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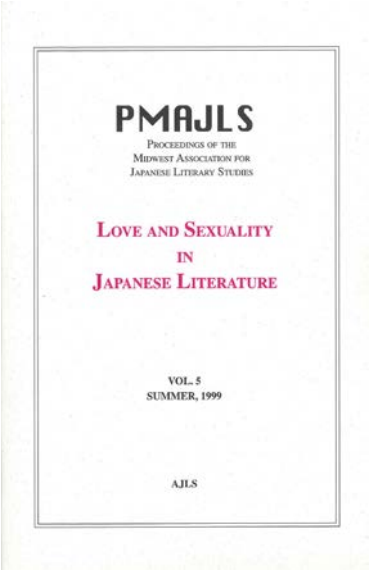

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THE YEARS OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY: LIFE AND LOVE IN TANIZAKI'S FICTION OF 1928–30

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In March, 1928, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō began serial publication of two novels simultaneously: *Manji* (or *Quicksand*, its translation title), and one almost unknown these days—*Kokubyaku* (or Black and White, untranslated). Within five months, he completed *Kokubyaku*. Soon after, in February, 1929, he began serial publication of a new novel, *Tade kuu mushi* (or *Some Prefer Nettles*); it too was completed in five months. *Quicksand* dragged on, not to be completed until twenty-six months had passed.

A passage from *Kokubyaku* hints at the excitement of an author putting his stories together, an excitement felt by the author and magnified in his imagination for the reader's response:

> . . . Mizuno constructed a scene as if from some European sexual adventure story, that he knew would provide the excitement his companion wanted. From the trunk he made it to sprout branches, to which he attached leaves, and added flowers, as he went into every minute detail. Nakazawa urged him on with absolute attention, from time to time licking his dry lips. The intensity of the listener communicated to the speaker, and Mizuno began to be pulled more and more into [his own story], until he himself almost couldn't tell that it was a fiction. Each time his companion let out an envious groan, he grew more enraptured, and he was permeated with the joy he would have felt had he actually experienced the pleasures he described, to the point that he began to feel caught up in what seemed like sweet recollections (*TJZ*, 11: 265).

These three novels, two famous, one almost unknown, that he wrote virtually simultaneously are the focus of a chapter in a larger study of Tanizaki I am currently doing. In the interest of space, this paper focuses primarily on the best-known of them, *Some Prefer Nettles*. My assumptions are two: despite seeming differences, the three novels are closely related; and real-life events in the year before what I am calling the "years of living dangerously" (1928–30) were making it possible for Tanizaki, after a fallow period, to gain access as a writer to powerful internal energy

that would enable him to write both these novels and in the 1930s the series of extraordinary stories, including *Yoshino-kuzu*, *Ashikari*, and *Shunkinshō*, on which much of his mature reputation stands.

Scholars tend to identify two significant personal issues that went into the writing of *Quicksand* and *Some Prefer Nettles*: migration to Kansai first as a refugee and then as a near-permanent transplantee following the 1923 Kantō earthquake that lost him his physical and spiritual "home" in Kantō; and the growing deterioration of his marriage. While I agree that these are important and manifest considerations, it long has seemed to me that they are not sufficient in themselves to "explain" Tanizaki's writing of the late-1920s. Tanizaki's own story-telling method—that is, his fascination with detective stories and shadows—hints that undoubtedly more could be gleaned if we were to follow him deeper into his personal imagination. That effort is my project.

By late 1927 as he began his novels, Tanizaki had been in Kansai for four years. At first, he may not have had an intimation that this period was anything but an extended, temporary camping-out. But in 1927 a number of real-time issues converged in such a way that in retrospect we can say they created a punctuation point in his life with significant ramifications for his creative imagination. The record of his publication in the early to mid-1920s suggests that there was something already stalling in his imagination when the earthquake occurred (the 1924 *Chijin no ai* or *Naomi* notwithstanding), and the events of 1927 opened new paths to creativity. Other writing in 1926 and 1927 shows that he was conscious of some aspects of some of the issues; but that same writing shows us that instinct—or unconscious intention—also was playing an important part in his creativity at the time, even as large historical movements and intellectual abstractions also played a part.

