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The Influence of Mishima Yukio's “Death in Midsummer” on Murakami Haruki's “Hanalei Bay”¹⁾

Jonathan Dil

Introduction

Murakami Haruki has consistently denied any literary influence from Mishima Yukio. In a 1985 conversation with Nakagami Kenji, for example, when asked about Mishima, Murakami tersely responded, “I don’t really like him” (18). In a 1992 exchange with the writer Jay McInerney, Murakami dismissed any semblance of influence, stating, “I’ve hardly read Mishima at all, so I don’t think there is a resemblance between me and Mishima.” In 2010, when asked by an interviewer about his aversion to canonical Japanese works like Mishima’s, Murakami cryptically replied, “In Japan, we eat squid and octopus. Do you eat them in Norway? I prefer squid to octopus. I have no reason about that” (Rappaport). In a 2011 interview with Rebecca Suter, Murakami reiterated his lack of influence from Japanese writers, stating, “As an author, too, I have not really looked at other writers for inspiration ... one day, I simply tried to write. But even then, I did not look for a model, I did not start reading Mishima or Kawabata in order to find my voice” (274). In

2013, when asked about his favorite writers at an event in Kyoto, Murakami expressed admiration for Natsume Sōseki, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, and Yasuoka Shōtarō, but contempt for Kawabata Yasunari and Mishima: “The authors I hate are Kawabata and Mishima. I viscerally can’t stand them” (Morishita 121).

Murakami’s visceral reaction to Mishima—“*seiriteki ni dame*” in Japanese—echoes Mishima’s own aversion to Dazai Osamu, as documented in his book *Henreki jidai*. The phrase Mishima used to describe his aversion to Dazai was “visceral repulsion” (*seiriteki hanpatsu*), which is close enough to Murakami’s expression to make one wonder if he was not channeling Mishima even as he expressed his dislike of him (Mishima *Ketteiban* 287). Unlike Murakami, Mishima acknowledges the probable self-revelation inherent in such a visceral reaction. He attributes this reaction to what he calls the “law of love and hate”, suggesting that Dazai is exposing facets about himself that he would prefer to keep hidden (287–288). Mishima even shares the story of once telling Dazai directly to his face that he hates his writing (290).

Mishima makes occasional appearances in Murakami’s fiction, a prominent example being the opening chapter of his third novel, *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (*A Wild Sheep Chase*; 1982). This chapter is titled “November 25, 1970,” which is the fateful day of Mishima’s *seppuku* or ritual suicide. The scene takes place on the campus of International Christian University (ICU) in western Tokyo, where the narrator and a woman he is with are munching on hot dogs. Together in the student lounge, they watch Mishima’s image flickering on a television screen. Yet despite the national drama unfolding before them, the duo shows a conspicuous lack of interest. The narrator remarks, “The volume control was broken so we could hardly make out what was being said, but it didn’t matter to us one way or the other” (Murakami *A*

Wild Sheep Chase 9). Instead, he suggests to the woman that they go to his apartment and make love.

Despite this nonchalant opening scene, however, *A Wild Sheep Chase* is a novel deeply influenced by Mishima. The plot, with its journey to Hokkaido on a quest to find a mysterious animal, draws loosely from Mishima's entertainment novel, *Natsuko no bōken* (Natsuko's Adventure).²⁾ Moreover, the novel concludes with the murder of the secretary of a right-wing boss, a scene which can be interpreted as a symbolic murder of Mishima, as Yamasaki Makiko has observed (245). Contrary to the indifference shown toward Mishima at the start of the novel then, he actually emerges as the central figure Murakami is wrestling with in the novel and the primary source of his anxiety of influence (Dil).

This essay focuses on a positive example of Mishima's influence on Murakami's work, specifically that found in his 2005 short story "Hanarei Bei," or "Hanalei Bay" in English. I will argue that this short story draws inspiration from Mishima's 1952 short story "Manatsu no shi," or "Death in Midsummer" in English. This short story remains one of Mishima's most famous and popular, appearing in both Japanese and English as the title story of a collection of nine short stories that Mishima selected as his best. Both Mishima's and Murakami's short stories explore the ways in which personal trauma can reopen historical wounds and both culminate in a scene in which a grieving mother awaits a visit from beyond—a theme reminiscent of a cultural motif identified by the folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu.

