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A Study of Yukio Mishima : The Aesthetics of Closure in His Novels

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My objective in this paper¹⁾, is to make clear the basic structure of some of Mishima's works and probe their possible relation to his death. I have to admit, however, that both in Japan and abroad most of the interest taken in Mishima is, more or less, based on his ritual suicide in 1970, while others hate him for exactly the same reason, sometimes without even reading his works. Surprisingly enough, even professional literary critics find themselves influenced by Mishima's political involvement to such an extent that they cannot make a fair assessment of his literary achievements. This offers mute testimony to the fact that no one can be free from the attraction of the abnormal and bizarre.

In his later years, Mishima was the most famous and controversial figure in Japan, not only as a great novelist who had been a nominee for the Nobel Prize for literature three times, but also as a man of extreme political convictions²⁾. When he died according to the traditional ritualistic mode at the Ichigaya Headquarters of the Self-Defense Army, the ordinary person's first impression was, I suppose, simply one of "absurdity" or rather "stupidity." How could he believe that soldiers, popularly believed to be hardly more than mere office workers, would rise and die for the sake of the patriotism Mishima championed? It is easy to say that his act was a complete anachronism, but what is most striking is the tremendous imbalance between his literary works and his political action.

In Mishima the novelist, you will find a logically constructed, elaborate plot, and a clarity of style in all of his novels; and some are definitely informed with an "art for art's sake" attitude. Understandably, since the death of Mishima, not only literary critics but also scholars in many other

fields, including psychoanalysts, have attempted to explain the true motive of his suicide and consequently we have a lot of different theories. As I do not want to waste time by giving an endless list of the theories, I will mention some of the typical ones. First of all, there is the theory that Mishima died simply out of patriotic passion and therefore as a warrior (samurai). Most people who insist on this theory belong to the right-wing and I think most scholars think it untenable. A second theory has it that his death was motivated by anxiety about his exhausted talent. And those who attach much importance to his homosexuality insist that the main factors of his suicide were his masochistic feelings and an erotic fascination with death, and that he therefore committed a "lovers' suicide" with his young aide Morita, who beheaded Mishima³). Still another theory holds that Mishima acted out his aesthetics in his life, not in his work. I do not think that any of these theories is good enough to accommodate the reality of Mishima's death. Nor do I believe there is a decisive theory which contains any exhaustive explanation of his death.

I am, however, intersted in the opinion that Mishima's death, which was carefully premeditated, is part of his work. This is because some of the endings of his novels seem to be symbolic of what happened to Mishima at the last moment in his life. The idea that death, especially by suicide, means destroying everything one has built up in one's life seems to figure in a number of Mishima's novels. I think that the last scene in *The Decay of the Angel*, the last book of his tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*. is a relatively typical example. In the climax of the novel, the aged Honda visits Gesshuji Temple for the first time in 60 years to see and talk with the Abbess about Kiyooki Matsugae, his closest friend, from his youth. Matsugae had deeply fallen in love with the Abbess, Satoko (her lay name), and died at the age of 20. Honda is stunned, however, by the Abbess's remark that she has never heard the name Kiyooki Matsugae and the attendant suggestion that there never was such a person⁴). Here we must remember that the first book of the tetralogy, *Spring Snow* gives some very impressive details of the love affair between Kiyooki and Satoko. Honda is acutually a third person narrator who records not only what happens to these two but what

happens to the other characters in the other three books of the tetralogy. So in the nihilistic climax of *The Decay of The Angel*, Honda is forced to say, "If there was no Kiyooki, then there was no Isao (the main character in *Runaway Horses*). There was no Ying Chan (the main character in *The Temple of the Dawn*), and who knows, there has been no I.5)" Kiyooki Matsugae's "reality" to Honda serves as the essential matrix of the tetralogy without which the other parts would become meaningless, so we may say that Mishima denies the basic plot in the last scene, while giving an impression that everything which is thought to exist is just an illusion. This notion of human existence more or less reminds us of the Buddhist concept of the Emptiness of the world. Donald Keene says about this ending, "At the end of the entire work, Mishima accepting of 'consciousness only,' wipes out with one masterful stroke all that he has described in 2,000 pages." In short, Mishima destroys the whole elaborate structure he has built up in the tetralogy, and this controversial ending is all the more effective and impressive because *The Sea of Fertility* is a very long novel that interposes an interval of 60 years between events in the first volume and the reunion of Honda and Satoko. It is possible to say that this ending is only natural, that is, understandable in terms of Mishima's psychological motivation, if one believes that on the very day of his death he had written the final lines of his tetralogy, though Donald Keene notes that when he met Mishima on August 12, 1970, Mishima told him he had already finished the last lines of *The Sea of Fertility*. At any rate, I think that it is no exaggeration to say that what might be called the impulse to deny the basic structure of the story is, to some extent, characteristic of Mishima novels.

