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Action as Fitting Match to Knowledge

Language and Symbol in Mishima's *Kinkakuji*

by DAVID POLLACK

IF the end of World War II was, by all accounts, a turning-point in the life of Mishima Yukio 三島由起夫 as it was for millions of Japanese, for few of the others can it be said to have proven the same source of dismay. The country as a whole may have welcomed the end of the fire-bombings, but for Mishima it was apparently a sort of private disaster. 'While Tokyo burned,' John Nathan has written, 'he had managed to feel a correspondence between his private, internal world and external reality. . . . But now that the fires were out and death was no longer a reality in the air, the dream that had permitted him to believe that he was symbolic of the age had vanished, and with it his confidence in his genius.'¹

Mizoguchi, the young acolyte at the Golden Temple who is the central figure of *Kinkakuji* 金閣寺, 1956, seems to speak for Mishima in similar terms at Japan's announcement of surrender on 15 August 1945:

The war ended. All that I was thinking about, as I listened in the factory to the Imperial Rescript announcing the termination of hostilities, was the Golden Temple. . . . To describe the situation properly, I should say that I was standing on one side and the Golden Temple on the other. . . . 'The *bond* between the Golden Temple and myself has been cut,' I thought. 'Now my vision that the Golden Temple and I were living in the same world has broken down. Now I shall return to my previous condition, but it will be even more hopeless than before. A condition in which I exist on one side and beauty on the other. A condition that will never improve so long as the world endures.'²

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¹ John Nathan, *Mishima, A Biography*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1974, p. 63.

² Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, tr. by Ivan Morris, Berkeley

Medallion Books, New York, 1959, pp. 82-83 & 84; Ishikawa Jun 石川淳 *et al.*, ed., *Mishima Yukio Zenshū* 三島由起夫全集, Shinchōsha, 1973, vol. 10, pp. 70 & 72. The emphasis ('bond') is found in the original Japanese text.

All subsequent references to *Kinkakuji* are made to these two volumes, indicated by paired page numbers.

‘A condition in which I exist on one side and beauty on the other. . . .’—perhaps in all of Mishima’s work there is no clearer emblem of the destruction of the world of the *samurai* 侍, the word split forever into two isolated and meaningless fragments, now but imperfect distortions of their ideal state, that had depended on one another for their very meaning: ‘man’ 人 stranded on one side of the schism, the ‘temple’ 寺 and everything beautiful on the other. The idea of the significance of the samurai that lay in the bond, now sundered, that had once united man and his beliefs, lies at the core of the novel’s ideational universe; informed by Mishima’s own idiosyncratic iconography, this central emblem ramifies outward as the work’s primary integrating structure.

The elements constituting that iconography are by now well known to the English-reading public, largely through Nathan’s brilliant biographical study. At its core is the equation of beauty, love, and death, a triad that Mishima understood as destiny: what was truly beautiful, and therefore capable of love, must perish or lose that beauty forever. This same equation demands the death of the once enigmatic and alluring sailor in *The Sailor who Fell From Grace With the Sea* (*Gogo no Eikō* 午後の曳航, 1963) who becomes safely landlocked into a mundane shore existence. The Golden Temple, too, having outlived its beautiful destiny of a fiery demise in the wartime bombing that failed to materialize in Kyoto, is doomed to destruction by the same inexorable logic. In having outlived its glorious end, the temple has become like the samurai who has shamefully failed to perish in battle and whose continued existence is an affront to a cherished ideal.

While thus unusually successful in creating an emblem or metaphor for his pervasive sense of fragmentation—the sort of vital and informing metaphor that often seems to mark the difference between sanity and insanity—Mishima was scarcely unique in feeling that the old values had disappeared forever in the new postwar Japan. Nor was he the only writer to produce a character—and here the pun is used advisedly—whose continued existence in the postwar era stands as a testimony of a Japan that ought, properly speaking, to have died.

