

〈研究ノート〉

**“The Idea and Practice of Translation”:  
An Annotated Transcription of  
Edward Seidensticker’s Talk at  
Doshisha University**

Juliet W. CARPENTER

Introduction

On the afternoon of June 7, 2001, at Shingaku-kan Chapel on the Doshisha University Imadegawa campus, Edward Seidensticker (1921-2007), emeritus professor of Japanese literature at Columbia University, gave a talk for the Doshisha University Graduate School Colloquium entitled “The Idea and Practice of Translation.”

Born in Colorado, Edward George Seidensticker was an English major at the University of Colorado at Boulder when World War Two broke out. In June 1942 the American Navy Japanese language school moved to Boulder, and fourteen months after enrolling, he graduated with a command of Japanese that would form the basis of his stellar career as a translator of Japanese literature, including the works of Tanizaki, Kawabata, Mishima, Kafu, and his crowning achievement, the 1976 translation of

Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari*. He won the National Book Award in 1971 for his translation of Kawabata's novel *The Sound of the Mountain* (*Yama no oto*, 1954) and was credited with enabling Kawabata to win the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature. He received numerous awards in Japan, including the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon, Third Class, in 1975.

What follows is a lightly edited transcription of his remarks with annotation.

### **Literary Translation: An Exercise in the Impossible**

I am very glad to be here. I spoke yesterday at Tanabe.<sup>1</sup> It will not be the same lecture today, but there will be an overlap. Some of the things I said yesterday there will most probably come into my remarks today here. Which will be a useful lesson, because you know, when things move from one language to another—and this is one of the great difficulties and one of the mysteries and one of the fascinations of translation—they change. Somehow, however accurate the translation is, the mood is different in one language and in another. So if I repeat myself from yesterday, those of you who were there yesterday can sense the difference perhaps, and it will be an object lesson in the difficulties of translation.

All sorts of profound treatises have been written on the philosophy of translation by such people as Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup> (as I call him; I suppose it's supposed to be "Benyamin" or something like that) and George Steiner.<sup>3</sup> They're very interesting, but they don't really help very much. They don't really say much about

what translation is for a translator.

For me, translation really is an exercise in the impossible. I am speaking of literary translation. When it comes to practical translation, translation of business letters, translation of instruction manuals, that kind of thing, I think probably something approaching perfect translation is possible. I don't think it is possible for literary translation. Here we come to my subject, "The Idea and the Practice of Translation." One has an idea of what constitutes perfect translation, but in practice that's not the way it works.

I think of translation as being a constant succession of choices. You're constantly having to choose between one possible solution to a problem in translation and another, and the trouble is that neither solution is ever, or very rarely, a perfect one. My idea of translation is nothing really very philosophical at all. My idea of translation is that it is imitation. You do your best to imitate the work that you are putting into another language, and if you can come up with a perfect imitation, then you have come up with a perfect translation. But this is not really happening. You are constantly having to make choices and almost without exception, the choice you make is not a perfect choice. When you have to choose between A and B, or A B C, A B C D, the choice you make always leaves something out that would be in one of the other choices. Which leads us inevitably to the conclusion that translation, literary translation, is an imperfect process.

### **The Challenge of Proper Names**

The matter of choices—what you are going to put in and what you are going to leave out—is always a very painful one because you almost always have to leave something out. I have been criticized for leaving out proper names.<sup>4</sup> Yesterday I dwelt at some length on the criticism, and I think it was a very unfair criticism, of my translation of Tanizaki's *Sasameyuki*.<sup>5</sup> The criticism centered on two things, the tenses of English and the question of proper names. Well, let us leave the question of tenses aside for the moment. The question of proper names is an excellent instance of the kind of choices you have to make. The criticism was centered on a passage in *Sasameyuki* which has a series of Tokyo place names, all of which I left out. In a very brief passage, Marunouchi,<sup>6</sup> Azabu,<sup>7</sup> and Ōmori<sup>8</sup> are all mentioned, and the critics took me very harshly to task. Julie Carpenter had exactly the same thing happen to her.<sup>9</sup> The critics took me rather harshly to task for leaving out the place names which were of such very great significance to Japanese. Well, I think for most Japanese, Marunouchi *is* of very great significance, and perhaps I was wrong in not including that and trying to explain what the significance is. The other two, Azabu and Ōmori, I am by no means convinced are really all that important, but I was taken to task for leaving them out and maybe properly, I don't know. All I can say, it was one of the choices that one has to make.

If you leave the place names in, there are very few readers in Europe and North America (these are the two places that provide the audiences, such as there are, for my translations) to whom any

of these names will mean anything. So if you include them, then you have to explain them. Marunouchi is, at least it used to be, the financial and entrepreneurial center of Japan. In the period covered by *Sasameyuki* it was unquestionably the financial center of Japan, with apologies to Osaka. Osaka is pretty important too, but Marunouchi really was in those years the center. But if I were to explain that, you see, something that seems to me very important would happen. I would be slowing down the pace of the translation. Even if I limited myself only to Marunouchi and left the other two, Azabu and Ōmori out, I would have to explain.

