

Romancing the Dead:  
Observations on the Sublime in *The Tale of Genji*

Dennis Washburn

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams  
And our desires.

-Wallace Stevens, from "Sunday Morning"

Plovers cry mournfully at the water's edge  
Amidst an icy frost glinting bright and clear...  
How desolate a sound in predawn twilight

-Murasaki Shikibu, from *The Tale of Genji*, Chapter 47 "A Bowknot Tied in Maiden's Loops"

He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.  
So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that  
celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised,  
indifferent as his God.

-Melville, from *Moby Dick*, Chapter 93, "The Castaway"

The sublime moves, the beautiful charms.

-Kant, *Observations on the Feelings of the Sublime and the Beautiful* 2:209

The cultural milieu that shaped Murasaki Shikibu's sensibility and stylistics was marked by a paradoxical structure of feeling—one that celebrated the ephemeral beauty of the material world while striving to avoid attachments that arise from feelings of longing and regret stirred by such beauty. The aesthetic values expressed in *Genji monogatari* reflect this structure of feeling insofar as they are grounded in the idea that all things must pass in order for beauty to exist and to be appreciated. This aesthetic principle operates throughout the narrative, occasionally producing unsettling moments that exhibit a sublime aesthetic charge.

Sublimity is itself a paradoxical aesthetic experience. The word "sublime" serves as a metaphor for the perception of something that cannot be fully grasped or described in any sensible form. To experience the sublime is to experience uncertainty, hesitation, a degree of awe or wonder that undermines the observer's desire for completeness, for control, for limits. A sublime experience, whether transcendent or inwardly reflective, is a moment of anxiety and of recursion. These feelings are a reaction to the quality of absence within the sublime object: absence of clarity, of light, of form, of boundaries. Sublime experience is an intimation of total absence, of perfect ephemerality—an intimation of the insignificance of human life that defamiliarizes the everyday world.

To know the sadness of the ephemerality, the tears of things (Virgil's *lachrimae rerum*), is to value in the moment the unmediated experience of things in themselves, their essential ephemerality. The paradoxical structure of feeling depicted throughout the narrative gives rise to a tropic of desire that may be described as romancing the dead. An admittedly jarring phrase, "romancing the dead" points to an unsettling mode of perception hypersensitive to the transience

of everyday things and matter. It is a mode that shares conventions and tropes with Gothic fiction.

The awareness that both sorrow and beauty inhere in the impermanence of the world is deeply embedded in the tale's discursive order, which develops in a manner similar to a fugue: contrapuntal and multivocal; oscillating between its primary theme of the traumatic loss of a beloved, and its affective response to such loss, which is longing for a revenant, for a return of the dead. Such obsessive desire invariably manifests as a form of haunting: either a psychological experience of regret and desire, or a literal, physical haunting in the form of spirit possession.

The types of behavior motivated by obsessive desire call to mind the second meaning of "fugue" as a flight, a psychological unmooring induced when a figure suffers a disorienting loss that disrupts the boundaries of the self. Such trauma is invariably depicted as an ineffably exquisite pain fully experienced only by those sensitive enough to appreciate its value. Such sensitivity, however, presents itself either as a true fugue state or as the illness of excessive mourning/melancholia.

The tale depicts a material world filled with spectral presences that signify the total absences, the psychological abysses created by loss. Genji's sensitivity to the aesthetic appeal of death both exemplifies and disrupts cultural values and standards. These disruptions arise most forcefully in scenes depicting the suffering or death of a beautiful woman. Poe famously asserted that the death of a beautiful woman, when it is closely allied to the ideal of Beauty, "is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." He goes on to note that it is the bereaved lover of the woman who is best suited to address that topic. In the case of Murasaki Shikibu's narrative, the role of bereaved lover falls most conspicuously to two male characters: Genji and Kaoru.

Genji's mother, for example, makes the briefest of appearances in the tale and is given voice only through the poem she composes lamenting the parting that comes with death. Her early passing transforms her into a purely literary specter whose idealized beauty is only made flesh and blood with the appearance of her doppelgänger, Fujitsubo. It is through this return in the body of another that her specter continues to exert both sexual and political force, motivating the actions of both Genji and his father, the Emperor. Other examples of spectral figures whose beauty in death induces a sense of the sublime include Yūgao, Genji's first wife, and the Rokujō lady.

In all these cases, death and suffering are not merely associated with beauty but seen as intensifying it. The closer the body approaches death, the more alluring it becomes. This is true of both male and female bodies, but the depiction of Murasaki in *Minori* provides an especially poignant case of this peculiar aesthetic.

