

## My Meeting with Edward G. Seidensticker in Kyoto – in 1957

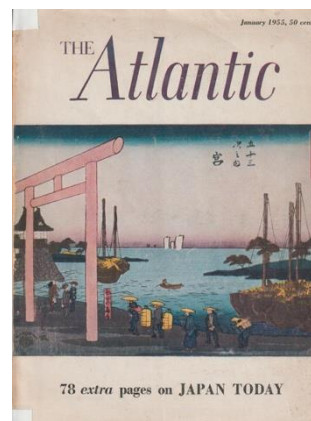
By Hans Brinckmann

Two of the most heavily thumbed publications on my bookshelves are a magazine and a novel, both in their original 1955 editions, both translations by Edward Seidensticker of works by Tanizaki Junichiro.

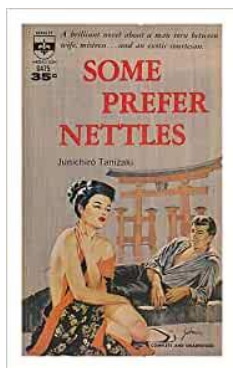


The first is *In Praise of Shadows*, Seidensticker's translation of excerpts from Tanizaki's meditation on Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. The piece appeared in a special 78-page supplement of *The Atlantic* magazine's January 1955 issue entitled "Perspective of Japan". It helped shape the way I experienced and approached Japanese culture at a time when, after four years of living and working in Japan and still only 22 years old, I was eagerly searching for the depths and meanings of Japanese life.

One of the essay's memorable lines is this: "In the mansion called literature I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push back into the shadows the things that came forward too clearly, I would strip away the useless decoration."



Tanizaki's exquisite interpretation of the essence of Japanese art resonated with my own budding understanding of it. But not being able to read Japanese, it was equally the translator's language that seduced me with its sensuous imagery.



In May of the same year I read *Some Prefer Nettles*, Seidensticker's ravishing translation of Tanizaki's *Tade kuu mushi*. Both the *Atlantic* essay and this novel are still regarded today as among the greatest of Seidensticker's many outstanding translations of Japanese works of literature.

I first met Seidensticker under unusual circumstances.

On New Year's Eve 1957, my poet friend in Kyoto, Shimaoka Kenseki, had brought me along to a group visit to the Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto's Gion district. This was the annual Okera-mairi, an act of obeisance to the Shinto deities enshrined at Yasaka. In the shrine's precinct a large charcoal fire – the okera-bi – was burning in an iron basket held aloft on a huge tripod. Visitors would buy a straw rope from the shrine's office and after setting it aglow at the fire take it home, twirling it all the way to keep the tiny flame going. Once home, the New Year's first kitchen fire was lit with its small spark. The hundreds of tilting red circles moving through the cold and dimly lit streets resembled fireflies chasing their own tails.

Among the group was Ichida Yae, a lady whom I had met before at a party at her home, which included Shimaoka and at his suggestion, me too. She lived with her teen-age daughters in one of Kyoto's last grand mansions, built in traditional sukiya style and set in extensive gardens surrounded by heavy walls. She was the scion of an old-established family of textile manufacturers, but she preferred the life of literature to that of business, and had gained some renown as a poet.



Admirers called her the twentieth-century Ono-no-Komachi, a legendary poet of the Heian Period. She did have the same hairdo and wore her kimono Heian-style, with the sash low and the neckline plunging. It was a jolly party – see this photo.

Ichida Yae center, Shimaoka far left, I second from right (Copyright Hans Brinckmann)

At the Yasaka Shrine the crowd jostled us as we tried to negotiate our way out of the shrine compound, and we kept losing each other. Then suddenly I found myself alone with Yae with no trace of Shimaoka or any of our other companions. I put a brave face on the situation and suggested a bite in a local bar before calling it a day. Yae graciously accepted. We gave our glowing ropes to some passing children and headed for the Ari-no-naki-ie, a fashionable hangout. It was well past midnight when we sat down on stools at the long bar and placed our order. Our arrival caused a minor flutter, which I did my best to ignore. Further down I spotted Edward Seidensticker, whom I had not met but knew by name. He gave us a

friendly nod, no doubt recognising Yae. Tanizaki had used her as a model for one of his heroines.