Now, explaining and translating are not the same thing. Explanation has the effect of slowing down the pace of the translation. In other words, it interrupts the rhythm. And rhythm is a very important part of a work of literature, and if the translation is to imitate the original in all respects, it should do its best also to imitate the rhythm. In choosing to put Marunouchi in and then explaining it, I would be interrupting the rhythm. My ideal of translation is a perfect imitation, but you see, here you are faced with a choice which makes perfect imitation impossible.

### **The Translator as Counterfeiter**

People are always saying—I have had it said about my translations—that the translation is better than the original. I do not look upon that as praise. A translation ought not to be better than the original. It should be in every possible respect an imitation of the original. So I think of the translator as being a counterfeiter. Now if you are a counterfeiter and if you're making

a one-dollar bill with George Washington on it, you're not being a very good counterfeiter if you make George Washington in your imitation a handsomer man than he is on the original; you are being a very poor counterfeiter. And that really is what we are being told when we are told that the translation is better than the original. We are being told that the translator has not been a good counterfeiter. He has made George handsomer than George is on the one dollar bill. So I do not look upon this as praise. A translation ought to be no better and no worse than the original. It ought to imitate it in every respect.

But of course here you're up against difficulties if you face a bad passage in a very good work—and I don't think there is such a thing as a perfect novel. There are perfect lyric poems; short forms of literature can be perfect. Every novel can be improved upon. My ideal, I think the finest novelist in the English language, is Miss Austen, Jane Austen. Still, she can be improved upon. There are passages in Jane that I wish weren't there. Shakespeare can be improved upon. It has been said that Shakespeare never changed a line. Well, Shakespeare ought to have changed a lot of lines. He's not perfection. There are some pretty bad things in Shakespeare. Are you going to imitate them? Well, you know if you do, then you'll be reproved for it. The critics will all jump on you. The editors probably won't let it by. If you say, well this is a pretty poor passage in the original and therefore I am translating it into pretty limp English, the editors probably won't allow it. So the obstacles are enormous in seeking to imitate the original absolutely. The obstacles are enormous, and I have already said

enough to inform you, I think, that I think that perfect imitation in the case of a literary work is impossible.

### **Fukuda Tsuneari on Translating Shakespeare**

One of the most intelligent men I have ever known—I don't know how well he is remembered, he's been dead for quite a few years now—Fukuda Tsuneari,<sup>10</sup> really one of the most brilliantly intelligent men I have ever known, told me one evening over the dinner table about his difficulties in translating Shakespeare. He said that if you translate everything in Shakespeare you have too long a play. You can't produce it. It would be just too long to produce on the stage. And therefore, he said, it is the next thing to impossible to produce a complete translation of a Shakespeare play. If you did, and if you tried to keep it within the time span of the Shakespeare original, the speech would be so rapid that probably no one could understand it. So the task, he said, is an impossible one. What he is saying, essentially, is that in order to preserve the rhythm, in order to keep a Shakespeare play within the time span of the original, which is to say to keep the pace essentially the same as that of the original, you have to abbreviate. You have to cut it down. So he is saying essentially the same thing as I, that you have to make choices. And in this case the choice is between having a translation of Shakespeare that is too long to be staged or a translation of Shakespeare that has been in some measure abbreviated.

I have had myself occasion to examine Japanese translations of Shakespeare, and my conclusion is essentially the same as Fukuda

Tsuneari: that a literal translation of Shakespeare into Japanese which includes everything is wordy. It takes too long. Just counting it out syllable for syllable, the Japanese translation consumes far more syllables than the English does. And if your prime concern is to preserve the rhythm, then you have to cut something out. But observe, please, that you are damaging the original, departing from the original, whichever you do. If you leave everything in, you are departing from the original because your rhythm, your pace, is slower than that of the original. If in order to keep the pace you cut, then quite obviously you are departing from the original. Anything that you cut from the original is an injustice to the original. So you see it's an impossible choice. Hence my conclusion that perfect translation of a complex literary work is the next thing to impossible, and we might make the completely sweeping judgment that it is absolutely impossible.

### **A Difficult Passage in *Snow Country***

I am very often asked which author I have most enjoyed translating. My answer is a very easy one—Murasaki Shikibu.<sup>11</sup> She was much the most fun to translate, much the most interesting. But then I learned that's not quite expected. People want to know which modern translators I have translated whom I have most enjoyed translating. That is Kawabata,<sup>12</sup> without question. The reason is that Kawabata is difficult. He's very difficult, and translation to be interesting has to be difficult. Easy translation is a bore. But Kawabata is very, very difficult. It's very



often hard to know what he's talking about. Very often a very subtle shift makes a very large difference.