Reading Murakami's "Hanalei Bay" as an homage to Mishima's "Death in Midsummer" offers at least two interesting insights. First, it is evident that dynamics first identified by Mishima in 1952, the year the American postwar occupation of Japan officially ended, still ring true over fifty years later in Murakami's 2005 story. While Murakami has been described by some as Ja-

pan's "first genuinely 'post-postwar writer'", reading "Hanalei Bay" in light of "Death in Midsummer" shows us that this is not the case (Rubin 17). Japan's long postwar period continues in his fiction. There is also a message in both stories that the peace and prosperity of postwar Japan comes at a price, that Japan is living on borrowed American credit, and that this situation has serious psychological consequences. In both stories, personal traumas reawaken historical traumas that have lain dormant for a time. Death shatters the illusion of peace and security that is supposed to be the state of postwar Japan.

Second, both stories characterize mourning as a process of waiting, leaving open the question of what might await the grieving person at the end of this process. Both stories include scenes of mourning mothers gazing out at the sea, wondering if they might be able to see their dead child or children one more time. Waiting in these stories is thus not the kind of absurd, modernist waiting of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Instead, it is a waiting grounded in a cultural archetype identified by Orikuchi Shinobu and found in a variety of modern cultural products. In other words, both stories tap into a cultural motif Orikuchi saw as foundational to Japanese spirituality.

The Long Postwar

The plot of Mishima's "Death in Midsummer" revolves around Ikuta Tomoko, a wife and mother on a leisurely visit to A. Beach, near the southern tip of the Izu peninsula. Accompanied by her sister-in-law, Yasue, and her three children, Kiyō, six, Keiko, five, and Katsuo, three, Tomoko is indulging in an extravagance, a beach holiday which is symbolic of Japan's emergence from postwar hardship. She can afford this luxury because her husband, Ikuta Masaru, works as a manager for an American car company, is well paid, and knows how to work the system. Tragedy strikes when the two older

children are swept away by a rip tide and drown, and the aunt, who was looking after them at the time, dies of a heart attack. Tomoko had been resting in their rented cottage, and when she is awakened by the news of the tragedy, she initially believes only her sister-in-law, Yasue, has died. It takes four hours before anyone realises that the two older children are missing, an oversight the narrator explains as the result of "a kind of group psychology" (Mishima "Death in Midsummer" 7). A search for the children begins, and Tomoko sends a telegram to her husband, Masaru, telling him what has happened.

The tragedy of the three deaths is quickly followed by the practical arrangements for the funerals. As the narrator tells us, "A death is always a problem in administration" (12). After this, the story becomes a study in mourning. For Tomoko, thoughts of suicide come and go, but her need to care for her youngest and only surviving child, Katsuo, becomes her sole reason for living. Tomoko is haunted by dark thoughts and once wishes for the death of a child she sees balancing on the edge of a pond. She also begins to hate signs of summer, such as swimsuits in shop windows, which remind her of death. Masaru, for his part, escapes into his work and begins to come home late so as not to have to witness his wife's grief. He also has a brief affair. For Tomoko, however, normality slowly returns. One morning she wakes up happy and realises that it is because, for the first time since the accident, she has not dreamed of the children.

Turning to Murakami's story, a similar pattern emerges in "Hanalei Bay", where the initial shock of learning of a child's death is followed by the mundane but necessary tasks of administration. While the vast majority of Murakami's stories are set in Japan, "Hanalei Bay" is largely set in Hanalei, a large bay to the north of Hawaii's Kaua'i island where Murakami once owned an apartment. Like Mishima's "Death in Midsummer", the story be-

gins with a tragedy, the death of a young surfer named Takashi who is attacked by a shark, loses his leg, panics, and drowns. His mother, Sachi, is informed of the disaster and rushes to Hawaii to identify the body and make the necessary arrangements.

