

THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN THE TALE OF GENJI AND REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

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ABSTRACT

There are many similarities, both in form and content, between *The Tale of Genji* and *Remembrance of Things Past*. It is my contention that one key facet, the concept of time, is central to both works.

The Japanese term "aware," a sense of nostalgic pathos, occurs again and again throughout Murasaki's work. What makes the novel's central character, Genji, unique is his embodiment and understanding of "aware." He senses both the deep sadness and the concomitant beauty of the passing of time.

Time is also the central focus of Proust's epic work. Not content like Genji to appreciate the many subtleties of the changes wrought by time, Proust attempts to "conquer" time by experiencing those happenings of long ago that connect spontaneously with present images. This connection is not linear but extra-temporal, and by such a process Proust feels that he has found the key to escape a life trapped within time.

It is remarkable that two novels, separated in time by almost a thousand years, and space by half the globe, should so often be linked together. Yet the parallels between these two great novels, *THE TALE OF GENJI* and *REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST*, are undeniable.

Both works are vivid portraits of their respective eras; both works are psychologically penetrating, especially in their depictions of love. Both works exhibit a deep understanding of the mechanisms of their respective aristocratic worlds. Perhaps most importantly, both novels are infused with an aestheticism that is unparalleled in the depth and vividness of their depictions of such arts as music, literature, painting, calligraphy, dance, architecture, the list goes on and on.

Both works are massive in scale, span generations, and unfold a galaxy of major and minor characters. It would be specious to take any one facet and attempt to cut to the heart of these two novels. One concept though, that of time, does indeed bring into focus many of their most salient features. It is my contention that time, as it relates to the concept of "aware" in *THE TALE OF GENJI*, and as it relates to memory in *REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST*, is the key concept and driving force of both of these novels.

It will be necessary to study both of these works individually, thus creating a certain inevitable dichotomy that hopefully will be resolved by the conclusion of this

paper, and by keeping in mind that time is the uniting thread that binds both these works together thematically. With these two points in mind, let us first look at the concept of time as a key factor in *THE TALE OF GENJI*. Before we begin, though, a short overview of the plot will help us to focus the narrative and put the story in perspective.

Genji is the idealized hero of Lady Murasaki's novel. The work is set in an unspecified time prior to the author's own generation, that of 11th century Heian Japan. Genji is the son of the Emperor and his favorite consort, Kiritsubo, who soon dies because of jealousy by her rivals at court. As Genji grows up, all who know him see in him the personification of courtly virtue: beauty heightened by grace and an effortless facility in the arts. He has a number of romantic affairs, always seeming to be attracted to "unattainable women." When at last he oversteps acceptable boundaries by pursuing Oborozukiyo, the Emperor's consort and sister to his arch rival Kōkiden, he is exiled to the island of Suma, but later pardoned. The number of women Genji is involved with is extensive; suffice it to say the deepest relationship is probably with his second wife, Murasaki. After her death Genji is deeply saddened. Whereas the initial focus of the novel is the affairs of Genji and his rivalry with his friend, Tō-no-Chūjo, the novel next turns to the exploits of the second generation and a new rivalry between Genji's son Yugiri, and Tō-no-Chūjo's son Kashiwagi. After the death of Kashiwagi, and then Genji, the novel examines a third rivalry, this time between Kashiwagi's son Kaoru and prince Niou, son of Emperor Kinjo and the Akashi Empress (Genji's daughter). The last ten chapters are spent in describing the amorous rivalries of Kaoru and Niou, usually over the same women.

There are many ways that we could view the use of time in Murasaki's novel. Time as a measure in the daily life of the characters, their daily routines, sleeping habits, and so on, would make an interesting study in itself. Also interesting would be a close look at the time needed for travel to certain pivotal locations such as Suma and Uji, or the slow pace of the unfolding of the action (or lack of action) in the plot.