I struggled with a very famous passage, and it's a very good passage, in *Yukiguni*. (Not my favorite Kawabata novel but I think it was the most interesting to translate because it was the most difficult.) There's a very famous passage not far from the end in which the hero, Shimamura, a pretty limp and uninteresting kind of hero but let's call him the hero all the same, is engaged in amorous dalliance with the geisha who is really the center of the story, Komako. Shimamura says to Komako, "*Kimi wa ii ko da ne* [You're a good girl]." To which Komako replies, "*Dōshite? Doko ga ii no?* [Why? Why am I good?]" And he says "*Ii ko da yo* [You're a good girl]." And then it goes on for a little while. She says, "*Yokunai wa. Tsurai kara kaette chōdai. Mō kiru kimono ga nai* [I'm not good at all. It's not easy having you here. You'd best go home. Each time I come to see you I want to put on a new kimono, and now I have none left.]" etc. etc. And then she continues, she presses the matter and she says "*Donna no? Doko ga ii ko?* [And what do you find good in me?]" And then comes a very subtle shift. And it's very interesting that Shimamura himself is not aware initially of what has happened, He shifts from "*Ii ko da*" to saying "*Kimi wa ii onna da* [You're a good woman]" and she is infuriated. Initially she doesn't catch the shift either. Initially she maintains her composure; she replies very much as she replied earlier, "*Dō ii no?* [How am I good?]" and he says again, "*Ii onna da yo* [A good woman]." And she continues. She still hasn't seen what has happened. "*Okashina hito* [What an odd person]," she

says. And then all of a sudden she's enraged. She says, "*Sore dō iu imi? Ne, nan no koto?* [What do you mean by that? What do you mean?]" And she becomes angrier and angrier. She says, "*Kuyashii, aa, kuyashii!* [I hate you. How I hate you.]"<sup>13</sup>

Now that's a subtle shift in that neither of them initially sees what has happened. Shimamura continues to be puzzled to know what has happened, and it is only gradually that he realizes that the shift from *ii ko* to *ii onna* is to her insulting. There's nothing platonic about their relationship, but it shifts what you could call a platonic relationship very abruptly into a carnal relationship, and so she is infuriated. What to do about it? I thought and thought and thought and tried and tried and tried all manner of possibilities, and finally I decided to be literal. I translated it exactly as it is in the original. I think I can't really call her a "child." I think I have Shimamura initially saying "You're a good girl," and then he shifts to "You're a good woman" and infuriates her. Well, a lot of readers have not understood that. I still have queries about it: "What exactly has happened?" I can only reply that this is a very literal translation.

***Shiru hito zo shiru: Those who know, know***

It's the same old problem. What do you do? Do you choose the rhythm or do you choose to explain? Explanation is possible. Explanation is perfectly possible. I chose not to do it. I said to myself, invoking one of my favorite Japanese expressions, *Shiru hito zo shiru*: those who understand, understand. The expression is very common and a very popular one in Japanese. It is used very

often in Japanese poetry because it comes out to seven syllables, and therefore fits perfectly into a waka.

The rendition of this expression in Kenkyusha's English dictionary is "Only one who knows can really appreciate it."<sup>14</sup> Well, here you see this is not specifically a problem in translation and yet it is a problem in translation. The Kenkyusha rendition is much longer than the Japanese original. And here something very interesting happens. The verb *shiru* appears twice in the original: "*Shiru hito zo shiru.*" Kenkyusha translates the two appearances of the verb "know," *shiru*, differently. In the first instance it says "Only one who *knows* can really *appreciate* it." The *shiru* has been translated in two different ways by the Kenkyusha, which shows you a part of our problem. I don't think that you have to translate it as Kenkyusha does. *Shiru hito zo shiru* means, "Who knows, knows." That's all you have to say. Or "He who knows, knows." Except that's forbidden these days. You can't say "he"; "he" is a forbidden word. "They who know, know" would perhaps be the best or the nearest you could come to it. But it doesn't have to be as roundabout, as verbose as the Kenkyusha translation.

Anyway, I decided that was my conclusion. "They who know, know." In other words, people who understand this will understand it. I think I did the right thing. I don't care if some readers are puzzled. *Shiru hito zo shiru.* Those who know, know, and that's all that really matters. And not every reader has been puzzled. The more perceptive readers see perfectly well what has happened, and no explanation is required.

But you see here again a choice of two alternatives. One was to

stay very close to the original and perhaps leave the reader puzzled. The other was to explain and make it all too obvious and, even worse, to interrupt the rhythm of the original.

### **The Opening Lines of *Snow Country***

The other passage in *Yukiguni* that has been the cause of endless inquiry, endless complaint, endless criticism, is the opening sentence. Here *all* the criticism has been from the Japanese. No American has ever criticized the passage in question, but I've had hundreds of inquiries from Japanese, and they're all complaints. Everybody says that this is a bad translation. I guess it is.