I propose that three linked events were of very deep importance for Tanizaki's creative work. At first glance (that is, at the time) one of these events was scarcely noteworthy; another is something that actually happened to someone else. I also propose that he was uncommonly vulnerable to earthquakes, and it was resonances from the 1923 earthquake that had him still in a state of special susceptibility to make him particularly sensitive to these events of 1927. Whether or not the earthquake is a sufficient condition, clearly his fiction of the following several years shows that there was indeed something special happening inside him that had not appeared with such intensity until then. These 1927 events were: Tanizaki's literary debate with Akutagawa Ryūnosuke over the "plotless novel;" his meeting Nezu Matsuko, in the company of Akutagawa; and Akutagawa's suicide several months later. Their combined destabilizing

effects occurred in a context of continued reverberations from the 1923 earthquake.

The literary debate between Tanizaki and Akutagawa on the role of plot and fictionality in creative writing is famous (for some summaries in English, see Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 50; Hijiya-Kirschnereit, *Rituals of Self-Revelation*, 155–157; Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, 155–172; Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, 152–153). Akutagawa began it in February 1927, probably not even intending for it to become a battle, by remarks about Tanizaki's recent writing (including a memoir of the Kantō earthquake) during a *zadankai* published in the pages of *Shinchō*. Akutagawa offhandedly mentioned that he found Tanizaki's stories too plot-ridden, and rather appreciated Shiga Naoya's style. (Shiga at the time was serializing *An'ya kōro* in the literary journal, *Kaizō*.) Tanizaki had just begun a monthly column in *Kaizō* commenting on contemporary literary matters, entitled *Jōzetsu-roku* or "Garrulous Ramblings;" he took up Akutagawa's comments immediately, issuing a kind of manifesto directed specifically at Akutagawa and in defense of his own position that plot played a positive and necessary function in fiction. The following month Akutagawa countered with *his* famous statement, now directly in answer to Tanizaki and entitled *Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na* (Literary, All too Literary), in favor of "storyless storytelling," as against his own earlier and Tanizaki's similarly highly-plotted fiction.

Three months later, Akutagawa committed suicide. Two months following that, Tanizaki wrote the following:

> I realize now that our [friend] Akutagawa's recent actions were actually not normal, but I never dreamed that he would come to such a tragic resolution. Could I have been more gentle and consoling to him? No, instead I thought I'd found a good partner to battle with, and uncharacteristically I engaged him in argument. But this was not at all worthy of a friend, and I have no words of apology I can give the departed. (*TJZ*, 22: 227)

This convoluted sentiment is constructed into one single uncharacteristically apologetic sentence. But another short comment, included when Akutagawa's *zenshū* was published posthumously later the same year, suggests that guilt was only one of the feelings in the complex of emotions Tanizaki felt at his death:

> In the late days of the deceased's life, I had occasion to be involved in an unfortunate difference of perspective with him over an aesthetic issue; and we had something of a theoretical battle in a journal about it. But now that I think of it, the deceased has strongly defended his position with his death. That is how sincere the man was, how faithful to his own conscience he was. Given this, one cannot help but pay the greatest respect to a man regardless of his artistic perspectives. (*TJZ*, 23: 100)

