PART 3

READING THE GENJI ROMANCE
For Bakhtin, the ‘novel’ form – always given a subsidiary place in relation to poetry and drama, because always seen as potentially subversive and parodic – is marked by heterogeneity, since it carries in it the discourse of the other; it is many voiced, ‘polyphonic’, the term associated for Bakhtin with Dostoyevsky. Poetry and the epic and drama are in Bakhtin by contrast more homogeneous, tending towards exclusion of the other, moving towards a total statement, through the finality of metaphor which can make diverse, different seeming things be perceived as one, homogeneous. The Tale of Genji includes in it these two forms of writing, and in addition, its narrative includes 795 court poems (waka), many of which are used in exchanges between characters, plus numerous other poems which are alluded to, and much historical commentary on it focused on its poetic qualities; so that it contains contradictory tendencies towards diversity and towards homogeneity at once. This chapter explores the implications of these two movements.

The homogeneity, however, is not all in the text’s poetic, literary language. It is there in the novel form too. The nineteenth and twentieth century European and American novel is more homogeneous than Bakhtin’s example of Dostoyevsky allows, and Roland Barthes, discussing it in its ‘classic realist’ phase shows how a tendency towards the plural and the different is countered by a tendency to centre the text, to control the reader’s response. In S/Z, Barthes’s analysis of Balzac’s short story Sarrasine, Barthes shows how the realist text is structured by codes which enable reading to seem spontaneous, the action of a free agent who arrives at the same conclusions that the author’s text already possesses, as if spontaneously. To be brief, there are five codes, the first two being the ‘action code’, which impels the reader forward, and the ‘hermeneutic code’, which keeps in the mind the suggestion that there is a mystery to be elucidated which reading to the end will solve. Three other codes