One thinks for example of the pathetic Shingo 信吾 in Kawabata’s *Sound of the Mountain* (*Yama no Oto* 山の音, serialized between 1949 and 1954), whose very name, ‘faith in myself’, is the ironic emblem of some seventy million individuals whose collective faith in themselves was all but annihilated in the war. The name Shingo is a rebus deconstructing the idea of ‘speech’ 語 as an alienation of ‘man’s words’ 人言 from his ‘self’ 吾. Our first view of Shingo, as he fumbles grotesquely for a name, is of a man literally bereft of words, the fragmentation of whose self has begun with the loss of memory that deprives him of speech. To fill the void, the role of memory (‘prompter’, *kiokugakari* 記憶係) is taken up more or less willingly by those around him, especially by his son Shūichi 修一, whose name represents the attempt to ‘repair the unity’ of fragmented language.

In *Kinkakuji*, however, Mizoguchi is unique in his determination not to go on living in a world in which the values of the samurai are swallowed up forever in the irretrievable gulf that the new age has opened between man and his beautiful destiny of death. The failure of the temple to 'die' in the war has also deprived the man of his dream of beauty, a dream that can now be realized only by 'killing' the temple. With the obliteration of the more recalcitrant term of the equation, the chasm separating man and beauty will cease to exist. Once he has achieved the destruction of beauty, however, Mizoguchi is instead surprised to find himself liberated from his obsession: unable at the end to perish in the flames (he is locked out of the third floor of the temple, a Zen meditation room, symbolic perhaps of his failure to attain a state of enlightenment in Zen terms), he realizes in the final sentence of the novel that at last he is free to go on living: 'I wanted to live.'³

For Mishima, the question of the ultimate meaning of life led inexorably to the problem of what one *does* about beliefs. By personal example as well as in his writings, his response was that the existentially valid life meant, as it meant for the European existentialists, taking the responsibility of choice into one's own hands. Mishima's response to the challenge of the existentialist dilemma was neither the fashionable imitation of continental Nihilism of a Dazai Osamu 太宰治, nor the retreat into the aesthetics of the past and the anesthetics of exotic sex of a Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 in his early and late periods (in whose writings Nagai Kafū 永井荷風 was to find 'a profound and mysterious beauty born of carnal terror').⁴ Mishima's contempt for the random senselessness of the nihilist act was balanced by his scorn for *any* fashionable intellectual pose that denied the ultimate significance of existential choice in action itself. 'Knowing without acting is not sufficiently knowing'—so he had quoted the famous dictum of the Chinese philosopher Wang Yang-ming 王陽明, whose thought found its Japanese apotheosis in the School of Yōmeigaku 陽明学 (*Yang-ming*).⁵

In Japanese tradition the existential act of taking into one's own hands responsibility for one's own existence usually ends in suicide, the murder of oneself; in Western tradition, to the contrary, it generally ends in the murder of another—even if that act leads, as it inevitably must if it is to be 'tragic', to one's own physical or moral death. The examples of Shakespeare's Macbeth, of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, or of Camus's Meursault, come to mind, men who confirm their own existence by the act of taking another's.

Mishima simultaneously alludes to this tradition and rejects it when his central character, the pathologically alienated Mizoguchi, takes a copy of a novel

³ p. 285; p. 274.

⁴ Nagai Kafū 永井荷風, 'Tanizaki Jun-ichirō Shi no Sakuhin' 谷崎潤一郎氏の作品, in *Kafū Zenshū* 荷風全集, Iwanami, 1963, 13, p.