The first sentence has called up a great deal of criticism. You know what it is, of course. "*Kokkyō no nagai tonneru o nukeru to yukiguni datta.*" There's an interesting problem here. Is it *kokkyō* or is it *kunizakai*? Which do you think it is? He doesn't say. There are no rubies there to tell us how to pronounce it. It could be either one. You'll find both *kokkyō* and *kunizakai* in standard dictionaries. I think almost everybody would say *kokkyō*. I think that is the standard reading of this. But I never asked Kawabata what he meant. And of course it doesn't matter. In English translation it doesn't matter in the slightest which pronunciation you give to Japanese in the original.

But I have been criticized for leaving the word out, for not translating it at all. I don't translate it. I say, "The train came out of the long tunnel and it was the snow country." Well, what do you do? *Kokkyō*. That requires explanation, doesn't it, if you're going to include it. You can't merely say "country border" because

that doesn't make any sense in English. That's what *kokkyō* means. "The train came out of the country border, along the country border tunnel..." You have to explain that the tunnel passes the boundary between two old provinces, the province of Kōzuke<sup>15</sup> and the province of Echigo.<sup>16</sup> Are you going to explain it? Well, I chose not to. And I still think it's the correct decision.

The other thing that people complain about is that the original sentence has no subject but the translation does. Well, here all I can really say is that English and Japanese are not the same. A sentence is almost required in English to have a subject. It's not absolutely required, but it's almost absolutely required. And I don't think there's any way that you can render this sentence into English without a subject. "Came out of the long tunnel, it was the snow country." "Came out of the long tunnel between the provinces of Kōzuke and Echigo and it was the snow country." That would be a literal translation, with no subject. But the reader in English would immediately say, "Well, who or what came out of the long tunnel?" Well, I say it was a train. People have criticized this, saying there is no subject in the original, to which my retort is, what is going to come out of a long railway tunnel except a train? The only alternative I think is a rat. It would be either a rat or a train. So I say a train. But lots of people say that this is wrong, that there is no subject in the original and therefore there should be no subject in the translation. Here we face a very fundamental problem, that Japanese and English make different demands, and in my case the demands of English have to be accommodated. So I said it was a train, and I thought I was

being perfectly safe in saying so and I still think so. I still think the meaning is very clear, that a train came out of the long tunnel. But people don't like it. Japanese people don't. No American has ever complained; this is Japanese entirely.

The next sentence does bother me. "*Yoru no soko ga shirokunatta*. What do I say in my translation? I have a certain way of getting around it.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately I didn't bring my translation here. But my translation omits, ignores, a very striking figure of speech: "*yoru no soko*." And I did that for what seemed to me a good reason. English prose avoids rhyme. Good English prose does not call attention to itself, and rhyme does call attention. Therefore I tried to separate the rhyme, the two words, "night" and "white." I think this was a mistake. I think I should have translated it "The floor of the night lay white" and let it go at that. I think that my translation here is inadequate.

I did a retranslation, but unfortunately the retranslation is read by almost nobody. It was published by the Limited Editions Club of New York<sup>18</sup> and cost about three hundred dollars and came out in an edition of I think really two hundred copies, so almost nobody has ever seen it. But in that I change it, and I have it saying literally, "The floor of the night lay white." I think that's what I should have done in the beginning. But I had to make a choice once more, and I think here, again the choice would sacrifice something whichever I would have come up with. The "white night" thing still seems to me unfortunate. I don't think anything can be done about it, but they do stutter—they bump into each other in English, which they do not in Japanese, and that's very, I

think, unfortunate.

But I did not know then something of which I have gradually become aware. I did not know then that this is probably the most famous passage in all modern Japanese literature. If you go back in classical Japanese there are other lines which are perhaps every bit as famous. "*Gion shōja no kane no koe.*"<sup>19</sup> "*Izure no ontoki ni ka.*"<sup>20</sup> There are sentences in the classics which are every bit as famous as this. But I don't think there is any passage in modern Japanese literature that is as famous as this one. I wasn't aware of it at the time. If I had been aware of it, I think I would have come up with a different solution. But my point continues to be the same. You have to make choices, and the choices almost inevitably mean sacrificing something.

But I didn't know what a famous passage I was up to. And of course because it's so famous, everyone has scrutinized it.

There's another reason why everyone has scrutinized it: it's because it's the opening passage. Jocularly I say to students, young people who are beginning to translate and who propose to make careers of translation (insofar as one can make a career in the United States or England of translation. Translation pays very well in Japan but it pays very badly in Europe and North America, so it's very, very difficult to make a living or a career from translation alone, unless it's technical and business translation. You can with that, but I don't think you can with literary translation.)—I tell young translators that they should be especially careful about opening passages and closing passages because they are the ones that people are going to notice. People

will notice the opening passage and the closing passage and nothing in between.

I think I did badly in this case. I really do. But there are these two things. One is that I disliked the rhyme in English. The other is I didn't know how important the passage was. You know, you can't give the same amount of attention to every passage, and if I had known how widely this would be scrutinized, and if I had known how famous the passage was, I probably would have deliberated at more length and come up with a different decision.

