

The Tale of Genji

By KENNETH REXROTH

MURASAKI SHIKIBU, author of *The Tale of Genji* and lady-in-waiting to the Empress Akiko, was born about 978 A.D. and died about 1031. Japanese civilization as far as the general populace was concerned was at a lower level than the contemporary Polynesian. Almost all Japanese lived lives of squalid, laborious poverty. Set apart from the brutalized mass was a tiny aristocracy whose culture had been transmuted into a utopia of exquisite sensibility and hyperesthesia. Nothing like it has ever existed before or since. The records that have survived from other remotely similar ruling castes, of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, Persia, or India for instance, are crude, impersonal, stereotyped by comparison. From the eleventh-century Heian court of Japan we have a number of imaginative and complex records of the most intimate interpersonal relations, diaries and novels and poems, many of them written by women. Not only does *The Tale of Genji* far surpass all of these, but most people who have read it agree that it is probably the world's greatest novel.

There is a huge and extraordinarily contradictory literature on *Genji* in modern Japanese. Some liberal critics consider it a suffragist denunciation of male promiscuity. Marxists have called it a satire on the evil ruling class. Mystical Buddhists see Prince Genji as a Bodhisattva. Westernized literary taste compares Lady Murasaki to Marcel Proust. The overt plot of the novel is simple enough in principle and infinitely complicated in detail. It is the story of the erotic relationships of Prince Genji, called *Hikaru*, The Shining One, and his friend To no Chujo, and their descendants to the second and even third generation, with an illimitable number of women—wives, mistresses, and wives of others. The story is told entirely from the woman's point of view. The men have titles of generals, administrators, but nothing is ever said of any work they might do beyond writing love notes, playing musical instruments, and climbing over balconies. The Japanese court had already become nonfunctional and parasitic, but even its symbolic activities are reduced by Lady Murasaki to the basic complexities of sexual refinement. This is only the superficial plot. Underneath it runs a profound concealed drama, the working-out, reduction, and

final redemption of an evil *karma*, the consequence of a moment of irresponsible jealous anger. Early in the book and offstage, as it were, the elaborately decorated bullock cart of Lady Rokujo, Genji's mistress, is scratched by the cart of his wife. She gives way to a spasm of wrath, and a being, an incarnation of her anger, "takes foot," as the Japanese say, and struggles throughout the book with the grace that emanates from Genji.

Lady Murasaki in her descriptions of Genji gives many clues to his character. "The Shining One" is a Bodhisattva epithet and his body has the unearthly perfume that distinguishes such a savior, but she presents him as an unconscious as well as an indifferent Bodhisattva, a profoundly original religious notion. A Bodhisattva is a being who turns away from the bliss of Nirvana with the vow that he shall not enter ultimate peace until he can bring all other beings with him. He does this, says mystical Buddhism, indifferently, because he knows there is neither being nor nonbeing, peace nor illusion, saved nor saviors, truth nor consequence. To this Lady Murasaki adds the qualification that he does it without knowing it, an idea derived from Chinese neo-Taoism, Shingon Buddhism, and rationalization of primitive Shintoist animism.

Lady Murasaki grew into her novel. The most profound and subtle writing occurs in the later half, after Genji is dead. As the generations go by, the *karma*, the moral residues of the lifetimes of Genji and his beloved friend To no Chujo, cross and recross in their descendants and are at last resolved when a young girl, beloved by descendants of both, struggles with the demon

and destroys it forever in a series of gratuitous acts as indifferent and unconscious as the original grace of which she is the re-embodiment.

The story that seems on superficial reading to be only an endless *kyriale* of philandering turns out to be an unbelievably complicated web of moral tensions and resolutions. Modern Japanese, even more than Western readers, find this outlandish and incomprehensible. The *hannya*, the devil who speaks through the mediums who are called in when the girls it is killing are dying, is almost always accepted by the critics as the ghost of Lady Rokujo, although at the beginning of its career she is not only still alive but has forgotten the incarnating episode and left the court to become a priestess of the national shrine of Ise, where she eventually dies in what we would call a state of grace. Although the *hannya* speaks in her name, it is only the personalized subsistent moment of hate that grows by feeding on the souls it destroys.

A similar situation surrounds Genji's birth, the death of his mother, and his first love affair. The plot is stated in a kind of *coda* at the beginning of the novel, as it is resolved in a cadence that restates all the principal motives at its end. Strung on the skein of this subtle plot are any number of subplots of like nature. I have never known anyone to read *The Tale of Genji* whom it did not throw into a state of esthetic joy, a kind of euphoria of response that very few other works of art can produce, the state of being that Marcel Proust sought in the paintings of Vermeer or the *Jupiter Symphony* and which he tried to reproduce in his readers at the most crucial episodes in his novel.