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⁵ Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure*, New American Library, New York, 1975, pp. 183 & 404, n. 8.12.

titled in Ivan Morris's translation 'Crime and Punishment' along to an assignation with a prostitute, a visit that is part of his careful preparations for setting fire to the Golden Temple. We are startled to discover that the novel is not Dostoevsky's; rather, it is by one 'Bequaria', 'an Italian criminal lawyer of the eighteenth century.'⁶

Some emendation of Morris's translation is necessary at this point. The book in question is *Dei Delitti e della Pene*, translated into English in 1880 as *Crimes and Punishments*, by the prominent Italian penologist (more accurate a translation of *keihōgakusha* 刑法学者 than 'criminal lawyer') Cesare Bonesana, Marchese di Beccaria, 1738-1794. Published in 1764 when the author was only twenty-six years old, this work has been called the most influential volume on the reform of criminal justice ever written. A typical product of Enlightenment thought, the book argued the utilitarian concept of the greatest good for the greatest number and criticized the use of torture and the death penalty. This is apparently why Mizoguchi finds the book 'to be a sort of *table d'hôte* dinner consisting of standard helpings of enlightenment and rationalism,' and, failing to find there what he had hoped for, reads only a few pages before discarding the book as useless. We should note that he brings it along to his tryst only because he thinks that 'the girl might possibly be interested in the title.'⁷

Indeed, whether such a man or work actually existed or not is almost beside the point: Mishima probably realized that nearly everyone would recognize the title and almost no one the author. As he was to do later in his tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* (*Hōjō no Umi* 豊饒の海), Mishima explores Western legal tradition here in order finally to dismiss it as alien to the Japanese spirit in its inability to deal with anything other than cold, unfeeling reason. He reduces the idea of murder to something that is merely the function of a pair of meaningless Western legal abstractions, 'crime' and 'punishment', that can then be dismissed as unrelated to Mizoguchi's concerns.

In the end, however, Mizoguchi's contemplated deed is unrelated to Raskolnikov's as well. The earlier Italian work had certainly influenced the Russian novelist in the sense that Dostoevsky reinterpreted Enlightenment ideas in terms of what he felt to be valid for the Russian preoccupation with the soul. As a rationalist, however, Beccaria would have cared little about the possibility of redemption through suffering; and, as a Japanese, Mishima cares just as little about redemption and suffering as about reason. Unlike *Crime and Punishment* or *The Stranger*, *Kinkakuji* has no trial scene, for Mizoguchi's salvation is to be achieved through action alone, and apart from

⁶ p. 252; p. 242.

⁷ p. 253; p. 242. The usual translation of the title of Dostoevsky's work is *Tsumi to Bat-*

su 罪と罰; Beccaria's is translated with the more scholarly sounding title of *Hanzai to Keibatsu* 犯罪と刑罰.

the simple equation of salvation and action there is no further lesson to be learned. Far from ensuring the moral death of the soul and its eventual rebirth, Mizoguchi's deed itself guarantees his liberation; by having committed it, he finds the peace with himself that Raskolnikov and Meursault are denied.

If there were any reason to translate a personal name—a procedure that cannot always be recommended—the 'Yang-ming' in the name of the philosophical school of Yōmeigaku would emerge in English as 'the sun's brilliance'. Paradoxically, Mishima included this school of thought in what he called in an interview with Henry Scott-Stokes the 'dark side' of the Japanese mind, the side that the Westerner simply could not or would not comprehend or accept.⁸ To the corrupt 'brilliance' of the Golden Pavilion in *Kinkakuji*, Mishima opposes the 'darkness' of this paradoxically destructive but life-affirming philosophy. That one must prevail over the other is a further paradox: only in the darkest night of this philosophy, in the destructive act of arson itself, does the 'brilliant light' of this drab temple, whose gold leaf had long since tarnished and peeled, become, if but for a brief moment, reality.