I have no apologies for the opening sentence. I think the fact that I put a subject in doesn't matter. I think the fact that I left out the matter of the border between the two provinces doesn't matter. I make no apologies for the opening sentence, but the second sentence I do think I didn't do properly by.

### **Influence of Murasaki Shikibu on Tanizaki and Kawabata**

The reason why Kawabata is so difficult is that he is a man of so few words. Now by "so few words" I mean that he uses a very limited vocabulary in a very resourceful fashion. We keep hearing about Tanizaki<sup>21</sup> and Murasaki Shikibu, the influence that Murasaki Shikibu was on Tanizaki. Well, since Tanizaki translated the *Genji* three times,<sup>22</sup> it's quite obvious that he was much taken with Murasaki Shikibu and in a way he had to be influenced by her. He couldn't spend all that time with her without being influenced by her. I think that probably the chief specific influence of Murasaki Shikibu on Tanizaki is in sentence structure. The very long sentences that the two of them go in for. I think the



long Tanizaki sentences are probably under the influence of Murasaki Shikibu.

They could be under a lot of other influences too. Mrs. Tanizaki once told me that she thought it was *her* influence that was responsible for them. She may very well have been right. She once told me, she said, that she thought that his sentences were too brisk, too abrupt, too lucid, that he ought to make them longer and more complicated. In other words, she said she told him, "You ought to be more Japanese." Obscurity it seems is good Japanese. It's quite possible that she was right, that this wasn't under the influence of Murasaki Shikibu, but rather under the influence of Tanizaki Matsuko.<sup>23</sup> But I think that that is the only influence really of Murasaki Shikibu, even if it's a questionable influence, that can be detected on Tanizaki.

Kawabata, on the other hand, is pure Murasaki Shikibu. And it's not the sentence structure, it's the scarce vocabulary, the fact that he uses a few select words in so many different meanings, that is like Murasaki Shikibu. He's a very difficult writer. He's difficult in so many ways. He's difficult to understand, frequently. I come back to the passage of the exchange between Komako and Shimamura—*ii ko* and *ii onna*—very tiny little things make a huge difference in Kawabata. And again—I can't emphasize this too much—initially neither Komako nor Shimamura was aware of what had happened. It took a while for it to sink in. But Kawabata was a man of few words. He did not say much. He is a very elliptical kind of writer. He is a very austere kind of writer. Often you can't quite understand what he's up to.

Initially, I already knew Kawabata rather well, indeed I can say he was a friend before I started translating him, but when I was working on *Yukiguni*, which was the first long Kawabata I translated, I would ask him about things and he was no help at all. I would say "Isn't this a rather ambiguous passage, Sensei?" He would look at it and nod and say, "Yes, it's ambiguous," but he wouldn't give me any interpretation of it whatsoever. I stopped asking.

And this was true of Tanizaki, too. You know, a funny thing about writers is that very often they don't like to talk about their work. I didn't know Tanizaki when I first started translating; I came to know him rather well. There was nothing diabolic about him. *Akumashugi*, *akumashumi*<sup>24</sup> were total Tanizaki, and certainly there is a very perverse element in his writing, but he was a very sweet old man. There was nothing satanic about him at all. And I take his devils to be rather pleasant, impish devils. They aren't really Lucifer. They are very remote from Lucifer [*looks around— he is speaking in a chapel*]—who I trust isn't near us. [*laughter*]

But the important thing about Kawabata is that he does use so few words to say so many things. This is a matter that I think is really rather important. A gentleman once sent me an article he had written for an obscure academic magazine called the *Fleur-de-lis Review*, put out by Shirayuri Joshi Daigaku in Tokyo. I thought initially, "Now here's a mistranslation. A fleur-de-lis is not a *shirayuri* [white lily]. It's an iris, surely." But I looked into the matter and sure enough, one of the possible significances (you know the fleur-de-lis is the bearing—fleur-de-lis [*pronouncing the*

*final s*], it should be—the fleur-de-lis is the bearing of the kings of France, the armorial bearing of the kings of France) I learned that one possible significance of the fleur-de-lis is exactly that. It’s not an iris, as I thought it was, but possibly a bunch of lilies. Nobody really knows what it signifies.

### **Multiple Translations of the Verb “*Omou*”**

Anyway, in the *Fleur-de-lis Review* published by Shirayuri Joshi Daigaku was an article by a gentleman who had investigated the use in my translations in three Kawabata works—*Yukiguni*, *Senbazuru*, and *Yama no oto*—of the word *omou*. I was annoyed at first. I thought, “Now, this is just the sort of thing an English professor would do.” [*Laughter*] Excuse me for saying it. That was my initial reaction: “Now isn’t that just the sort of thing an English professor would do!” But then I got to thinking about it, and I thought it was really, really very interesting. The gentleman had investigated the number of ways in which I had translated the verb *omou* in those three novels. And he came to a total of something like forty or fifty—I don’t seem to have the exact count here—sometimes it was translated as a verb, sometimes it was translated as a verb plus an adjective, sometimes it was translated as an adjective, sometimes it was translated by a question mark, sometimes—here I was negligent, of course—sometimes it was not translated at all. I assumed that people would understand without my translating it. *Omou* (sic) [think] is the most common. That’s quite natural. That is the fundamental meaning of the word. But it’s a very complex word, you know. It’s complex in every

language. And when you have complex words, you inevitably have places, you have a stand where the meanings are identical and then that is the overlap, but on the borders are meanings which are unique to one language or the other. *Omou* in Japanese means something like "to be lovesick." It has no such meaning in English. But anyway, here is a list of the verbs--limiting myself only to verbs, here is a list of verbs by which I had rendered *omou*.