As another example of the same process, I would like to take up *The Play of Beasts* which was written in 1961, nine years before Mishima's death. Unfortunately no English translation of this novel is available, and there have been relatively few literary critics either in Japan or abroad who discuss it. In my opinion, however, this novel is one of Mishima's masterpieces. It is written in an extremely self-conscious style, and uses brilliant metaphors, though they are sometimes idiosyncratic, which makes translation especially difficult. Furthermore, unusually philosophical and even metaphys-

ical conversations are set within a plot that might even be called trashy, quite similar to the plot of a third-rate popular novel. This imbalance may in fact be one of the novel's premeditated effects.

The setting of *The Play of Beasts* is a small fishing village named Iro on the Izu Peninsular in Japan. Mishima must have gone to the village by himself and studied it intensively, because it offers many detailed descriptions of the actual geographical features and buildings in that village. It is well known that Mishima often visited the places he had chosen for his locales, before beginning to write a novel. This may be contrary to the popular belief that such an imaginative writer as Mishima would never do such a thing. It will later become clear that this attitude of Mishima's toward the composition of novels is very suggestive, especially when we think of his special brand of nihilism.

Anyway this novel is, as it were, a distorted type of love triangle story. The heroine Yuko is married to Ippai, who is a dilettante of literature, sometimes contributing to literary magazines, though he is also the wealthy owner of a pottery shop in Ginza. This husband is a playboy who enjoys flirting with other women. His excuse for flirting, however, is a little different from that of the other men in the world. He insists that he flirts just to make his wife jealous of him because he believes she never experiences feelings of jealousy. Then Koji, a young student, who works part-time at Ippai's pottery shop, is attracted to Yuko, merely because he feels sorry for her, or rather, because he sympathizes with her unhappiness. One day, Koji takes Yuko to the apartment where her husband keeps another woman. It is not easy to tell the motivation for his action in specific terms, but Koji seems filled with hate toward Ippai, Yuko, and himself. And when Koji sees Yuko beaten by her husband in front of Ippai's second woman, Koji gets mad and strikes Ippai on the head with a wrench. Ippai is seriously injured and becomes a mental cripple, completely losing his powers of speech, while Koji is arrested and sent to prison. This is the first half of the plot, and the events are not so unusual, at least in terms of probability. However, as the story goes on, we find that the development of the plot goes beyond the normal chain of cause and effect in human life, but,

nevertheless, is still filled with a very concrete and realistic atmosphere.

Yuko decides to take care of both her crippled husband and Koji as well once he has completed his sentence, and two years after the tragic incident the three characters begin to live together and start a new and unusual life in Iro village. However, catastrophe soon visits them again. One day Koji and Yuko strangle Ippei and insist to the police that they killed Ippei only because Ippei asked them to, despite the fact that Ippei was already a mental cripple and did not seem able to express any volition at all. Naturally their excuse is not accepted by the authorities, and at the trial, Yuko is sentenced to life imprisonment, while Koji receives the death penalty and is actually hanged.

In this novel, too, what is most striking and shocking is the ending in the last chapter. Before I enter into the problem of the ending, however, I would like to point out how Yuko's facial expressions are described in this novel. It is clear that Mishima attempts to make the faces of the characters look like Noh masks. This is especially true of the description of Yuko's face which helps the readers feel the ambiguous and fascinating nature of Yuko's presence. As we read on, we will be attracted to this mysterious woman, precisely because we cannot understand why she acts the way she does. Actually she does not act for any obvious reason. Nevertheless, there still remains a very impressive image of a woman who is attractive, capricious, and forlorn. However, all this is, again, turned upside-down in the climax of the last chapter. In the last chapter, there appears a person an "I", who seems to be the author Mishima himself. This objective "I" studies folklore and visits Izu Peninsula for the purpose of collecting materials for his study. However, at a temple which he happens to visit, he hears from the priest a story about a case of murder which actually happened in the village. Thus, the unnamed narrator "I" is assimilated into the story which the reader already knows. The priest is well acquainted with and respected by Yuko and Koji, and perceiving the narrator's interest in the murder case, asks him to visit Yuko in prison and give her a picture of the tombstones that have been set up for Yuko, Koji, and Ippei. Here the narrator learns that, at the request of Yuko the three tombstones have been erected side by