A central and paradoxical opposition of light and darkness is present from the start of *Kinkakuji*. The novel's opening scene is set in the village of Yura, the home town of the central figure Mizoguchi, where the brilliance of the setting sun perpetually alternates with the gloom of the rainy sky. The story develops with Mizoguchi's revelations about his childhood—the sort of pathologically sensitive observations that are so common in Mishima's writings. Darkness as a symbol is emphasized even in the name of his mother's relative, one Kurai 倉井 (whose name puns on the word for 'darkness'), who in a particularly repulsive scene stealthily enjoys sexual intercourse with Mizoguchi's mother while his sick father covers the boy's eyes so that he cannot see.⁹ With this as his background, we are quite ready to accept the fact that Mizoguchi grew up a stutterer who finds 'brilliance' even in his schoolmates' cruel laughter at his frustrated attempts to speak in the stammer that stands perpetually between him and action. He learns early to find in anything brilliant only an impediment to action.

The conflict between light and darkness in Mizoguchi's life reaches a decisive point during an unsanctioned trip he takes as a young acolyte in the Golden Temple to his bleak hometown of Yura, the 'source' of all his problems. It is here, in the primal leaden gloom of a gray river that empties into an even grayer sea, that the idea of burning the temple takes shape as a 'flicker' that

⁸ Henry Scott-Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*, Dell, New York, 1974, p. 24.

Mishima also evoked the 'darkness' of the Japanese interpretation of Yōmeigaku in his 1970 essay, '*Kakumei no Tetsugaku to shite no Yōmeigaku* 革命の哲学としての陽明学: 'As

something that definitely was uncongenial to Europeanization, it was shoved to the back of the closet as unenlightened, Asiatic, benighted, disgusting, ugly, contemptible—something we wouldn't want foreigners to see.' *Zenshū*, 34, p. 450.

⁹ p. 74; pp. 62-63.

comes to 'gleam' with a 'light' of its own.¹⁰ The steady opposition of light and darkness thereafter builds inexorably to the conflagration of the temple itself. As the book ends, the arsonist Mizoguchi sits calmly down to light a cigarette and observe the results of his handiwork.

In an important 1970 essay on the uprising of the late-Tokugawa martyr Ōshio Heihachirō 大塩平八郎, 1793-1837, whose attractively hopeless rebellion against overwhelming state authority provided one of the core elements of Mishima's own private political iconography, Mishima firmly placed the problem of the polarity of words and action within the context of the philosophy of Wang Yang-ming.¹¹ For Mishima, who found life's greatest meaning in a fiercely romantic idealization of *bushidō* 武士道, the code of the warrior, the central principle of Wang Yang-ming's philosophy was the call to individual action based entirely upon conscience, independent of any establishment claims to a higher authority. To established authority, to the contrary, such a credo of independent action was of course heterodoxy to be discouraged in the strongest terms.

In *Kinkakuji* one official response to a personal interpretation of action comes when the military police, or *kempeitai* 憲兵隊, are led by the girl Uiko (有為子, 'girl who takes action') to the hiding-place of her deserter-lover in an old temple. In its obvious ironic allusion to the Taoist ideal of *wu-wei* 無為, or 'not acting (in opposition to nature)', her name clearly suggests action that is undertaken for entirely the wrong reasons—in this case, love, a senseless 'woman's passion' that can lead only to an equally senseless death. Although nobly futile, it is still a tainted death and without beauty, based as it is on false premises. Mizoguchi sees in her, as we can be sure Mishima did, an awful lesson in a woman's capacity for betrayal. The student of psychoanalytical criticism might ultimately trace that betrayal to Mishima's own childhood abandonment by his mother, who was made to leave him from early infancy to the age of twelve in the care of an infirm, tyrannical, and apparently episodal-

¹⁰ In a short essay titled '*Muromachi no Bigaku: Kinkakuji*' 室町の美学：金閣寺 that appeared in *Tōkyō Shimbun* nine years after the novel was published, Mishima wrote that the desolate and gloomy countryside around Maizuru to the north of Kyoto had etched itself into his mind as the crucial setting in which the protagonist makes his decision to burn down the Golden Pavilion.

The essay also reveals that Mishima's entire experience of the world of Zen temples consisted of a single night spent during a fact-finding expedition at Reun-in in Myōshinji, Kyoto. It is interesting that Mishima felt that he had to defend his writing only on the basis of such scanty experience by noting that Émile Zola had written *Nana* 'after eating but a

single meal with an actress from the opera' in Paris. *Zenshū*, 31, p. 561.

