

Silk and Insight

A Novel

By Mishima Yukio

Frank Gibney, ed., and Hiroaki Sato, tr.

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Mishima Yukio (1925–1970) needs no introduction. His notoriety in the West is due in no small part to a plethora of works available in translation, for dozens of novels, short stories, plays, and poems have been rendered into English over the years. Yet, Mishima was a writer of great diligence, turning out scores of works over the course of his short career. This productivity ensures that works remain to be “discovered.” We are indeed fortunate that Hiroaki Sato, a translator whose skill and sensitivity are well known, has rendered into comfortable English *Silk and Insight* (1964), a novel “discovery” for Western readers in many respects.

Written at a time when Mishima’s domestic popularity was on the wane, the theme and style of *Silk and Insight* seem hardly calculated to change the critical opinion of the time. It lacks overt manifestation of many of the hallmarks of Mishima’s writing one has come to expect: sex, death, beauty, and purity. Thus, at first glance, it might seem an incongruous star in the constellation of Mishima’s work, although arresting locutions such as “the coughs were unimaginably clean, like tiny white-painted pinecones tumbling out of her mouth” offer ample evidence of Mishima the word smith. One further senses the author in the ostentatious use of Western icons such as quotations from *Macbeth*, snippets of Friedrich Hölderlin’s *Poems & Fragments* as filtered through Heidegger, or allusions to *Das Kapital*, all of which provide a counterpoint to the equally conscious introduction of Japanese and Chinese iconic references.

If *Silk and Insight* seems unusual, one need only recall the 1956 novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* to realize that historical fiction is simply a minor mode within which Mishima wrote. Like its more famous predecessor, *Silk and Insight* is a novelized account of an actual event with far-reaching implications: the pivotal 1954 labor strike at Ōmi Kenshi, a manufacturer of silk and thread. Sato’s concise introduction skillfully situates Mishima’s novel in its historical context. His careful attention to explicating in footnotes cultural issues, oblique historical points, and myriad literary references, both Western and Japanese, is also judicious and helpful.

The paternalistic, idealistic Komazawa Zenjirō, modeled on Natsugawa Kikuji and a self-professed devotee of what we might now call “tough love,” is the ostensible focus of the novel, yet it would be misleading to call him the protagonist. True, each



chapter is titled “Komazawa Zenjirō’s . . .,” but that is a framing device. It might be more reasonable to take as the protagonist Okano, the *éminence grise* whose efforts help to bring about the strike at Komazawa Textiles and, after the subsequent death of its eponymous father, eventual control of the factory. Although Okano has a hand in the manipulation of most of the characters involved in the tale, the reader is privy to the thoughts and motives of numerous central figures. In

short, the story traces the life of Komazawa as it is affected by the characters who subvert, either actively or as an oblivious participant in some larger machination, his comfortable role as “emperor” of his nation, the textile factory and its exploited workers. Indeed, this relationship between Komazawa and his “children” has allowed the novel to be read as an oblique critique of Japan under the emperor system.

One can envision numerous uses the work under review might serve beyond its inclusion in a course on Japanese literature for which it is admirably suited. The setting for the tale—the Komazawa Textiles factory in Hikone—would conceivably allow the novel’s integration into a course treating thematically the general Kyoto/Lake Biwa area such as those found in study abroad programs. A course in modern Japanese economic history might, for example, find in the novel a provocative supplement offering the “insight” of the title, albeit fictionalized, into the minds of the strikers. That notwithstanding, the work could certainly act as a stimulus for discussion of the issues surrounding the 1952 and 1953 MITI guidelines on textile production, as well as the ramifications of three basic labor laws enacted at the urging of General Douglas MacArthur in 1945, 1946, and 1947. One might also find fruitful discussion in the role such an export-oriented product like silk played in wartime and postwar Japan.

Although a financial and critical debacle at the time of its publication, *Silk and Insight* is an exciting, provocative addition to the corpus of Mishima’s works available in English translation. I, for one, am eager for a chance to introduce my students to the author through the novel’s varied characters, engaging story, and occluded manifestation of those characteristics of Mishima’s pen that have made him so highly regarded. ■

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