A recurring motif in “Hanalei Bay” is that postwar Japan lives on borrowed American credit. In Mishima’s story, the family’s lifestyle was supported by Masaru’s work for an American automobile company. He had studied English at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and had worked for an American company prior to the war, so he was well positioned to prosper in the American-occupied postwar period. In Murakami’s story, Sachi learned English as a young woman when she lived in America, making her living as a jazz musician. In the immediate aftermath of her son’s death, she is saved time and again by American companies and the convenience of credit. At first, she is unable to find a last-minute flight to Hawaii, but is saved by a United Airlines reservationist who takes pity on her. In Hawaii, she rents a car from Avis, and when it comes time to pay for her son’s cremation, she asks if they take American Express, which they do. This last example is strongly emphasized in the story. First, we have Sachi’s statement to the official handling her son’s death, “I only have American Express” (Murakami “Hanalei Bay” 271). The officer assures her that American Express will be fine, and then we are presented with Sachi’s internal monologue, “Here I am, paying the fee to have my son cremated with an American Express card” (271).

This motif of living on American credit reappears later in the story. Sachi continues to visit Hanalei Bay on the anniversary of her son’s death. On one of these trips, ten years after the tragedy, she meets two young Japanese surfers who are hopelessly naive about the dangers of life in Hawaii and in whom she takes a motherly interest. These young men have little money be-

tween them and plan to sleep on the beach. Sachi warns them that this is not safe and suggests that they rent a room somewhere, insisting that they must have some emergency funds. What they have, it turns out, is a credit card belonging to one of the boys' fathers, which they are not supposed to use unless it is an emergency. This father knows that once they start using the card, it will be impossible for them to stop. Unlike Sachi's American Express card, the boy's card is Diner's Club, but the effect is the same. Far away from home and in a tight spot, they can survive with their American credit card.

A few nights later, the boys prove that the father's fears were justified. Sachi spots them in a restaurant and bar where they are enjoying a meal on the father's credit card. Sachi makes small talk with them and later starts playing the piano in the restaurant while the regular performer is on a break. A drunken ex-marine then approaches Sachi and requests a song. She explains that she is not the paid pianist and declines his request, but things escalate and he becomes belligerent, attacking not only Sachi personally but Japanese people generally: "Tell me something, then, will you? Why aren't you Japanese willing to fight to protect your own country? Why do we have to drag our asses to Iwakuni to keep you guys safe?" (285). This ex-marine feels entitled to his song because postwar Japan continues to live under the umbrella of American military protection.

Returning to Mishima's story, the husband, Masaru, buys a plot for his sister and two children at Tama Reien, a cemetery in western Tokyo, and the family's visit to the cemetery is described in some detail. Tama Cemetery is where Mishima would be interred after his suicide in 1970, and it is interesting to know that Murakami lived near the cemetery at the time of Mishima's death. As a student, Murakami lived next to the golf course once owned by International Christian University, the same university mentioned in the

opening chapter of *A Wild Sheep Chase*, where the narrator and the girl he was with at the time watched the news of Mishima's suicide flashing on a broken television screen. Murakami moved to this area to be close to a girl from his hometown who was attending ICU. This girl would later move back to Kobe and take her own life, and she is said to be the model for the recurring motif of the suicidal girlfriend in Murakami's fiction, such as Naoko in *Noruewei no mori* (*Norwegian Wood*, 1987). ICU's golf course, now Nogawa Park, is right next to Tama Cemetery. If Murakami has read Mishima's "Death in Midsummer", as I believe he has, he would be very familiar with the geography described in this part of the story, an area of personal significance to him.

In both stories, personal tragedy is subtly linked to the tragedy of war. The process of each mother's return to normalcy after tragedy can be read as an allegory for Japan's journey in the postwar period. Normality slowly returns, but beneath the surface there is still a deep sense of loss and even a desire to reconnect with the dead. Forgetting, what in the national context would be historical amnesia, is also an important part of the process. Part of what makes the tragedy difficult for Tomoko to process is the number of people who died: three. In her mind, the death of one person would have been more understandable—after all, accidents happen. Thousands of deaths, on the other hand, are also understandable, especially for someone familiar with war. Three deaths, on the other hand, feels unnatural. As the narrator describes, "It was too large a number for one family, too small a number for society" (Mishima "Death in Midsummer" 19). In the background of Murakami's Hawaiian setting, of course, is Pearl Harbor and the memory of Japan's war in the Pacific. In both stories, the people of postwar Japan live comfortable and largely carefree lives, but on borrowed American credit. Death pierces their postwar amnesia for a time, and they are subtly

reminded of Japan's traumatic wartime history and its lingering aftermath.