¹¹ *Kakumei no Tetsugaku to shite no Yōmeigaku*, in *Zenshū*, 34, pp. 449-82, esp. pp. 460ff. Mishima, p. 460, notes that Ōgai's pioneering treatment of the story in his *Ōshio Heihachirō* inevitably reflects more of Ōgai's 'Apollonian' than Ōshio's 'Dionysian' nature. The essay is discussed in Morris, *Nobility*, pp. 180-81 & p. 402, n. 8.1.

A less tendentious study of Ōshio than Mishima's may be found in Tetsuo Najita, 'Ōshio Heihachirō (1793-1837)', in Albert Craig & Donald Shively, ed., *Personality in Japanese History*, University of California Press, 1970, pp. 156-59.

ly psychotic grandmother. Never a simple matter to establish in any case, the complex and subtle changes of authorial attitude, whether toward Uiko or Mizoguchi himself, are always a problem. In one sense, however, Mishima clearly saw Uiko's action as noble, for a life of shameful hiding would be no life at all. Treachery is beautiful, while mere love, on the contrary, Mizoguchi sees only as trite. Yet to die for passion is itself sufficient to guarantee a degree of beauty, and for her nobility Mishima grants Uiko the ecstasy of death that seals love and beauty forever: having led the police to the temple, she ascends the steps alone to tell her lover what she has done; drawing a pistol, he kills first her and then himself.¹²

Long before Wang Yang-ming's philosophy was known in Japan, adherents of a radically fundamental version in China had been regarded by the state as dangerous zealots and were sometimes considered followers of a heretical school known as Wild Zen. Real Zen Buddhism, however, was for the most part quite tame. It had its own mainstream of accommodation with the political, social, and cultural realities of the world; only by such compromise could the fundamentally antisocial and eccentric sect have managed to survive and to exercise the influence that it did for so long in a society that valued conformity to social norms above all else.

In this historical perspective, the gilded temple stands out as the most prominent symbol of the corruption of the Zen sect in late medieval Japan, when the sect reached unprecedented heights of power and wealth under the patronage of the Ashikaga shoguns. Mishima's long textbook description of this former villa of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 that became the Rokuonji Zen temple after his death in 1408 makes abundantly clear the lavish setting of this once-magnificent establishment.¹³ Mizoguchi finds its present corruption limned in the episode concerning the GI and the prostitute, and the descriptions of the worldly pleasures of the superior of the temple.¹⁴

Because the Golden Temple has endured and been treasured by men for so long, it has become possessed by what Mishima calls in the novel the medieval belief in *tsukumogami* 付喪神, the curse that inevitably results from attachment to material objects.¹⁵ This refers to an ancient folk belief, clearly of Shinto origins, that objects over one hundred years old (*tsukumo* 九十九, 'ninety-nine') become possessed by evil spirits dangerous to man. Mishima draws the analogy of the empty space in a newly built drawer: at first simply a practical storage place, the space slowly solidifies in time—it *becomes* the essence of the passage of time itself—as it becomes filled with precious objects that are the locus of man's basest passions. In terms of Buddhist philosophy, too, men are in the habit of assuming that the apparent solidity of substance confers immor-

¹² p. 35; p. 24.

¹³ pp. 37-38; p. 26.

¹⁴ pp. 91, 93ff, & 87, 182ff; pp. 79, 82ff, & 75, 170ff.

¹⁵ p. 218; p. 206-07. Morris's translation inaccurately interpolates 'the year of the mournful spirit'.

tality when in fact the opposite is true. The karma that inheres in objects takes the form of ever-increasing human attachment to them that finally becomes a destructive curse. In this elaborate parallel, Mishima makes clear that the curse of the *tsukumogami* has befallen the Golden Temple.

