In the second and final installment of her review of *The Tale of Genji*, Professor Janine Beichman homes in on the "Uji chapters" and the sorrowful "other world" of Genji's descendants.

In 1982, not too many years after completing his translation of *The Tale of Genji*, Edward Seidensticker confessed that "The *Genji* is not an easy book to get into. Many readers leave it early, having acquired an impression of great length and heaviness." His antidote? To read the *Genji* as a series of related or connected novels, rather like Anthony Trollope's novels about the fictional English county of Barsetshire.

Elsewhere Seidensticker explained in more detail:

"*The Genji* is very loosely organized. It builds up by a process akin to agglutination. At the end of the vast *monogatari*, with the Ukifune story, one can look back and see how beautifully the earlier sections have emphasized the tragedy, but it is very difficult indeed to imagine that Murasaki Shikibu had the tragedy in mind when she commenced writing, and indeed it is not possible to be certain whether or not 'the end' was meant to be the end."

Episodic the *Genji* may be (which is why at least one critic has compared it to a soap opera), but within each part there is drama, and the most dramatic part of all is the Ukifune sequence, the last five chapters of the book. By the time we get there, Genji has been gone for almost a decade (he dies offstage, between Chapters 41 and 42) and we are in the world of his descendants. The Ukifune sequence and the preceding five chapters taken together are called the Uji chapters. Here the central focus shifts from the court—or as Seidensticker pithily put it in another essay, "the action departs the mansions of the grandees"—to Uji, a desolate mountain area not so far from the capital but quite difficult to access, and, as its name (which suggests *ushi*, "misery") implies, a place of sorrow.

In Uji live the widowed Eighth Prince, one of Genji's half-brothers, who has retired from the world, and his two daughters, Oigimi and Nakanokimi, whom he has brought up with devoted care. Kaoru, Genji's putative son and a spiritual seeker, often visits and comes to look on the Prince as almost a surrogate father. After the Prince's death, he woos Oigimi, but Oigimi, reluctant to marry, wastes away and dies. Into this gloomy landscape wanders an unrecognized daughter of the Eighth Prince, shepherded by her mother. She is Ukifune, and her mother is a niece of the Prince's former wife. Now married to a boorish provincial official, Ukifune's mother hopes that through marriage her daughter will reclaim the aristocratic position that her birth and beauty, if not her countrified upbringings, entitle her to.

At first, when the dependable Kaoru becomes enamored of Ukifune, all seems to be going well. In his careful, methodical way he begins preparations to bring Ukifune to the capital and set her up in a proper home there. But then Kaoru's old friend and rival, the rakish and impulsive Niou (Genji's grandson and a prince of the blood), gets wind of this new beauty, and a complicated triangular relationship begins. The cousins compete in love, with Ukifune caught in the middle. She narrowly survives.

With the Uji chapters, the center of the narrative shifts not only geographically, but also psychologically. Before, we had seen things from the point of view of the prosperous and powerful courtiers who dominated the earlier chapters along with their lovers and servants; now
a new point of view becomes equally and sometimes more important. It is that of dispossessed nobility and their relations, almost all of them women. They are marginals, comfortable neither with the highborn nor with the low, and their awareness of rank and class is acute and painful. As Ukifune's unhappy mother so frankly puts it, they have lost their "proper place in the world" and know from bitter experience that "one's station in life made all the difference."

Nakanokimi, unlike her tragic sister Oigimi, achieves a nice position in the capital thanks to becoming Niou's wife and the mother of his firstborn son, but even she at times of stress thinks to herself that her "origins were simply not such as to command respect," and that "she was not meant to mingle with these grand people... It would be better to return quietly to her mountains." Ukifune, for her part, lacks the rank and family backing necessary to marry as she deserves. As unsuited to life at court as to provincial life, her profound sense of alienation from both is at first her doom and then her salvation.