"Sincerity," "faithfulness," yes. But also: in effect, checkmate. Willy-nilly, by his self-determined death Akutagawa had won the debate by closing it, Tanizaki says. Their "literary battle" had been polite, and Tanizaki and Akutagawa had remained friends; but there is passion in Tanizaki's own opening self-defense in the March segment of *Jōzetsu-roku* , and then later after Akutagawa's death. He feels "respect" for its "sincerity," but there is something more in the intensity with which Tanizaki still defends his own position. Perhaps a kind of thwarted rage, and beyond the rage, with Akutagawa's death there also seems to be a fear: that perhaps Tanizaki shared more with Akutagawa than he wanted to acknowledge. In another 1927 memorial piece, "Akutagawa and I," he detailed their twinship as sons of Edo who from childhood on had gone to the same schools and shared the same teachers; in this essay and others at the time, the word "weakness" shows up frequently. What if Akutagawa's emotional fragility were his own, too? Ambivalent rage at being forestalled, guilt at that rage, and a deep, subterranean fear—these all come out in *Kokubyaku* , the story Tanizaki began publishing early the next year. With the plot hinge of an hallucinatory sexual encounter between a writer and a (Japanese) Ginza streetwalker known only as "Fraulein Hindenburg," *Kokubyaku* is, in short, the story of a writer who kills another writer through his writing, and who may pay with his life for that unintended murder, in which he had no hand other than imagining it.

Another extra-literary element enters into Tanizaki's complex sensitivity to Akutagawa's death. Four months before the suicide, even as Tanizaki and Akutagawa engaged in their literary debate in the pages of *Kaizō*, it was in the presence, and in a sense, under the sponsorship, of Akutagawa that Tanizaki first encountered Nezu Matsuko at Akutagawa's inn when Mrs. Nezu came to visit Akutagawa. At the time Tanizaki could not know that eight years later she would become his third wife; but his unusual account of their meeting shows that from the start he was intensely aware of her. In summary, the encounter sounds innocuous enough: Akutagawa had been invited to give a lecture in Osaka; Mrs.

Nezu admired his writing, and had asked to be introduced to him; Tanizaki happened to be there when Mrs. Nezu visited Akutagawa's inn, where the two friends were continuing their conversations on life and art; and as a good hostess, Mrs. Nezu invited them to go to a dancehall the next day—a popular entertainment at the time. But listen to how Tanizaki describes it—ingenuously? slyly? self-deceivingly?—in an unusual context: the essay entitled "That Poor Man" (*Itamashiki hito*) included in a memorial issue of *Bungei Shunjū* two months after Akutagawa's death, from which I have already quoted:

> The next day too Akutagawa kept me from leaving, and happily invited by Mr. Nezu's wife, he said he would go to see a dancehall. When out of respect to Mrs. Nezu I changed into a tuxedo, she purposely stood, and buttoned the buttons of my formal tuxedo shirt for me. It was a kindness utterly like that of a sweetheart (*TJZ* 22: 228).

That he uses the word "sweetheart," that is, *iro-onna*, surely raised more than one reader's eyebrows on first reading it. In any case, it is a strange word to use, and a strange scene to describe, in a memorial essay for a writer who has just died a suicide, and using the socially well-placed married woman's actual name, too. Whether at the time Tanizaki was entirely conscious of it or not, he shows us here that Nezu Matsuko had set a switch in him that could well be activated some day. As I will suggest through my discussion of *Some Prefer Nettles*, I believe that it was a complicated switch: it would be necessary for her not simply to be divorced—something surely neither of them could have imagined at the moment in 1927—but returned to her original family. That is, the significant issue in her divorce is that Nezu Matsuko, wife and mother of a child, would go back to being the pre-married and pre-maternal Morita Matsuko.

But before all this, there was the earthquake. Or rather, earthquakes. This is a major issue in Tanizaki's life, to which I am devoting considerable attention in the larger study. Here I will say only that Tanizaki had been writing about earthquakes almost from the beginning of his career, and in numerous writings he himself drew attention to what we would probably call a "phobia." Long before the Kantō earthquake, and long after it, his writings show that the natural disaster of 1923 was experienced by a man preconditioned to receive it as an emotional catastrophe of major proportions—"overwhelming," is the word he uses in English to describe it in one piece. Mary Gedo has shown in her study of Pi-

casso—who also was earthquake-haunted—that internal, personal disintegration can accompany external, natural disorder; and in the artistic personality, the effort to re-order can have aesthetically rich consequences (*Looking at Art from the Inside Out: A Psychoiconographic Approach to Modern Art*, 1994). This clearly is what happened in Tanizaki's case.