I intend to sharpen the focus of my study of time and limit it to its influence on the absolutely vital concept of "aware." The importance of the term is made manifest by its use of more than one thousand times in the story. Unfortunately "aware" has no English equivalent. Ivan Morris defines it as "... a word frequently used in *THE TALE OF GENJI* and other classical literature. Among its wide range of meanings are 'pathetic,' 'moving,' and 'beautiful.' The phrase 'mono no aware' corresponds to 'lacrimae rerum,' 'the pity of things,' which is often taken to be the underlying theme of Murasaki's novel." Arthur Waley defines it as an "exclamation of sympathy or distress, "while Edward Seidensticker calls it"...an ejaculation of vague and undefined sadness." Earl Miner terms it "... that which stirs cultivated sympathies by touching them with beauty, sadness, and the awareness of ephemeral experience."

Miner's linking of beauty and sadness with ephemeral experience is very apt. What gives pathos to things of beauty is their very ephemerality. Morris has noted the ideological vice that Heian Japanese were caught in. Squeezed between reverence for nature as practiced by the native religion of Shinto, and the rejection of natural phenomena by Buddhism, pathos is the concomitant result.

Genji, when viewed with Western eyes, is scarcely the stuff of heroes. He performs no great action, is prone to break into tears, and seems excessively delicate and effeminate, besides seeming virtually immoral. Only when viewed as an idealization, as the embodiment of a man who can appreciate the ultimate pathos of life, can the true worth of Genji be seen.

The aesthetic refinement of the Heian era is almost unbelievable. Although THE TALE OF GENJI is a work of fiction, most of the content has a basis in fact and is confirmed by many other written accounts from the same era. The Heian elite made up a very small section of the spectrum of society, and within this inner circle a mastery of the arts infused with a sense of "aware" was the standard by which other members were judged.

Genji's artistic capabilities read like a catalog of the arts, and he is a master. He can dance, as when he dances the "Waves of the Blue Sea" for his father, the old Emperor. He can compose beautiful poetry for any occasion, play the koto, mix perfume, perfectly match the colors of the robes of his kimono, and paint pictures (as he did when he was in exile in Suma). But most importantly, Genji is sensitive to the inherent beauty and pathos of both art and nature. He has the sense of "aware."

An aristocrat that is deficient in the arts or that can't sense the underlying pathos of existence cuts a poor figure in Heian court society. When Genji waits for a response from a lover or would-be-lover, his anxiousness is more than just a lover's anxiety. Whereas the West considers the eyes as the mirror of the soul, Heian nobility saw the soul through calligraphy, the strokes of the brush, the color of the ink, the folds and texture of the paper. When Genji gets a note from Nyosan, Murasaki knows she has little competition from the young princess because of the childishness of her strokes. Sei Shonagon, author of THE PILLOW BOOK and a contemporary of Murasaki Shikibu, rejected as a lover one of the most powerful men of her day simply because he was not adept at writing poetry. Ukifune, in the last section of the TALE OF GENJI, begins to feel love for Niou merely by observing the dexterous way he handles his brush. A sense of "aware," coupled with a mastery of the arts, often seems more important than a moral nature, a fact that sometimes scandalizes Western readers of Murasaki Shikibu.

If Genji is the very personification of "aware," time is the vital component of "aware." Beauty and human life are positive qualities per se. But since beauty and life must exist in time, and time is always moving, always changing, beauty must fade and people must die. When the Emperor Reizei and Genji discuss nostalgically

about times past accompanied by the sound of a lute, the entire scene is heavy with pathos, with "aware." And what is more ephemeral than human life? Genji lives to see so many people dear to him die: his parents, his wives Aoi and Murasaki, his lover Yugao and his friend Kashiwagi.

Beauty and sadness are linked in "aware," and it is time that links them together. Genji knows this, and feels this fact, and he is thus able to look deeply into the heart of things. Even though every member of the nobility in the Heian era did not necessarily sense "aware," this concept existed as an ideal by which court members were judged.

Strangely enough, the hero of Proust's REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST, Marcel, also senses this same pathos wrought by time. It is Marcel's attempt to understand, and then to overcome the destruction caused by time, that serves as the mainspring of his novel.

Just as time is the motive force in "aware," so time is the motive force in Proust's novel. His work, seven volumes long, is the collected memories of a character, named only once in the entire novel, Marcel. The first volume, SWAN'S WAY, relates the childhood and adolescence of the narrator. It also includes a lengthy flashback involving a family friend, Charles Swann, who falls in love with a courtesan, is tortured by jealousy, and finally destroys his reputation with a disastrous marriage to his lover.