For almost two generations Arthur Waley's beautiful translation has been the standard version. It, rather than the original, has been translated into many languages, including the modern Japanese. Arthur Waley has brought out the subtlety, exquisite refinement, psychological complexity, and moral profundity to a degree that could easily be missed by the most learned and astute reader of the medieval Japanese text. Lady Murasaki's novel is a great but inaccessible classic in Japanese. Arthur Waley's translation is both a major English and international classic.

The Tale of Genji has recently been issued in one volume as a Modern Library Giant. This is the cheapest and most convenient edition now on the market. There is a brief introduction by Waley that provides all the information you need to follow the story. *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, by Ivan Morris (Knopf, 336 pp. \$5.95, 1964), is good background reading *after* you've finished the novel.



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The Second Dublin Declaration

EDITOR'S NOTE: Twenty years ago Owen J. Roberts, Supreme Court Justice of the United States, and Grenville Clark, lawyer and private American citizen who has been one of the most influential and constructive voices in the nation for more than a half-century, called together a group of forty-eight prominent Americans. The purpose was to think through the implications of the atomic explosion that had just ended the war against Japan. The meeting took place in Dublin, New Hampshire, and lasted five days. The statement produced by that group anticipated—far better than any official forecast of analysis—the main course of events during the next two decades. It called for the rapid development of the United Nations into a world federation with limited but adequate powers to enact and enforce world law.

Recently, Grenville Clark called a second conference in Dublin, New Hampshire, to consider the first Dublin Declaration in the light of events since that time. The conferees included sixteen of the original group. In addition, thirty-nine other Americans participated, among them Kingman Brewster, Jr., President of Yale University; Thomas H. Mahony and Edward Mahony, Boston lawyers; John S. Dickey, President of Dartmouth College; Erwin N. Griswold, Dean of Harvard Law School; John K. Jessup, chief editorial writer for *Life* magazine; Gerard Piel, publisher of the *Scientific American*; the Honorable Stanley A. Weigel, judge of the United States District Court; Dr. Paul Dudley White, Boston physician; the

Reverend Dr. Donald S. Harrington of The Community Church of New York; A. J. G. Priest, Professor of Law, University of Virginia Law School; C. Maxwell Stanley, Engineer and President of the United World Federalists; and James P. Warburg, author.

The text of the Second Dublin Declaration follows:

THE RIGHTS of man and the conditions of life itself on this planet are imperiled by lawlessness among the nations. World anarchy is manifested by the growing frequency of international crises as well as by the number of nations with the capacity to build arsenals of nuclear weapons. One serious adverse effect of that anarchy has been an increasing acceptance of violence and, thereby, a cheapening of the worth of human life.

Protection of the safety and dignity of human beings is generally acknowledged as the highest obligation of governments. The growing inability of nation-states to provide this protection, particularly in the face of the nuclear threat, emphasizes the need to replace world anarchy with enforceable world law.

The highest sovereignty on earth resides with the peoples who inhabit the planet. National sovereignty is justified only as it safeguards this basic sovereignty of the peoples themselves. Since, in a nuclear age, national sovereignty alone cannot serve its highest obligation, it must be buttressed by an international authority.

Even if there were no threat of nu-

clear destruction hovering over the future of the human race, the increasing complexity of international life, the general welfare of mankind, and the requirements of orderly growth impose on the nations and on their leaders an imperative to establish world peace and order under an adequate authority.

We therefore affirm the imperative need for a world federation equipped with the powers necessary to enforce world law against international violence and the threat of it. We call upon all heads of governments to move swiftly and persistently for the creation of a world authority capable of maintaining world peace through world law. We call upon people everywhere to recognize the indispensable link between peace, justice, and meaningful survival on the one hand, and the existence of the instrumentalities of world law on the other. And we call upon them, as well, to make known, by every means at their command, their insistence that world peace through enforceable world law shall become the first business of their governments.

The Reasons: Peace means more than the temporary absence of major war in an armed world. Genuine peace requires enforceable law, order, and justice. In short, peace requires government. In its absence, law, order, and justice cannot exist.

The world must be made safe for the diversities of mankind — diversities of race, nationality, religion, forms of government, economic systems, and social values. The positive worth of these diversities cannot be preserved without enforceable world law.

History demonstrates the necessity for enforceable law as the prerequisite of order within community, province, state, and nation. Experience, reason, and common sense compel the conclusion that such law is also the prerequisite for genuine peace on the world level.

Yet it is precisely at the world level that enforceable law is nonexistent. The absence of any system of effective world law precluding international violence makes arms races and recurrent wars inevitable. Failure to correct this basic defect in the organization of human society has now become a threat to civilization itself.

Developments since the Second World War confirm and emphasize the growing need for an effective world federal authority.

Nuclear problems have been compounded by the beginnings of man's conquest of space. Effective world law is requisite (a) to keep space from becoming a jungle of nuclear weaponry, (b) to head off danger of war from rival nationalist claims to uses of space and planets in it, and (c) to guarantee that