work." I had my own conception of "note and pitch," although the difficulty of achieving it often reminded me of my shortcomings. What the original work requires, in the translator's judgment, and what the translator can actually achieve may not be the same. My goal was a tone at once distinguished and unpretentious. Lacking personal familiarity with any court, I listened instead, in memory and imagination, for the note struck in conversation by my distinguished grandparents. Of course I did not quite achieve that. Even current English is no longer the language that I myself heard and spoke at twenty; and my French is mainly a survival from secondary schooling in France during the 1950s.

Court language anywhere is discrete and indirect. Courtiers express themselves guardedly and rarely call a spade a spade. *Genji monogatari* is known for this discretion, especially since the author and her narrator are both women. Many passages show how cautious a lady of the Heian court had to be. Considering this guardedness and indirection integral to the "note and pitch" that were my goal, I avoided naming any "spade" not explicitly identified in the original. An example is the notion of marriage. Despite frequent, intense concern with issues having to do with marriage, *Genji monogatari* has no single lexical item for either "marry" or

"marriage." Therefore my translation has none, either. Perhaps marriage was too delicate an issue even to name. I remember my relief when the expression "advantageously settled" floated into my mind.

An equally delicate issue is the wish to renounce the world. Genji often thinks about doing so. However, the author never used the word *shukke*, the normal term for this step. Instead she had Genji dream of acting on his *hoi*, his "long-cherished desire." I therefore respected her discretion. In time Suzaku, Genji's half-brother, acts on that same *hoi*. Having repeatedly rejected explanatory translations like "become a monk" or "take religious vows," I was astonished to see that Yosano Akiko, in her modern Japanese translation, had had Suzaku enter upon *shūkyō seikatsu*, "the religious life." This intellectually explicit, four-kanji compound felt to me like a block of concrete.

My way of treating names and titles may have lost me some readers—the objection being that it makes the narrative harder to follow. I did all I could to assist in this regard any reader of good will, but I could not bear to adopt as invariant names the traditional nicknames of such characters as "Aoi," "Yūgiri," or "Tō no Chūjō." These nicknames have been current for centuries, for excellent, practical reasons, but they are foreign to the web of interpersonal relations, private and public, that informs the tale. I shrank from taking such liberties with characters who felt so alive in so living a world. For example, I could not bear to have Suzaku, in conversation with Genji in the first "Wakana" chapter, refer to Genji's son as "Yūgiri." To do so would have been to short-circuit the tension between two distinct realms: that of the tale proper and that of later readers peering into it.

This short-circuit would have be painful because, as a translator, I read each word in relation to the narrative as a whole. This is just how my mind worked. Awareness of context affected my translation. I adjusted my rendering of every line to my conception of the whole and to my notion of tone.

Two translations equally accurate in lexical and grammatical meaning can convey different impressions. Is the speaker the self-centered twit of the first or the well-meaning gentleman of the second? Neither may be demonstrably truer to a text, the idiomatic nuances of which were forgotten centuries ago. However, the translator must still take a position. Is an utterance ironic, or is it not? Does it convey vulgarity or mockery? The decision involves ideas of intended meaning and of likely reception by the original audience. This, too, is a matter of "note and pitch." The possible tuning range in a such translation can be wide.

In the case of *Genji*, the tale's relatively low lexical variety heightens this difficulty. The meaning of a common word, even when restricted by context, may seem open in character and indeterminate in outline. This partly explains the tale's famous "suggestiveness," which not merely invites, but also actually requires reader participation in the attribution of meaning.

Perhaps that is why scholars who quote *Genji monogatari* in English usually provide their own translation instead of quoting a published one. An existing translation may be quite all right in general, but it does not necessarily say, in the passage at issue, exactly what the scholar wishes the passage to say—or, better, believes that it *does* say—in support of the point to be made.

I have done this myself. I translated each page carefully, but when later I wished to quote a passage in an essay, with a particular point in mind, I always found my wording blurred, inadequate. I felt compelled to sharpen the focus so as to bring out better what I now believed the passage "really" said. (Or was it what I *hoped* it said?) I pondered this problem often, confident that no one could charge me with mistranslation, yet uncertain whether the author and her intended audience would have recognized such sparkling precision. It was then, especially, that I thought of Takasue's Daughter.

These are some of the things that I thought about while translating Murasaki Shikibu's masterpiece. Once the book was out I turned my attention to developing further some ideas that I had about the tale. That turned out to be difficult. Moral and intellectual wars have been fought over *Genji monogatari* for nearly 900 years, and they continue. I realized that I had strayed onto a battlefield. Eventually, though, I marshalled evidence and critical opinion, argued my case as well as I could, and published my ideas in a book.

They were good ideas, I think, but never mind what they were. That I had them at all, however, thanks to having translated *Genji monogatari* rather than studied it from the outside, raises a question. Does, or could, translating a complex literary work give the translator special insight into that work? Perhaps, or perhaps not, depending on many things. At any rate I had given my best, first to translating and then to reflecting on *Genji monogatari*. Then all that was over. *The Tale of Genji* slipped into my past.