In contrast to other sects of Buddhism, the magnificent physical and cultural edifice of medieval Japanese Zen was built upon an oddly meager foundation of doctrine. The earliest Chinese formulations, as these appear in a number of sources, were to remain the substance of Zen's teachings even centuries later in Japan: 'A separate transmission beyond the sutras that depends not upon the written word but points directly to the heart.' Especially in the Zen sect, 'words' have always been anathema, action everything. This is nicely illustrated in the Zen koan or parable, perhaps apocryphal, about the man who, hanging for dear life by only his teeth to a root growing out of the side of a sheer precipice, must open his mouth to shout for help or perish on the rocks below. He seems to have no choice at all: he is dead if he opens his mouth, dead if he does not. 'Quickly!' shouts the Zen master, 'What will you do?' By such paradoxes Zen seeks to force the student to realize the urgent peril of his present position, as well as the complete inadequacy of any response the intellect can provide. As in modern psychoanalysis, to understand that the problem exists is only the first step, and that there may be a solution merely the next. But 'knowledge' is an intellectualization to be dealt with ruthlessly; one comes to enlightenment (or sanity) by one's own actions, tested under conditions of battle.

This brief rehearsal of some of Zen's attractive and frustrating principles is simply by way of introducing the metaphysical underpinnings of *Kinkakuji*'s own central koan, called 'Nansen Kills the Cat'. Immediately after Japan's defeat in the war, the superior of the Golden Temple gathers together his students, of whom Mizoguchi is one, to lecture on this koan, never even alluding to the war or the disaster of defeat.

In the T'ang period there was a famous Ch'an priest, P'u Yüan, who lived on Mount Nan Ch'üan, and who was named Nan Ch'üan (Nansen, according to the Japanese reading) after the mountain. One day, when all the monks had gone out to cut the grass, a little kitten appeared in the peaceful mountain temple. Everyone was curious about this kitten. They chased the little animal and caught it. Then it became an object of dispute between the East Hall and the West Hall of the temple. The two groups quarreled about who should keep the kitten as their pet.

Father Nansen, who was watching all this, immediately caught the kitten by the scruff of its neck and, putting his sickle against it, said as follows: 'If any of you can say a word, this kitten shall be saved; if you can not, it shall be killed.' No one was able to answer, and so Father Nansen killed the kitten and threw it away.

When evening came, the chief disciple, Joshu, returned to the temple. Father

Nansen told him what had happened and asked for his opinion. Joshu immediately removed his shoes, put them on his head, and left the room. At this, Father Nansen lamented sorely, saying: 'Oh, if only you had been here today, the kitten's life could have been saved.'¹⁶

As in so many koans, the problem is here posed as one of language, of 'speaking' or not 'speaking'; whatever one 'can say' (*tao-te* 道得) is wrong, and if 'nothing can be said' (*tao-pu-te* 道不得), the kitten will die. The failure of the 'inability to say' is represented by the stuttering Mizoguchi's failure with language; and of the 'ability to say', by Kashiwagi's equally dismal failure, while talking too much, to say anything that can matter. The only 'solution' that avoids the fatal traps of words is the swift and wordless action offered by Joshu.¹⁷

We have seen in the case of Kawabata's characters Shingo and Shūichi that names in Japanese novels, like those in Victorian novels, are often intended as clues to character. In keeping with this tendency, the names of the paired antagonists in *Kinkakuji* reveal them as representatives of opposing philosophical points of view. The name Mizoguchi 溝口 means literally 'estrangement-mouth' or 'rift-mouth' (his name is perhaps the Japanese equivalent of Raskolnikov, whose name means 'alienation' and signifies his estrangement from others). It is his stuttering mouth, 'that silly little dark hole', that creates an alienating and unbridgeable 'gulf' between him and the world. He quite literally 'cannot say', and, since language fails him at every turn, cannot act at the decisive moment: 'When action was needed, I was always absorbed in words'.¹⁸ Kashiwagi (柏木, 'oak tree'), on the other hand, whose name can, with obvious exaggeration, be interpreted as meaning 'deprived of lower limbs' (*kashi* 下肢, 'lower limbs'; *hagi* 剥ぎ, 'deprived of'), is club-footed. It is not words but action that consistently fails him. He talks on and on, interminably engaged by his own fluency, and when he does act his every action is a grotesque mockery of action, demonstrated vividly for example when he picks up a young woman by deliberately and quite spectacularly stumbling in front of her.¹⁹