In alphabetical order, I had rendered the verb *omou* by ask, believe, conclude, consider, decide, doubt, fear, feel, find, hope, know, marvel, mean, mind, occur, remember, see, seem, sense, sound, strike, suggest, suspect, take, view, want, wish, and wonder. That's quite a count, isn't it? All renderings of the single verb *omou*. Well, I make no apology. I think that was rather clever of me, actually, [*chuckles*] to find so many ways to translate *omou*.<sup>25</sup>

But my point is that that's the kind of writer Kawabata was. And it is in this regard that he seems to me to resemble Murasaki Shikibu, far more than Tanizaki does. The most difficult writer in modern Japanese to translate, and therefore the most interesting. I'm not sure everyone would agree, but to me, I can state as a valid generalization that translation is interesting in the measure that it is difficult, and Kawabata was much the most difficult and much therefore the most interesting of the modern writers I have translated. I think he was a very fine writer.

### **Choosing Whom to Translate**

The choice of whom we translated was left pretty much to me.

Most of my long modern translations were done for Alfred Knopf<sup>26</sup> in New York, but the editors there gave me pretty much free rein, and I chose what to translate and it was I who chose Kawabata and Tanizaki. Many Japanese were disappointed when Kawabata got the Nobel Prize. They thought that there were other more significant writers. I think Kawabata was a very fine writer. I chose Kawabata and Tanizaki because at the time I felt that they were the best living Japanese novelists, and we had to have a living novelist because Knopf was out from the start to get a Nobel Prize. It was for them a great triumph when Kawabata got it. There would have been a triumph if Tanizaki had gotten it too, but Tanizaki died too quickly, and dead people do not get Nobelled. [*waggishly raising a finger*] Remember that: dead people do not get Nobel Prizes. Important; remember it. Don't die too soon.

But Kawabata I think is a very fine writer. I think he was a fine writer because as with so much fine writing, he stood at the intersection of the new and the traditional. Kawabata is in many ways a very traditional kind of writer, I think that does not need elaborating upon, but he was also a very modern kind of writer. Kawabata's style was perhaps traditional, Kawabata's sense of the sadness of things was certainly traditional, but Kawabata's themes are very modern. Loneliness, the impossibility of love—these are very modern themes.

I was somewhat disappointed by the citation that Kawabata got in Stockholm.<sup>27</sup> It made it seem that in fact the Swedish Academy, which awards Nobel Prizes, was drawn to a kind of prettiness

about Kawabata. I don't think that comes anywhere near the heart of Kawabata. I had told so many Japanese I thought this had nothing to do with the awarding of the prize, therefore it was a bit of a disappointment to learn that in fact the Nobel Swedish Academy had been somewhat drawn to that. The Kawabata novel that they made the most of in the Nobel citation was what I think now is not a very good novel. Forgive me for saying so, because it's set in your city—*Koto*.<sup>28</sup> I don't think it's a very good novel. But they made a great deal of it. And they made a great deal of such silly, silly things, such as where the hero goes around to the Heian Jingu,<sup>29</sup> I think, to see whether the old trees had been taken over by the Americans, who were still there. Well, that's nonsense. Anybody could see that the trees were still there without waiting for the Americans to go away. It's utter nonsense. But that's the kind of thing the Swedish Academy liked, and I think the Swedish Academy showed its inadequacy. Dare I say that I thought the Swedish Academy again showed its inadequacy when it awarded the prize to Ōe Kenzaburō?<sup>30</sup> [*impishly*] I won't say it.

But Kawabata was a very, very good writer, and I still think that however things may be now, at the time, Kawabata and Tanizaki were the two finest living Japanese novelists, and it was my choice. If the choice was inadequate, if the choice was based on insufficient reasons, then the responsibility is entirely mine. But I really was allowed free rein. I could choose pretty much what I wanted to choose.

There was only one point at which we had a real disagreement. That was *Yama no oto*. I wanted to translate *Yama no oto* and

Knopf said no, they said it was too "pretty" a novel. Well, I should have translated *Yama no oto* when I translated *Senbazuru*. I had a higher regard for *Yama no oto* than for *Senbazuru*. But I wasn't sure that it was finished, and I wanted a work that was finished. I was wrong. You know what happened was, I translated *Senbazuru* thinking it was complete and it turned out not to be. Kawabata started writing again. I never attempted to translate the additional installment. But the choice was mine, and I go on thinking that those were the two persons who at that point deserved most to be translated. Thank you.