Successfully translating *Genji* had filled me with wonder and changed my life. So what to do next? *Ise monogatari* came to mind. For me, there is no better way to discover a literary work than to translate it, and I had long wondered what makes

Ise such a seminal classic. It is more difficult than it may seem. An enormous body of commentary on it, accrued over the centuries, offers so many varying interpretations that I shrank from making *Ise monogatari* look, in translation, as though it were all simple and straightforward. If I were to translate it, I would have also to acknowledge adequately its mysteries and complexities, but my struggle with *Genji* commentaries and modern *Genji* scholarship had extinguished in me any wish to plunge again into such waters. Just then, however, I learned by great good fortune that a colleague in Canada wanted a new *Ise* translation but doubted his own ability to produce a good one. Personally, he said, he would much prefer to deal with the *Ise* commentaries. So he and I got together and published a joint volume.

I enjoyed translating those devilish *Ise* poems—and devilish they are, not at all the straightforward little utterances, with a transparent narrative meaning, that they may seem to be in translation. *Ise monogatari* is among, other things, a brilliant display of wit. So I allowed myself some fun with the poems, on the grounds that it was fair enough to make them a little challenging in English, since they certainly are in the original.

That book came out seven years ago. What next? Feeling that I had one more major project in me, I decided to see whether I could make *Heike monogatari* live more fully than before in English.

Heike is so different from *Genji* in theme and language that I hardly knew how I might go about achieving that. My starting point toward a solution was simply the fact that, originally, *Heike* was performed for an audience rather than read silently off the page. I decided to convey something of that oral character. From an edition marked with performance information from an eighteenth-century manual, I learned that *Heike* performance involved, essentially, three modes of oral delivery. I called these "speech, "recitative," and "song. For each I devised a different translation format.

"Speech" was easy, since it is remotely analogous to spoken dialog in opera. "Recitative," more musically voiced, lent itself to long, highly irregular but nonetheless rhythmical English lines. Finally, "song," a remote relative of aria, became short-line blank verse. But wait a minute! Isn't *Heike monogatari* in prose?

Well, no, not really. The very notion of prose assumes the possibility of verse. English writing from past centuries offers plenty of extended narrative in both, but the conventions of Japanese poetry make extended verse narrative impossible. The few, brief examples of it occur only in the *Man'yōshū*. The recitative and song

passages of *Heike monogatari* could not possibly have been conceived in language recognizable as verse from the perspective of an Indo-European language. Therefore they are not inevitably prose, either. I mention this issue in order less to justify translating most of *The Tale of the Heike* into verse, than to present this decision as a further dimension of the art of translation: translation not only of language, but also of form.

Everything I had learned from my earlier work went into translating *The Tale of the Heike*. It was quite an experience. *Genji* had required groping, experimentation, rewriting, and extensive, repeated editing. I translated some chapters two or even three times. In contrast, *Heike* just flowed. I seldom changed a word. My *Genji* translation has received outstanding recognition, for which I am very grateful, but to my mind my *Tale of the Heike* surpasses it. It is my proudest major achievement as a translator. My proudest minor one is my translation of the Noh play *Genji kuyō*, which I entitled "To Hallow Genji." In the late twelfth century people came to believe that Murasaki Shikibu had fallen into hell for having written so scandalously licentious a work. *Genji kuyō* tells how her tale was hallowed (that is, religiously redeemed) after all and became holy writ, and how she herself was revealed to be the merciful Kannon of Ishiyama.

Once my publisher had my *Heike* manuscript, I felt responsible for making available the other war tales, or *gunki monogatari*, that relate events preceding and following those narrated in *Heike* itself. These war tales are *Hōgen monogatari*, *Heiji monogatari*, and *Jōkyūki*. I translated them, too, although not into verse. When Penguin Classics rejected the book on the grounds it would not attract enough readers, I published it myself, through Amazon, in print-on-demand form. That volume went up on Amazon in late 2012, just when *Heike* itself came out.

This adventure into self-publishing went so well that I have self-published all my subsequent work, including four more volumes of literary and historical writing from medieval Japan. One, entitled *A Tribute to Noh* includes not only *To Hallow Genji*, but also, among other things, all the non-repertoire plays (*bangaikyoku*) by Zeami that survive in his own handwriting. Another, entitled *From the Bamboo-View Pavilion*, is a special favorite of mine. It contains *Takemuki-ga-ki*, a moving autobiographical memoir by a noble lady who died in 1358. Two more volumes focus on accounts of fourteenth-century war and rebellion. The second of these, entitled *Iwashimizu Hachiman in War and Cult*, will be up on Amazon soon. It is my last volume of translations from Japanese.

I am grateful that the honor of the Inoue Yasushi Award should come at just at this moment, to cap my career.