As in the earlier chapters, the story is told in the voice of a courtly serving woman. But there is a new realism, and the tone is pricklier than before, at times ironic, judgmental, even indignant. This is not the romantic, slightly airbrushed world of the earlier Genji-centered chapters. Who could forget Oigimi repeatedly examining her own thin wrists as she starves herself to death, or the kindly bishop smitten with Ukifune's naive little brother and inviting him to come back "for an occasional visit"?

The Uji chapters, in fact, are so different in feeling from those before that some medieval commentators believed that they came from a different hand than Murasaki Shikibu's. Although this theory is not in favor today, I have to admit that as I read the Uji chapters, especially the Ukifune sequence, I instinctively felt it must be right. Either that, or Murasaki Shikibu changed as she aged and stopped holding back her feelings about the paralyzing limitations women in Heian Japan lived under, even when they were greatly loved.

Kaoru hides Ukifune in Uji in order to keep Niou away from her, but ever concerned with appearances and busy with the preparations for bringing her to the city, he does not often visit. His letters, when they come, are brief and proper. Meanwhile, Niou discovers Ukifune's whereabouts through some sleuthing of his own and secretly makes his way to Uji, where he manages to gain entrance by impersonating Kaoru. When Ukifune realizes that the man whose bedding has been laid out beside hers is not Kaoru, Niou places his hand over her mouth. But there is no need; she is paralyzed. Then, realizing who he is, she weeps, first from embarrassment and then from horror at the thought of what is being done to Nakanokimi, who has been so good to her. Niou too weeps, at the thought of how difficult it will be to see her again. But Ukifune has survived in the world up to now by never asserting her own will; she has gone with the flow. By the next morning she is as thrilled with Niou as he is with her. And now the lying begins.

**Lies and Deceit**

As the day for Ukifune's move to the capital comes closer, Kaoru is occupied with preparing for the move and the manipulative Niou is exploiting the situation as best he can. He has no compunctions about forcing Ukifune and her servants to cover up the affair; this gives him a thrill, because he is besting his rival Kaoru, but the deceit it involves is painful for them. As Ukon, Ukifune's chief serving woman, says, "We get pulled in, and end up telling lies." When, as Niou feared, his position makes him unable to visit as much as he likes, he fires off long, passionate letters, which set Ukifune to dreaming about him and their time together. There is an unpleasant undertone to Niou's passion however.
For Niou words are less a way to communicate truth than a method of disguising it. He instinctively exaggerates his own difficulties so as to arouse Ukifune's pity and admiration for him, but is annoyed if she asks for any understanding in return. On one of his visits to her at Uji, he describes "with some embroidering, the horror of last night's journey" from the capital, but when she replies with a poem suggesting the agony of her situation, for "I am caught, dissolve in midair," he is "rather annoyed," and she tears the paper to bits, disowning her own feeling. Small incidents like this build up so that words become a way to hide the truth and true emotions go unsaid. A web of lies and deceit begins to enclose Ukifune and she struggles within it.

Although Kaoru has not broached the subject openly, it is clear that he knows Niou is sleeping with Ukifune. No matter which man she chooses, she will be disgraced. But in fact, she does care for both men, although in different ways. Infatuated as she is with Niou, she is awed by Kaoru and moved by his deep kindness. Her choice is impossible. (Some readers may note that were she a man, she would not have had to choose. Loving two or more women was perfectly proper for a man in Heian Japan, but for a woman to love more than one man was a sure way to lose everything.)

Matters are brought to a head when Ukifune overhears her mother, in conversation with the serving women, say, "if something were to happen, something to set tongues wagging, well, I would be very sorry, of course, but that would be that. She wouldn't be my daughter any more." This almost casual remark by the person she depends on and cares for most in all the world makes her feel as if "she were being cut to shreds. She wanted to die."

Ukifune's attempt to kill herself, if indeed she gets that far (we are never told for sure), occurs offstage. We leave her brooding late one night, silent in the face of her serving women's pleas to make up her mind for Kaoru or Niou. The next morning they wake up and she is gone. When they cannot find a body, they concoct a story that she died suddenly, and hold a sham funeral. Thus the lies continue.