side against the strong opposition of the villagers. Agreeing to this request, the narrator visits the prison in Tochigi prefecture. (This is a famous prison for women which really exists.) Before he meets Yuko, he gives full play to his imagination with regard to Yuko's beauty from the story he has heard from the priest. And it may be said that readers are also expecting at this point that his imagination will be confirmed by Yuko's actual beauty. However, what actually happens in an interview room in the prison is completely contrary to what is expected. Yuko is neither beautiful nor even merely attractive, but quite plain. To the narrator, Yuko seems unmistakably "not young," and her features seem common and dull partly because of her thin lips⁶). And I think it is not very difficult to interpret the concluding scene as evocative of the effect that Noh masks can have on a viewer—a quite varied range of impressions can be achieved just by changing the angle at which they are seen. Anyway this ending is quite similar to that of *The Sea of Fertility* in that Mishima seems to have been unable to overcome the impulse to make meaningless everything he has built up in the novel, just as children scatter the blocks they have painstakingly stacked up. I do not think it can be denied that this is a kind of writing technique which Mishima uses consciously. Mishima once said in an interview with a literary critic, that he did not begin to write a drama until he had decided on its last line, and it seems to me that this remark is sometimes true of even his novels. At least it can be said that Mishima is very sensitive toward the endings of his novels.

I think, however, this impulse, or more properly this technique, should be interpreted as connected with nihilism, deep-rooted in his consciousness and subconsciousness. Indeed, in his remarks about *The Sea of Fertility*, Mishima refers to "the image of cosmic nihilism" suggested in that novel. And it is no coincidence that, in the last scenes of these two novels, cicada's voices in the abundant sunshine of summer are contrasted with the stillness of the temple garden on the one hand and the deep quiet of a woman's prison on the other. Some may find this reminiscent of one of Basho's most famous haiku, but the image Mishima's novels evoke is entirely different, notwithstanding the apparent similarity of the setting. In my opinion, this has

something to do with the fact that these novels, contrary to the general belief that Mishima is an anti-realistic novelist, express very concrete situations and feelings, while describing actually existing landscapes and buildings. So Mishima's nihilism is paradoxically based on reality. That is, it is the nihilism of someone who belongs to this world, and is not connected with any religious feelings. Of course, it is true that Mishima had a very deep knowledge of Japanese classics and Buddhism, and such an intellectual background is, more or less, reflected in his novels. For example, in *The Play of Beasts*, as I already mentioned, the facial expressions of the characters are clearly compared to Noh masks, and the development of the plot itself is similar to a Noh play not only because it deals with the theme of jealousy but also because the subplot introduced by the appearance of the "I" in the last chapter is joined to the main story⁷⁾. *The Sea of Fertility* is also a story based on *The Tale of the Captain of Hamamatsu*⁸⁾, a story about dreams and reincarnation, as Mishima himself says in the postscript to *Spring Snow*⁹⁾. Therefore, to some extent, it may be helpful to the understanding of this novel to compare it with the Buddhist concept of "death and rebirth." At the same time, it should be noted that setting for both *The Sea of Fertility* and *The Play of Beasts* is contemporary Japan, and they both depict the tragic vacuum of the spirit that, for Mishima, was occasioned by the defeat of Japan. The imagery often used in his novels is connected with the nihilistic void aroused by Japan's devastated landscape on August, 15, 1945, when Mishima believed every value had collapsed¹⁰⁾. This void is, to be sure, commonly felt by all Japanese, but has a special meaning for Mishima. I do not doubt that he earnestly wished for the end of the world in 1945. Nobody can imagine how such a self-conscious man as Mishima could tolerate the sense of cowardice he experienced when he was not drafted into the army because of his frail health. I do not want to emphasize Mishima's inferiority complex toward his weak body, as most literary critics do, but it must be admitted that his obsession with the military came from this unbearable experience. In that sense, I believe, the description¹¹⁾ in *Confessions of a Mask* tells the truth.