Here then is the context I propose for the fiction of 1928–30: By late 1927, Tanizaki was forty-two years old (by Japanese count), and feeling middle-aged. In his youth he had been self-consciously an Edokko, a circumstance he saw as a first point of similarity between himself and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, who had just committed suicide. As a young man—and like the "old man" in *Some Prefer Nettles*—he had "indulged in foreign tastes of the most hair-raising variety," to use Seidensticker's translation phrasing (34—all translations from the novel are from the Seidensticker translation of *Tade kuu mushi*). When he was thirty-seven, the great Kantō earthquake had radically shaken up his already-confused life (he was at the time also involved with his wife's younger sister, and was just emerging from the latest bout of the *shinkei suijaku*, or "nervous prostration," that plagued him on and off throughout his life). There were obvious strains in his marriage. His good friend, Satō Haruo, had developed sympathy for the plight of Tanizaki's wife who, like Misako in *Some Prefer Nettles*, could be described as experiencing the "sadness of the unloved wife" (33). That sympathy had ripened into something stronger. Tanizaki had already met Nezu Matsuko. (Note: Matsuko was twenty-three at the time, just the age Kaname imagines for Ohisa in *Some Prefer Nettles*. Noguchi Takehiko sees Matsuko as the "unconscious inspiration" for Ohisa [*Tanizaki Jun'ichirō ron*, 167], but Tanizaki's own writings suggest that the inspiration was far from unconscious.) He also had just met the young magazine editor, half his age, who between April 1931 and January 1935 was to be briefly his second wife.

Well then, *Some Prefer Nettles*. There is a central question that must be asked about the novel: What is it about, anyway? The rest of this paper tells the "other" story I see being told in it, which, in light of many of the issues proposed above, diverges from the dialectics often identified for it in the critical literature: Kantō and Kansai, West and East, modern and traditional, control and masochism. It is a story that addresses the ambivalence that permeates the novel.

What *Some Prefer Nettles* engages obviously is related to what is bothering the protagonist, Shiba Kaname, through whose consciousness almost exclusively we view the action of the story. "Obviously," I say, because his name itself tells us that *he*—and not Japan's struggle with

tradition and modernity—is what we have to pay attention to. As Kōno Taeko and numerous other Japanese critics long ago reminded us, the "kaname" is that central and essential clamp that holds together the ribs of a fan at a single point. *He*, and not the narrative (which after all is only a picture pasted to the ribs), is the crux of the story. In a very important and special sense, *Some Prefer Nettles* truly is about Kaname. To read this story completely, we have to separate Kaname himself from the events that happen to and around him.

Well then, what *is* bothering him? He seems quite open about his problem: He is a woman worshipper, and he does not worship his wife. At least one character—his father-in-law—is not convinced by his arguments for a divorce. His cousin, Takanatsu, is willing to take Kaname at his word, but he finds peculiar Kaname's pacing of the divorce and lack of clear trajectory in putting his plan into effect. Nor, for that matter, is he either entirely convinced than Kaname and Misako are incompatible.

There are at least four significant lies—in other words, direct falsehoods—that Tanizaki hides out in the open in this story, to misdirect or divert our attention. First, that the "old man" is old. He is not. He is only around fifty-six years old. Lest we readers (in either 1929 or 1999) be tempted to say, "Well, that is old for the day," Kaname tells us that he is "not really as old as all that," and that his "oldness" is a kind of hobby (24). Playing the part of an old man clearly serves some purpose—rather as Kaname's rationalization of "woman worship" for what has failed in his marriage serves him some purpose.