### **From the Q&A session**

#### **On Strange Figures of Speech**

Q: In *Sasameyuki* the family was worried about not getting anybody to marry Yukiko, and she is described in your version as "marketable goods." And that was a literal translation. It was quite shocking. We know the attitude of people towards women, but it was shocking to see it said in that particular way.

A: Another excellent example of a shocking thing is in *Yukiguni*, where Komako's lips are constantly being likened to a pair of leeches. One reviewer said, "Leeches, Mr. Seidensticker? *Leeches?*" Italicized. Yes, it is leeches. That's what the original says. Kawabata has some strange figures of speech. He does constantly liken Komako's lips to a pair of leeches. [*ruminatively*] I guess he liked leeches, I don't know. [*laughter*] Most of us tend not to...But that is a very good instance of something that I translated literally, and the reviewer wouldn't believe that that was what was

said in the original, but it was. I had forgotten about the business of "marketable goods," but it's quite possible. It was a very, very different age. Women *were* marketable goods. I wonder what the original was. (Q: I think...*shinamono*.) Oh. Not much you can do with that except "goods," is there? That's very interesting.

### **On Current Japanese Writers**

When you've translated Murasaki Shikibu, there's nobody left. No modern writer is as good as Murasaki Shikibu, and having translated her I really don't want to translate anything else. There are some really very great modern writers, but...there are no writers active today that I really want to translate. I've sort of lost interest in the younger generation, I'm afraid.

### **On the Uniqueness of Japan's Snow**

I grew up in snow country myself. I grew up in Colorado, which is the American equivalent of snow country. I think the Japanese landscape is very beautiful but it's not unique, I don't think. I have a very strong sense of what being snowbound is like, but I think it would have been possible to translate *Yukiguni* without ever coming to Japan. I don't think there's anything really unique about it. Of course, there's more snow there than there is most places. That's perfectly true. But the fact of being "snowed in," as we say, is very much the same. That's very much a part of my childhood. Not being able to get out for a week or so.



### **On Japanese Writers Wanting the Nobel Prize**

Mishima<sup>31</sup> always campaigned for himself to win the Nobel Prize. He really did. He went off to Stockholm and campaigned. They all wanted it desperately. I think there's no question about that. One thing I liked very much about Kawabata was that I knew very well that he wanted the Nobel Prize but I had to ask him to do favors for other authors who also wanted the Nobel Prize, and he was very good about it. He always did what he could, in spite of the fact that these were his rivals. I thought that was a very, very good thing and a very generous thing of Kawabata. But Mishima wanted the prize desperately. There's no question that Kawabata did too. Tanizaki I don't know. I'm not quite sure. I think Tanizaki had a certain self-sufficiency that was not quite present in the others, but I never had really much indication that Tanizaki wanted the Nobel Prize. But I think he probably did. I think everybody did.

#### **Notes**

- 1 A similar talk was given in Japanese the previous day at Neesima Memorial Hall, sponsored by the English Department of Doshisha Women's College.
- 2 Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic. In his seminal essay "The Task of the Translator" (1923) he argued that translation is a form of art whose goal is not communication but "expressing the innermost relationship of languages to one another." He believed that the translator should not attempt to transform the source language into the target language but the reverse, stretching the boundaries and capabilities of the target language to free the "pure language" trapped in a text.

- 3 George Steiner (b.1929) is a French-born American literary critic and philosopher. In *After Babel* (1975) he argues that all communication, within a language or between languages, is a form of translation. Steiner also claims that every translation is inevitably tainted by the translator's own cultural leanings, attitudes, and knowledge, so that the original meaning is lost.
- 4 The previous day's talk made clear that the objections referred to were raised by critic Eto Jun (1932-1999).
- 5 *Sasameyuki* [Light snow], a novel by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), was serialized from 1943 to 1948. The Seidensticker translation, entitled *The Makioka Sisters*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1957.
- 6 Marunouchi, a thriving financial district of Tokyo, is located between Tokyo Station and the Imperial Palace.
- 7 Azabu is an upscale residential district located south of central Tokyo.
- 8 Ōmori is an area in Tokyo's largest ward, Ota-ku, and was the site of a POW camp during World War II.
- 9 Eto Jun criticized the rendering of "Kansai" in *Masks* (Knopf, 1983), Carpenter's translation of Enchi Fumiko's *Onnamen* (1958).
- 10 Fukuda Tsuneari (1912-1994) was a prolific playwright, translator, and critic who translated all of Shakespeare's plays into Japanese. He directed several of the plays using his own translations, including *Hamlet* (1955) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1963).
- 11 Lady Murasaki Shikibu (c.973-c.1014) was a novelist, poet, and lady-in-waiting in the Imperial Court. She is best known as the author of *Genji monogatari*, generally considered the greatest work of Japanese literature and the world's first psychological novel. Seidensticker's translation, *The Tale of Genji*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1976.
- 12 Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), a novelist and short story writer, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968, the first Japanese author to receive the award. Seidensticker's translations of his works include "The Izu Dancer" (*Izu no odoriko*), 1955; *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni*), 1956, revised in 1989; *Thousand Cranes* (*Senbazuru*), 1959; *House of the Sleeping Beauties* [*Nemureru bijo*] and *Other Stories*, 1969; "Japan the Beautiful and Myself" (*Utsukushii Nihon no watashi*), 1969; *The Sound*