Some days later, a sobbing Ukifune is found under a tree by the kindly bishop mentioned above. She does not remember who she is. Though exorcism improves her condition somewhat, she eventually insists that he cut her hair and make her a nun. Her memory of the past comes and goes, but she confides nothing, and speaks only the barest minimum to her fellow nuns.

In the world of the Uji chapters the general rule is this: speech is the friend of lies, and silence of truth. Liars love words and talk at length, but the truer a person's heart, the less that person says. And so it seems right that Ukifune, having escaped the deceit that the double affair forced her into, lapses into silence.

But silence does not erase the self. To the contrary. Ukifune begins to write poems, not the poems she, like all cultivated people, previously wrote as parts of elegant conversation or letters, but poems as they come to her, expressing her own true emotions. Poem-writing becomes "her chief pleasure in recesses from her devotions." Muteness has given her a new voice, which "speaks" in the silence of paper and brush. Lost to the world, she has been saved for a new life.

After Murasaki died, Genji had written this poem to his cousin the Empress:

Look down upon me from your cloudy summit, upon the dying autumn which is my world.

Yes, one wants to add, and the world of the Uji chapters is the world after autumn has died. We are in the winter of the heart. And yet out of that winter Ukifune is reborn, as a nun and a young poet. As Seidensticker wrote, describing what he called Ukifune's "pilgrimage":

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She has left behind the corner on the outskirts of the court that has been hers, and... arrived at her nunnerly, there to make solitary preparation for the unknown. The women of the Genji have come a great distance since Murasaki was espied among the cherry blossoms by the shining Genji.

Clearly, Seidensticker felt, as do I, that there is a sense of closure when Ukifune takes her vows. Why then did he write, as quoted above, that in the Genji "it is not possible to be certain whether or not 'the end' was meant to be the end"? It is not only because we know that Ukifune can still undo those vows and in fact is being urged to do so. The more important reason is that the novel goes on after the denouement described above.

Kaoru, who has heard that Ukifune is alive and living at the nunnerly, sends her younger half-brother as a messenger to inquire if his information is true. Ukifune has achieved a modicum of serenity, but Kaoru's letter plunges her into dread. Overcome by anxiety, she collapses in tears, and refuses to receive the boy. Through an intermediary nun, he appeals for "a word, just a word," but she is silent. She lies in an inner room, we are told, "with her face buried in her sleeves." This is the last we see of Ukifune but it is still a little way before the last words of the tale. The nun apologizes for Ukifune's behavior, and asks that Kaoru be reminded of "our vulnerability," clearly hoping he will try again. The Tale of Genji's very last words describe Kaoru's reaction to the boy's report:

It would seem that, as he examined the several possibilities, a suspicion crossed his mind: the memory of how he himself had behaved in earlier days made him ask whether someone might be hiding her from the world.

The ending has both a sense of closure and a sense of future opening. It may not suit the Aristotelian ideal but it does have its analogy in a certain idea of the novel, which the English novelist and critic E.M. Forster expressed in his classic Aspects of the Novel:

Music, though it does not employ human beings, though it is governed by intricate laws, nevertheless does offer in its final expression a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way. Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that?

Strangely enough, though written about a millennium before Forster's work, The Tale of Genji is, indeed, like that.

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About the Translations

Every translation is a mirror of its translator, and the Waley, Seidensticker, and Tyler translations each differ in tone and atmosphere and sometimes even in details of meaning. At the same time, all three in their own ways are true to the original work. What Richard Holmes says about biography holds true for translation as well: there can never be a definitive one, especially of a great book. Perhaps this is why each time a new translation of The Tale of Genji is published, it gives rise to a new wave of Genji studies in the target language. Those by the translator, who has lived for years with the original work, are always of special interest. In