Waiting

Both short stories end with the motif of waiting at the water's edge for a visit from beyond. In Mishima's story, normalcy slowly returns to the family in stops and starts. Tomoko dresses up for and attends a concert. She takes up sewing. She becomes pregnant again and has another child. As the narrator tells us, Tomoko "lost the habit of remembering, and it no longer seemed strange that the tears failed to come at memorial services or visits to the cemetery" (25). Then, two years after the tragedy, she suddenly announces to Masaru that she wants to visit A. Beach. Although Masaru hesitates at first, he eventually agrees and they make the necessary arrangements. At the height of summer, the family travels to the same inn and visits the same beach where the tragedy occurred. The story ends with the now family of four standing on the shore. Tomoko looks out at the ocean, and Masaru wants to ask her what she is waiting for. In the end, however, he does not ask the question; the narrator tells us, "He thought he knew without asking" (29). Masaru clings to Katsuo's hand, their surviving child from the accident, sensing that something ominous may be afoot. In Murakami's story, the two young Japanese surfers have seen the one-legged Japanese surfer, demonstrating that this is possible, even if Sachi is not yet ready to do the same. In both cases, this scene of waiting while gazing out at the ocean has come at the end of a long process of mourning. It has come after a return to normality. It suggests that underneath the peaceful normality of postwar Japanese society is still a strong desire to be reunited with the dead.

Waiting, in these stories, is part of the mourning process. In Murakami's story, Sachi, like Tomoko, must go through various stages of grief as she slowly adjusts to her new reality without the son she has always loved but

not always liked. On her annual trips to Hawaii, she spends most of her time gazing out at the ocean, just like Tomoko, waiting. One day, the two young Japanese surfers she has befriended ask Sachi if she has seen the one-legged Japanese surfer. She is surprised. She has never seen such a person. She considers various possibilities about what this means, and finally concludes that the two boys have seen the ghost of her dead son, something she appears to be unqualified to do.

When Sachi had first identified her son's body, the Japanese-American officer, Sakata, who had attended her had asked her not to hate their island. Unlike death from war, he had explained, in the case of her son, there was nobody to hate:

“Whatever the ‘noble causes’ involved, people die in war from the anger and hatred on both sides. But Nature doesn’t have ‘sides.’ I know this is a painful experience for you, but try to think of it like this: your son returned to the cycle of Nature; it had nothing to do with any ‘causes’ or anger or hatred.” (Murakami, 272)

Sachi is unable to see her dead son, we might conclude, because she is unable to accept this fact. She wants someone or something to blame. Her return to the island year after year is an attempt to come to terms with this. The story ends with Sachi continuing to play her piano and thinking about the three weeks she will spend in Hanalei Bay each year at the end of fall. She thinks about the waves, the trees, the clouds, and the birds in the sky, but most of all, “she thinks about what surely must await her there” (290).

On the other hand, the ability of the two young Japanese surfers to accept nature as it is and see the one-legged Japanese surface seems to be partly related to their generational distance from Sachi. This generation gap is

played up throughout the story, such as when Sachi tells them they are no longer in Elvis' Hawaii, and they think she means Elvis Costello, not Elvis Presley. Later, Sachi meets one of the young surfers at a Starbucks in Roppongi, but he is a very different young man from the one she met in Hawaii. He is about to graduate from university and is looking for a job, so he has gotten a haircut and is wearing nice clothes. He also has a young woman with him whom he is trying to make his girlfriend. This young man asks Sachi how to make this happen and she kindly gives him three pieces of advice: "one, shut up and listen to what she has to say; two, tell her you like what she's wearing; and three, treat her to really good food" (288). The young man immediately asks if he can write down this advice, explaining that he is like a chicken: "three steps, and my mind's a blank" (288). Miyawaki Toshifumi sees this act of writing down Sachi's advice as a sign of the young man's seriousness—his strong desire not to forget—in contrast to Sachi and her generation (39). The recovery of Tomoko in Mishima's story and Sachi in Murakami's story is predicated on their ability to forget, but Murakami's story suggests that the next generation, while in many ways naive about the larger world they live in, at least has a desire to try and remember things.