Second, that Ohisa is a "traditional woman." She is not. Rather, she is playing an ancient role to which women still resort when they have no other social structure to protect them. Ohisa, like thoroughly modern Naomi in the 1924 *Chijin no ai* (or *Naomi*), is willing to play a part if someone will construct the set, buy the costumes and properties, and pay for upkeep. She is good-hearted, while Naomi came to be cruelly manipulative; but she is not—as Kaname wants to see her—"a shade left behind by another age" (98). We know from her own testimony that many of the old man's demands are a pain in the neck to her. We are shown enough to suspect—indeed, the text so speculates—that she might rather be reading movie magazines than Edo chapbooks. But she is willing to put up with her protector's whims—or maybe, she realistically recognizes her own powerlessness just below the surface. If Kaname can contemplate divorcing his wife, how much more precarious must Ohisa's position be, despite the old man's apparent fondness for her.

The third lie is that Kaname does not find his wife sexually attractive. Now we're starting to get onto dangerous ground. For if this is not

true, it undermines Kaname's justification for the divorce. And yet the author plants little hints here and there that, far from feeling nothing for Misako, Kaname instead makes himself—almost, it seems, *forces* himself—to look away from his wife. What are we to make of the following enigmatic passage?

> She perhaps knew from experience what sort of emotions the occasion would arouse in him. . . . He saw the curve of her back, he saw the soft roundness of her shoulders in the shadow of her kimono, he saw, where her kimono was kicked aside at the skirt, an inch or two of ankle above her sock. . . . Her skin, under these stolen glimpses seemed fresher and younger than her almost thirty years, and had it belonged to someone else's wife he could have found it beautiful and exciting. Even now sometimes in the night he felt a certain desire to press close, to caress it as he had in those first nights after they were married. But the sad thing was that, since those early nights, her skin had quite lost its power to excite him. (17)

We will return to this passage, to contemplate the final lines; but for now, let us simply ask ourselves: Is this the meditation of a man who feels no sexual attraction for his wife, or is this a man who is working at not responding to his wife's sexual potential?

And fourth—and this is the lie that points to the "kaname" or crux of Kaname's complex of feelings: the engine that runs the relationship between the old man and Ohisa is not sex. This is a situational or definitional lie, for Misako in her disgust for the implications of the relationship between her father and his mistress directs our attention to a misreading. But the author shows us significantly where the slippage takes place. That is, by definition Ohisa is the old man's sexual property, and therefore sex must be fundamental to their relationship. Yet what does the story actually show us? Their most intimate moment is revealed on the island of Awaji, where Kaname has joined them on a pilgrimage excursion. They are staying at an inn, the old man and Ohisa in one room and Kaname across the hall in another. They have retired for the evening, and through the paper walls, Kaname unavoidably overhears what is going on in the other room. The conditions for an exciting peeping-Tom situation are set up: one man listening in to another man in bed with his mistress. Here is the climax of the scene:

> . . . left with a bedroom to himself now for the first time in a great many days, he found that the muffled voices of the old man and O-hisa across the hall disturbed him more than Misako would have. The old man seemed to soften as though into a different person, even the timbre of his voice changed, when he was alone with O-hisa. Apparently they guessed that Kaname would be listening. Their . . . voices, hushed as though to keep a secret, were no more than an affectionate murmur. . . . A low, steady pulsing beat along the floor to his pillow . . . . (89–90)

Given the premise of the scene—that is, a man in bed with his mistress—we know what we—and Kaname—would imagine if we were told of "affectionate murmurs," "muffled voices," a "low, steady, pulsing beat" vibrating through the floor of their room. But this is not a primal scene. Far from it: it comes closest to a mother soothing a fretful child to sleep. The "pulsing beat" is that of a massage. While Kaname assumes they know he can hear them, he has no sense that they have adjusted their behavior for his presence. In a sleight-of-mind to match the author's sleight-of-hand, Kaname imputes a sexual relationship, although he does not name it, with no evidence of it. In just this way the author superimposes sexual tension over something demonstrably non-sexual; here, the old man's putative "oldness" plays its part, blurring the discernment of capacity and incapacity.