When it was time to pay I found my wallet gone, obviously lost to a pickpocket at the shrine. Seeing me flustered, Mr. Seidensticker came over and offered to help out, but Yae insisted on taking care of the bill. The incident was watched with barely suppressed curiosity by the bar's other patrons, further adding to my embarrassment.

Seidensticker in 1957

I hoped for an early opportunity to get to know Seidensticker more personally, but it was not to be. He left Japan in 1962 to take up a teaching post at Stanford, and then at the University of Michigan, and finally Columbia. After his retirement in 1985 he moved to Hawaii, but also kept a place in Tokyo.

It was not until 2005 that we finally met again. I had sent him a copy of my memoir at his Honolulu address, and he responded with a courteous letter. He remembered the little incident described in the book, and looked forward to meeting me on his next Tokyo visit.

That meeting, attended also by my translator Hiromi Mizoguchi, took place on the third of August 2005. When I called him to confirm the appointment he suggested the “northwest corner of Matsuzakaya department store in Ueno” as the meeting point. I said all right, but he added: “I hope you have a sense of direction! I hate people who have no sense of direction – that’s just laziness!”

Thus forewarned, we arrived at the appointed spot several minutes early, but he was already there, dressed in dark suit and tie despite the over 30° heat and high humidity. He looked a frail yet sprightly 84, carried a cane, and without preliminaries guided us to a nearby tearoom, the Fugetsudo, where he ordered hot tea. From the start he mostly led the conversation. We found him acerbic, opinionated, skeptical, but not cynical. And he

showed respect, too. He proved to be a listener as well as a talker. His comments were crisp and economical.

- Do you still translate Japanese novels?

“Not anymore. I stopped doing that a long time ago. I don’t like the modern writers. Soseki, Tanizaki, Kawabata, they were the giants.”

- What about Shiga Naoya?

“He was not a great writer.”

- But he belonged to the Shirakaba Group, he helped found it! [A leading group of writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century]

“So?” That summed up his opinion of Shiga.

We talked about European writers. He said he doesn’t like the French.

“Not good,” he commented, without elaborating. Of the Italians he praised Umberto Eco. But right now, he is (re-)reading English classics, like Mark Twain.

- What do you now consider the best place to live?

“I can’t decide where to live, Tokyo or Hawaii. Honolulu is boring. Tokyo is terrible, impossible. So many things are not allowed!”

- Why did you choose Honolulu then if you find it boring? Work? Or the climate?

“No, not work. And certainly not the climate. I don’t understand people who choose a place for the climate. No – I like the tropical foliage, the colours, the plants...”

- And you do keep coming back to Tokyo even though you dislike it...

“Habit. And to talk to publishers. I have many unpublished books. Fiction. Can’t get it published. Sad story...”

- Have you considered using the Internet?

“An American lady asked me the same thing, and she offered to publish me on the Internet. But I don’t know what that means.”

I tried to explain. I also suggested on-demand publishing, which can now be arranged at very little cost. I offered to assist him in using this method, but he showed no interest. He began to tire. His blue eyes seemed a little watery. It was time to go. Hiromi said she hoped to meet him again. He smiled and began to sing a song in a low voice, something about an old man and a young woman...

We said good-bye in front of the tearoom. He turned and went his way. A solitary figure.

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There are other Japanese novels in translations of Seidensticker on my shelves: Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters* and Kawabata Yasunari's *Thousand Cranes* and *Snow Country* — which earned him his Nobel Prize. Also, Mishima Yukio's *The Decay of the Angel*. I treasure them all.

Edward Seidensticker passed away August 26, 2007, from the effects of head injuries sustained in a fall during a walk in Ueno Park, near his Tokyo home. He was among the greatest translators of Japanese fiction. To me he was the greatest, because of his unrivalled ability to evoke in fine, literary English the atmosphere and human psychology of the Japanese original. His style is natural and modern. His work doesn't read like translated Japanese, yet the locale cannot be mistaken for any place but Japan – and in some cases, Kyoto. That is his genius.

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