- of the Mountain* (*Yama no oto*), 1970; *The Master of Go* (*Meijin*), 1972.
- 13 The bracketed translations are from the Berkeley Medallion Edition of *Snow Country*, 1964, 120-121.
- 14 The fifth edition of Kenkyusha's *New Japanese-English Dictionary* (2003) gives the following renditions: "Those who know it, know it very well (though it isn't known to many people./To those [people] in the know, it's very well known." 1331.
- 15 An old province in north-central Japan located in today's Gunma Prefecture.
- 16 An old province in north-central Japan on the Sea of Japan side. Today it is part of Niigata Prefecture.
- 17 The 1956 Seidensticker translation reads as follows: "The earth lay white under the night sky."
- 18 The Limited Editions Club edition of *Snow Country* was published in 1990 with five aquatint plates by artist Kuwayama Tadaaki, signed on the colophon page by Kawabata and Seidensticker. In all 375 copies were printed.
- 19 The opening words of *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*), a Buddhist-flavored mid-thirteenth century chronicle of the Genpei war (1180-1185) that marked the fall of the Taira clan and the founding of the Kamakura shogunate. The full line is *Gion shōja no kane no koe shōgyō mujō no hibiki ari*: "The sound of the Gion Shoja bell echoes the impermanence of all things."
- 20 The opening words of *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), a fictional narrative by Murasaki Shikibu written during the first decade of the eleventh century. Seidensticker's translation of the first sentence reads: "In a certain reign there was a lady not of the first rank whom the emperor loved more than any of the others."
- 21 Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), a writer of fiction, drama, and essays. Seidensticker's translations of his works include *Some Prefer Nettles* (*Tade kuu mushi*), 1955; *The Makioka Sisters* (*Sasameyuki*), 1957; and *In Praise of Shadows* (*In'ei raisan*), with Thomas Harper as co-translator, 1977.
- 22 Tanizaki's first translation of *Genji monogatari* came out in 1939-1941. Distribution of the second began in May 1951, and distribution of the

- third in November 1964.
- 23 Tanizaki Matsuko was the novelist's third wife. They met in 1927, when they each were married to other people, married in 1935, and had a childless marriage lasting thirty years. She is widely believed to be the inspiration for Sachiko, the second sister in *Sasameyuki*.
- 24 Both terms refer to diabolism, a literary style attributed to Tanizaki, defined by sensuality and associated with the *femme fatale*, masochism, and fetishism.
- 25 Kenkyusha's *New Japanese-English Dictionary*, Fifth Edition (2003), lists thirty-eight one-word verb equivalents for *omou*. Fifteen of Seidensticker's renderings listed above—more than half his total—are not among them: ask, fear, find, marvel, mean, mind, occur, see, seem, sense, sound, strike, suggest, take, and view.
- 26 The New York house of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. published thirty-four titles of Japanese literature in English translation in hardcover between the years 1955 to 1977 under the leadership of editor-in-chief Harold Strauss (1907-1975), beginning with *Some Prefer Nettles*, Seidensticker's translation of Tanizaki's *Tade kuu mushi* (1929), and ending with the 1977 anthology *Contemporary Japanese Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Film and Other Writing Since 1945*, edited by Harold Hibbett.
- 27 For the citation, see [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1968/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1968/press.html).
- 28 Originally published in 1962; translated by J. Martin Holman in 1987 as *The Old Capital*. The Nobel citation says of it that "Kawabata's most recent work is also his most outstanding."
- 29 Heian Shrine, a partial reproduction of the Heian Palace, was built in 1895 to celebrate the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Heian-kyo (present-day Kyoto). The annual Festival of the Ages, one of Kyoto's most important festivals, begins at the old Imperial palace and ends at Heian Shrine. The festival, which takes place on October 22, is featured in *The Old Capital*.
- 30 Ōe Kenzaburō (b.1935), a novelist, short story writer, and essayist, was awarded the 1994 Nobel Prize in Literature for books "enabling us to see the interaction of time present and time past, of relentless change and persistent myth, and to distinguish man's delicate position in the

context.”

- 31 Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), a prolific novelist, poet, playwright, critic, and film director known also for committing ritual suicide (*seppuku*). Seidensticker translated his final book, *The Decay of the Angel* (*Tennin gosui*), 1974, Volume 4 of the tetralogy “Sea of Fertility” (*Hōjō no umi*) as well as a number of short stories.