Marebito

So what awaits Tomoko at A. Beach and Sachi at Hanalei Bay? Orikuchi Shinobu, one of Japan's most famous folklorists, wrote about the land of dead, which he called *tokoyo*, located far across the ocean. He also described how, on special occasions, *marebito*, or rare visitors, could make the long journey to visit the living who have been waiting for them. Orikuchi saw the origin of *matsuri*, or festivals, in the verb *matsu*: to wait. He saw *matsuri* as occasions when waiting could end and people could welcome special visi-

tors from across the ocean who had come to visit them for a short time. He saw evidence of this common cultural motif in numerous *matsuri* throughout Japan.

The *marebito* motif continues to be reimagined in contemporary Japanese culture. Andō Reiji, an expert on Orikuchi, sees the little people who appear in Murakami's 2009–2010 novel *IQ84* as inheritors of the *marebito* motif (14). Yoshiko Okuyama sees the gods that appear in the boat scene in Miyazaki Hayao's *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*) as examples of *marebito* (102). And Ōsawa Masachi sees the ending of Mishima's "Death in Midsummer" as indebted to the idea of *marebito* (182–183). Mishima was well aware of Orikuchi's work, and he even used Orikuchi as the model for a character in one of his short stories. Andō Reiji's writing suggests that Murakami is also well aware of Orikuchi's work.

Of course, both short stories end before we see whether or not the *marebito* will appear, but in Tomoko's and Sachi's waiting, we see a desire for such a visit. While *marebito* are, strictly speaking, gods rather than the spirits of the dead, the final scene of Tomoko looking out to sea and waiting taps into what Orikuchi saw as a central archetype of Japanese spirituality. Orikuchi was a man who had suffered his own personal losses, and in a famous account he describes his own sense of longing for the Land of the Dead, which he experienced while looking out at the ocean while traveling in Kumano. He writes, "I couldn't help but feel as if out there, beyond the edge of the waves, was the home to which my soul belonged ... I couldn't help but wonder if those feelings didn't appear as an atavistic return of some feelings of nostalgia that had once fanned up in the hearts of my ancestors" (209). Scholars today argue about how much Orikuchi was a myth-discoverer and how much a mythmaker (Stockdale 243–244), but in any case, in the motif of waiting by the ocean's edge, longing for a visit from a special visi-

tor from the realm of the dead, his experience and theory are very much in line with the endings of both Mishima's and Murakami's short stories.

Conclusion

Fifty-three years after Mishima published "Death in Midsummer", still one of his most beloved short stories, Murakami published a tribute, "Hanalei Bay", which shows that many of the questions and feelings Mishima wrestled with as the American occupation of Japan was coming to an end in 1952 were still relevant in the Japan of 2005. Both stories begin with tragedies, followed by formalities, and then a long process of mourning. In both stories, mothers who have lost their children wait for some kind of visit from beyond the grave. Their personal tragedies and the process of mourning can also be read as allegories for the postwar mourning of Japan as a country, a process in which forgetting is an important element, while Murakami's story suggests that this may be changing among the younger generations. At the end of their long mourning process, both mothers are still waiting for something at the water's edge, and if we are to follow the thinking of Orikuchi, both stories tap into an archetype of deep cultural significance.

At the same time, the subtext of both stories suggests that Japan's dependence on America in the postwar period has been problematic, and that while it is possible to live on borrowed credit for a time, one eventually has to pay what is due. What makes this particularly interesting in Murakami's case is that he is often seen as a writer at home in American culture and not overly critical of Japan's postwar relationship with America. A comparison of these two short stories shows that Murakami actually shares many of Mishima's concerns and is not unaware of the psychological costs of Japan's heavy postwar dependence on America.

And what a comparison of these two short stories also reveals is a posi-

tive example of Mishima's influence on Murakami—an influence he vehemently denies. While many other examples of this influence are negative in nature, “Hanalei Bay” is a story that pays tribute to “Death in Midsummer”, demonstrating that even an author you viscerally despise can occasionally write something you like.

Notes

- 1) This essay is based on a paper presented at the 25th NZASIA Biennial International Conference held at the University of Canterbury, 29 Nov – 1 Dec, 2023.
- 2) The Japanese title of *A Wild Sheep Chase* is *Hitsuji o meguru bōken*, which could be translated more literally as *An Adventure Surrounding Sheep*. Thus, the titles of both Mishima's and Murakami's stories share the word *bōken* (adventure).

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