

Mishima Yukio & Haiku

by Hiroaki Sato

Many are likely to be surprised to hear that Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925-1975)—yes, the fellow who chose to die by disembowelment and decapitation—wrote haiku. When you think of it, though, if you go to school in Japan, you are automatically asked to compose haiku in grammar school and perhaps in junior high school. Also, sometimes you or your parents meticulously preserve every scrap of writing you do or your school magazines printing your stuff survive. Both happened to Mishima. As a result, we have about 180 of his haiku, in addition to two haibun.¹

What makes Mishima different from us regular mortals is the fact that he was, above all, an astonishing literary prodigy. In the case of haiku, it also helped that his teacher of the Japanese language in the Middle Division of the Peers School was Iwata Kurō (岩田九郎) who after the war would establish his reputation as an authority on Edo haikai. Iwata encouraged his students in coming up with their own writings.

One of Mishima's earliest haiku dates from when he was seven years old, and it reads:

おとうとがお手手ひろげてもみじかな

Otōto ga o-tete hirogete momiji kana

My younger brother spreads his palms, maple leaves²

Mishima's younger brother, Chiyuki, was two years old at the time. He would go on to become a diplomat.

Mishima wrote more than 60 plays, beginning with one based on a folktale the French novelist Alphonse Daudet tells in one of his letters to his friend (according to Mishima's own introductory note); he wrote it when he was twelve or thirteen.³ Most of the plays he wrote were staged in his lifetime, but the first commercial success was a grand costume drama *Rokumeikan* 鹿鳴館, in 1956, and it had to do with a political and familial intrigue that is supposed to take place in the British-designed Renaissance-style social center with that name that the Japanese government built at great cost, in 1883. The sole purpose of the large building was to encourage social intercourse between foreign dignitaries and members of the Japanese aristocracy.

The *Rokumeikan* was named after 鹿鳴, a phrase in the Confucian *Odes* 詩經.⁴ It survived until 1933, when Mishima was eight. By then, however, it had long been a fading social club for Japan's high society, a phantom reminder of "the Age of the *Rokumeikan*" when copycatting Westerners was regarded as the height of sophistication and social achievement.⁵

When he was sixteen, Mishima wrote a set of five haiku referring to the *Rokumeikan* and the age it represented. He was prompted to write it, one assumes, when he saw a Western dress and some paraphernalia that were the remnants from the youthful days of his grandmother Natsuko, among the clothes taken out to air for *mushiboshi* 虫干. As anyone who has read any of Mishima's biographies knows, Natsuko famously or infamously influenced Mishima until well into his teens, although, as Muramatsu Takeshi (also Gō) 村松剛 has suggested in his perceptive literary biography of his friend, it is highly unlikely that Natsuko attended

any of the balls at the Rokumeikan.⁶ She was simply too young for that and not aristocratic enough.

The set in question is preceded by a heading: “About the Rokumeikan and Such.”

香水のしみあり古き舞踏服

Kōsui no shimi ari furuki butōfuku

Here's a stain of perfume on this old ball gown

虫干や舞踏服のみ花やかに

Mushiboshi ya butōfuku nomi hanayaka ni

Airing clothes only the ball gown elegant

遠雷や舞踏会場馬車集ふ

Enrai ya butōfu kaijō basha tsudou

In distant thunder horse carriages gather for the ball

蛍あまた庭に放ちて舞踏会

Hotaru amata niwa ni hanachite butōkai

Numerous fireflies released in the garden then the ball

舞踏会露西亜みやげの扇かな

Butōkai Roshia miyage no ōgi kana

At the ball a souvenir from Russia a fan

Other than *mushiboshi*, each of the four other haiku contains a summer kigo: *kōsui*, “perfume,” because it is thought to help dispel the smell of your perspiration, although I dare suggest that any perfume destroys the natural fragrance of a young female body, perspiring or otherwise; *enrai*, “distant thunder,” simply because in Japan there’s more thunder in the summer than in other seasons, one assumes, though the term as a kigo is supposed to hint at something portentous; *hotaru*, “fireflies”; and *ōgi*, “fan,” because you can stir up the air to cool yourself.

The fan here, of course, is obviously of a decorative variety, and that prompts me to add: before Japan defeated Russia in the 1904-1905 war during the period of global imperial expansion (has it ever stopped?), or even before the Russian Revolution, in 1917, Japan’s high society had looked up to the Russian aristocracy like the aristocracy of any other European country and treated things from that country as admirable exotica.



NOTES

¹ They are collected in Vol. 37 (poetry), pp. 799-812, and Vol. Hokan (supplementary; gleanings), pp. 129-130 and pp. 193-196, of the latest Shinchōsha edition of Mishima's complete works.

² Vol. 37, p. 799.

³ Vol. 21, pp. pp. 9-24. Actually, the dating of his plays in his early teens is based on guesswork.

⁴ The phrase in question, in James Legge's fanciful translation, appears in the stanza that begins: "With sounds of happiness the deer / Browse on the celery of the meads. / A nobler feast is furnished here, / With guests renowned for noble deeds." James Legge, tr., *The She King; The Book of Ancient Poetry* (Trübner & Co., 1876), p. 190.

⁵ See Hiroaki Sato, tr., *My Friend Hitler and Other Plays of Yukio Mishima* (Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁶ Muramatsu Takeshi, *Mishima Yukio no sekai* (Shinchōsha, 1990), pp. 57-58. Vol. 37, pp. 807-808.