Despite the fact that she was terribly emaciated, Murasaki still looked remarkable; the loss of weight had, if anything, distilled her beauty, which now possessed a boundless nobility and grace. Once, in the glorious flowering of her prime, her looks exuded to an almost excessive degree a lambent glow that was like the bright fragrance of blossoms.

Now her infinitely cherished appearance, which brought to mind the transient nature of the mortal world, possessed a deeper loveliness, one that evoked incomparable feelings of compassion and sweet sorrow.

When Murasaki dies, the desire for idealized beauty is momentarily realized. The reader is allowed to glimpse the perfection of beauty through the eyes of Genji's son; and because Murasaki bears a strong resemblance to Fujitsubo, we witness in that moment the spectral form of Genji's mother as well.

Her hair was stretched out beside her, left just as it was when she died, incomparably lustrous and beautiful with not one strand of those thick, cascading tresses out of place. It no longer mattered to her that she was exposed to his gaze. In the bright glare of the lamplight, her complexion had an alabaster glow, and her face, needless to say, looked more pure and spotless than when she was alive ...

Words fail Genji who, stricken with grief, covers his face and is no longer able to exercise the male prerogative of gazing. The experience of losing the love of his life reinscribes his grief and longing for his mother, who is brought back in the form of Murasaki's lifeless body, who appears as a kind of Reclining Buddha in the Pure Land that is the Nijō villa. It is the ultimate sublime moment in his life—one that effectively silences him. The scene distills the essence of romancing the dead in which perfected beauty is achieved only at the moment of its passing.

The aesthetic experience of perfected beauty, that is, of beauty in death, is similar to Gothic sublimity, which David Morris defines as “a version of the sublime utterly without transcendence. It is a vertiginous and plunging—not a soaring—sublime, which takes us deep within rather than far beyond the human sphere. . . . In its excessive violations of excess sense, Gothic sublimity demonstrates the possibilities of terror in opening the mind to its own hidden and irrational powers.”

Morris's insight into the peculiar nature of the Gothic sublime is suggestive of the literary effects Murasaki Shikibu achieves. An explicit assertion and appreciation of the connection between ephemerality and the sublime appears in the *Asagao* chapter in a scene that captures in microcosm the complexity of the dominant aesthetic and ethical sensibilities depicted in the tale. After his pursuit of Asagao fails, Genji settles back into his relationship with Murasaki. It is near the end of the year, and they are sitting quietly taking in the winter scene at the Nijō villa.

Snow had piled up 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.

Although Genji does not differentiate between the sublime and the beautiful (à la Burke and Kant), he proposes a radical inversion of the norms of courtly aesthetics with his assertion that the beauty and sorrow of the sense of absence stirred by a cold, snowy winter night are more appealing than the beauty represented by the fulsome colors of spring and autumn. Attracted to the unfamiliar and the sensation of estrangement, Genji embraces a nontraditional aesthetics that valorizes the total lack of color, the bleaching out of the setting by the purity of the snow in the cold moonlight, and the transformative power of terror and sorrow. Genji's mode of perception resembles that of a Gothic aesthete, savoring as he does beauty that is otherworldly, melancholic, ineffable.

The conception of the sublime that Genji presents in this scene appears transcendent at first glance, since he feels that the beauty of absence transports him to a different realm. His ability to appreciate the terror of the sublime as well as its beauty—a mode of perception that enables him to savor a defamiliarizing perspective on the world—is directly tied to the strength of his emotional attachments. Just when it seems that Genji has finally overcome his earlier obsessions, that his desire has been talked out and he has finally settled on Murasaki, the ghostly figure of Fujitsubo, a specter of his desire and his guilt, appears and disrupts what might have been the end of his obsession, and thus the end of the *monogatari*. Genji himself becomes the target of a spirit possession, which rekindles his desire, a fact that the narrator's remarkably blunt, intrusive criticism at the very end of the chapter drives home. The terror of the supernatural experience described in this scene is triggered by the atmosphere of the sad, ghostly winter scene, and its estranging beauty opens the mind to its own irrational powers. Haunting memories, triggered by unfulfilled yearnings, lead to an actual haunting, a vertiginous, guilt-induced encounter with a revenant. The representation of such terrible beauty reinscribes the recursive nature of intractable desire, giving rise to the sublime charge of romancing the dead—an aesthetic experience given voice in the poem Genji composes immediately after his encounter with the spirit of Fujitsubo:

My heart troubled, I awaken  
 From fitful sleep . . . how short my dream  
 On this cold, lonely winter night