But is this scene so non-sexual, after all? To answer this question, we first have to assemble some pieces of information, as characters in the story also are shown to assemble information about each other. Hiroshi, we are told, is "over ten" years old (18)—he is an elementary school fourth-grader. Misako, we know, is not yet thirty. Kaname and Misako have to have been married at least eleven years. Therefore Misako had to have been around sixteen or so when they got married, and seventeen or eighteen when Hiroshi was born. Kaname has not felt sexual attraction for his wife since the first year or so of their marriage. Kaname has intense memories of his mother from his Tokyo childhood. Through the old man's manipulations, Kaname sees Ohisa as more evocative of the world of his mother than she seems a denizen of the world of the 1920s.

The "old man" is more middle-aged than old (like Tanizaki himself). Ohisa is around twenty-three, five or so years younger than Misako, and thus clearly of an age to be his daughter. The old man indeed seems more like a fond but autocratic father than like a lover. And yet, for all that Ohisa is thirty-five or so years younger than her master, indeed, younger than his daughter, she seems almost more motherly than mistress-ly. One

piece of information we are not given enough even to surmise about. We do not know what happened to Misako's mother—she died, but it is as if she never existed.

Ohisa is the interesting ambiguity in the novel, around whom Kaname's consciousness comes to revolve. Unlike Misako, who occupies the position of a mother but is not described in any terms that will make us think of her as one, Ohisa is a mere mistress, but at the same time she is actually a motherly figure. It is Kaname's fascination with her that points to the "kaname" for us. His attention is fixed on the truly missing figure: the real mother. Tanizaki's creative instinct knows the story it wants to tell. And that is a story about a boy and his mother. It is a story about the incest taboo.

Here then is the outline of that story: Kaname married a very young, virginal woman, whom he found sexually attractive. All too soon, she changed, not through any will to change, but by fulfillment of her socially defined function and biological teleology: she got pregnant and had a baby. She became at this point, very early in their marriage, unavailable to Kaname. (Kaname in all honesty never says he grew bored with her; he says he stopped finding her sexually attractive.) That is, she stopped being a "woman" and became a "mother." Kaname is telling the truth: he must have a woman to worship—that is, a "not-used" woman. Any woman who becomes available, in the familiar economy, becomes not virgin/goddess, but whore, and not to be worshipped—that is, a "used woman." He has whores, and he has Misako, who is "mother," and therefore a woman he cannot have. And *this* is the story *Some Prefer Nettles* tells: the story of Kaname's impasse, caught between used and not-used women, women he can have and ones he cannot. We see his growing fascination with a possible way out through the accessible whore Ohisa who somehow manages also to be "mother."

Is this plausible? All we can know is what Tanizaki put in the novel, and there is nothing I have described here that is not in the story. And we also have the record that with Kaname's problem identified—even if only in the shadows—Tanizaki too, after a long seeming logjam, got on with his life and started pursuing a new fulfillment in both life and art. Sometimes, I have suggested, the very identification of a conflict brings about a kind of resolution of it. Both Tanizaki and Matsuko were astonishingly open with—or even exhibitionistic about—many of the details of their private life. Their prenuptial agreement that Matsuko would have no more children—honored even to her having an abortion when she did get pregnant—point to an acting-out of Kaname's "solution": how to be man and child at the same time, without competition.

Some Prefer Nettles suggests that the problem is not that the "more Kaname-like type-Kaname" (an adaptation of a phrase you may recognize from Seidensticker's translation) does not want to be a husband, but that he does not want competition as the object of the mother's attention. Or, in other words, how to have your cake and eat it too: do an end-run around the incest taboo.

All scholars indentify in Tanizaki's work a "search for the eternal woman" and a "yearning for mother." In *Some Prefer Nettles*, Tanizaki hints that these were not pretty—and ultimately empty—artistic poses of a decadent role-player, but very real, personal, dangerous and powerful forces in his life. *Some Prefer Nettles* is a beautiful and even witty novel, but it is also a very brave piece of work, and miles ahead of Shiga Naoya's arrogant and self-indulgent autotherapy that so enthralled critics and writers of the day, even Akutagawa, "that poor man," as Tanizaki called him.

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