The succeeding volumes tell of his first infatuation for the child of Swann, a daughter named Gilberte. This hopeless infatuation gives way to his great passion, Albertine, whom he woos, tries to possess, and finally loses. Sometime after she flees from Marcel she is killed in an accident, and too late Marcel realizes that he has repeated the identical mistake of Charles Swann. By attempting to possess solely, he has allowed jealousy to destroy their relationship.

A large cast of characters is woven in and out of the plot, grow old, betray their dreams, and die. The aristocratic Madame de Guermantes, the homosexual Baron de Charlus, the elegant Robert Saint-Loup, the social climbing Madame Verdurin, the tortured composer Vinteuil, all are swept by time (except Robert who is killed at a young age) through life, age, decay, and end in sorrow and old age.

In the seventh and final volume, TIME REGAINED, the pessimism of the preceding volumes is changed to a rebirth, to an affirmation of life. In this volume the narrator goes to a party attended by many of the principal surviving characters of the novel. He sees their worn, ageing faces, their pretensions and lost dreams, and realizes that he too has aged, and in the process he has committed many of the same follies of the other characters. But just when it seems that time has conquered, his impressions and experiences at the party cohere into a pattern. Faces he sees at the party remind him of other people and other times; actions such as the seemingly insignificant tripping over a paving stone resonate and evoke earlier, forgotten actions.

This novel of a million words could have been merely the record of despair and a wasted life, a life wasted by time. Instead, despair is turned to wisdom, and a key to a way of triumphing over time is discovered. "... I began to divine as I compared these diverse happy impressions, diverse yet with this in common, that I experienced them at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a different moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other. The truth surely was that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to now, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the past with the present, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time."

This, then, is the salvation, the escape from time, that Marcel finds. He discovers it in analogies, a moment in the present that has an analog to a previous event in memory. The present takes on a deeper meaning because of its linkage with memory, thus freeing both the past and the present from their fixity in time. They become extra-temporal, freed from time.

The first instance of such an extra-temporal occurrence happens in the "Overture" section of *SWAN'S WAY*. The narrator is given tea by his mother one morning. Into the tea he dips a small cake, a "petites madelines." The combination of the madelines and the tea triggers an involuntary recollection. The narrator's memory is awakened, and suddenly he is mentally back in Combray with his Aunt Leonie, all the sights and sounds of Combray having sprung forth from that one cup of tea. The present moment and the memories of Combray are pulled from their respective places in time and fused into an extra-temporal image freed from time.

Proust's ideas of time were greatly influenced by his former teacher, the philosopher Henri Bergson. In reacting against the current scientific, linear concept of time propounded by such writers as Auguste Comte, Bergson proposed a fluid, psychological concept of time. He believed that all past actions were locked within the memory, and certain correspondences between past and present events trigger spontaneous remembrances that leaped from one time period to another, disobeying any spatial, linear progression. Bergson's insights were utilized by Proust to counteract the destruction caused by time. Bergson's ideas provide Marcel with the incentive he needs to begin work on his novel, a work in which he attempts to put his memories into a coherent framework, thereby creating a work of art that would enable the author to step outside of time and find salvation in a world immune from ageing.

The narrator, Marcel, can finally begin to create. "If at least time were allotted to me to accomplish my work, I would not fail to mark it with the seal of time, the idea of which impressed itself upon me with so much force today, and I would there-

in describe men, if need be as monsters occupying a place in time infinitely more important than the restricted one reserved for them in space, a place, on the contrary, prolonged immeasurably since, simultaneously touching widely separated years and the distant periods they have lived through—between which so many days have ranged themselves—they stood like giants, immersed in time.”

We have looked at how time has influenced the concept of “aware” in *THE TALE OF GENJI*, and memory in *REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST*. Time is a given for Genji. He accepts its altering powers because it is time that gives special beauty to people, art and nature which Genji, more than anyone else in Murasaki’s novel, can appreciate. Marcel cannot see the beauty of the passing of time as Genji can. He sees primarily the destruction, and by writing a work of art that incapsulates his experiences and memories, they become embodied within his art, awaiting their release by a sympathetic reader who, in the act of reading, will form extreme temporal analogies, and thereby be able to step, as did Marcel, outside of time.

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