Therefore, the shadow of death in the two novels, despite their apparently

metaphysical nature, arose from Mishima's concrete experiences during and after the war. And this is most distinctly reflected in the structure of the plots, especially their endings. Here we should remember the reality principle that we can overcome traumatic experiences by proceeding on the premise that all preceding events were merely dreams. Mishima seems to have attempted to apply this principle to his works in an unusually negative and paradoxical way. The endings of *The Sea of Fertility* and *The Play of Beasts* force us to feel that we are looking into the depth of Emptiness, precisely because we know what Mishima has built up is based on the reality of the ordinary world. As I already mentioned, in almost all of his novels Mishima uses concrete place names and personal names and seldom writes in the style of "in the town of X" or "Mr. Y." All this is a prerequisite device for realizing an effective catastrophe in the climax of his novels. The endings of his novels sometimes remind us that it is not the nightmares we have in our sleep that really scare us, but the sense that everyday reality exists only as if it were a dream. Mishima was very conscious of this principle and these novels in particular were intended to evoke such an attitude toward the very nature of reality. So we can summarize more concretely as follows.

1. The ending of *The Sea of Fertility* and *The Play of Beasts* has a parallel relation to Mishima's actual life and is suggestive of a nihilism based on rather personal motives.
2. In this sense, despite apparently imaginative nature of the story, these two novels contain some important factors related to Mishima's own life and death.

However, I wish to stress that in this paper I have only suggested a possible correspondence between Mishima's death and the aesthetic principle he used to pattern his stories. Needless to say, I do not pretend to know the single correct motive for his death. But if a personal comment may be allowed, I have to confess that I feel tempted to recognize a similar structure in other Mishima novels as well. For example, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and *Confessions of a Mask* seem to have similar endings in the sense of leading to a failure of expectations. However, another paper would

be necessary to apply the analysis used here to those novels.

Notes :

- 1) This paper was originally prepared as the manuscript for a speech made at Stanford University at the request of the Center for East Asian Studies. And it has been considerably revised for presentation here.
- 2) In *The Defense of Culture* (1968), Mishima argued that the emperor was the sole "source and guarantor" of Japanese culture, and therefore defending the emperor was equal to defending this culture and constituted ultimate form of self-defense.
- 3) Mishima organized a private army called the Shield Society, and it was the three members of the Shield Society, including Morita, that went to the Ichigaya Headquarters of the Self-Defense Army with Mishima. It is true that some people suspect Mishima and Morita had a homosexual relationship, but attaching too much importance to Mishima's personal sex life does not seem to help to explain why he acted the way he did.
- 4) "But I fear I have never heard the name Kiyooki Matsugae. Don't you suppose, Mr. Honda, that there never was such a person." (Yukio Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel* trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York : Washington Square Press, 1971), p. 245.)
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- 6) "Kemono no Tawamure," in *Mishima Yukio Zensha*, v. 13, pp. 405-406.
- 7) The traveler, the priest, and the temple are typical settings for some Noh plays, especially for *mugen-Noh*. For further details regarding this aspect, see Konishi Jinichi's brilliant analysis of *The Beasts of Play* in "Mishima Bungaku he no Koten no Suijaku : *Kemono no Tawamure to Motomezuka*," *Kokubungaku Kaishaku to Kanshō*, Aug. 1968, pp. 26-30.
- 8) It is thought that this novel was written in the twelve century by the Daughter of Takasue Sugawara. The original title was *Mitsu no Hamamatsu*.
- 9) "Houjou no Umi ni tsuite," in *Mishima Yukio Zensha*, v. 34, p. 51.
- 10) Mishima describes in several essays and novels how he felt when the war ended. Most famous is the following passage taken from Meredith Weatherby's translation of *Confessions of a Mask* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1970), p. 218 : It was not the reality of defeat. Instead, for me—for me alone—it meant that fearful days were begining, It meant that, whether I would or no, and despite everything that had deceived me into believing such a day would never come, the very next day I must begin that "everyday life" of a member of human society. How the mere words made me tremble.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 138.