Nansen had shown his disciples the 'murdering sword' (*satsujin-tō* 殺人刀) that eliminated the problem of who should own the cat by simply eliminating the cat. Joshu's response illustrates the 'life-giving sword' (*katsujin-ken* 活人劍) that solved the problem by simply eliminating the ego that had caused it in the first place.²⁰ Kashiwagi's citation of the phrase from *Rinzairoku* 臨濟錄, 'If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!',²¹ shows him capable only of the

¹⁶ p. 85; p. 73.

¹⁷ We might also include as a 'failure of language' that of the narrator himself, who seems to grope throughout the story for a voice that consistently eludes him.

¹⁸ pp. 29 & 30; p. 18.

¹⁹ p. 129; pp. 117-18.

²⁰ p. 86; p. 74.

²¹ pp. 163-64; pp. 152-53.

murderous solution, devoid of any compassion. When, toward the end of the novel, the superior arranges for the unregenerate Mizoguchi to find him crouched in the posture of abject humility known as ‘garden-waiting’ (*niwazume* 庭詰, the posture assumed by wandering monks awaiting permission to enter a temple), he is revealing the ‘life-giving sword’ to his errant charge.²² Ironically, this is the final straw for Mizoguchi, who decides to set fire to the temple since this action makes him realize at last that it is useless to wait any further for the superior to provide him with an excuse by expelling him from the temple.

The apparently sophisticated Kashiwagi is revealed time and again as merely the sophist Kashiwagi. When he argues with Mizoguchi that knowledge is all and action is but a delusion—‘What transforms this world is knowledge,’ he claims, to which Mizoguchi replies, ‘What transforms the world is action. There’s nothing else.’²³—Kashiwagi’s response is yet one more tedious explication of the koan about the cat, comprised totally of sophistry of the worst sort. As the man who acts cynically without convictions, Kashiwagi is entirely lacking in *makoto*, or ‘sincerity’, so that action must inevitably fail him every time. The true test of Mizoguchi’s own ‘sincerity’ comes, as it must, at the last moment, when the seductive thought occurs to him that, having *determined* to act and even having *begun* to act, he need not finally *act*: ‘Does not the reason, then, for all my careful preparations lie in the final knowledge that *I would not have to act in earnest?*’ The final answer is that he must in fact ‘do the deed precisely because it was so futile.’²⁴

The obvious shortcomings of characterization and plot of *Kinkakuji* have been discussed elsewhere. Certainly, as Masao Miyoshi has pointed out, the characters are badly drawn in terms of Western requirements of motivation, point of view, and consistency of narrative perspective.²⁵ To these we must also add Mishima’s occasional inability to refrain from writing dialogue that sounds more like tracts on whatever subjects his characters are being made to advocate.

What perhaps deserves more attention than has been accorded his work so far, however, along with a brilliant mastery of language that is difficult to convey across the language barrier, is the integrity of the intellectual framework providing Mishima’s novels with an organic structure that succeeds, to a great extent, in carrying them over these failures of nearly everything we believe necessary to the successful novel. Success being in the eye of the reader, it may well be that this is a failure only in our own terms. If we suspend our own parochial demands for a while, we can begin to consider the possibility that the

²² p. 259; pp. 248-49.

²³ pp. 238-39; p. 228.

²⁴ pp. 280 & 281; pp. 269 & 270. The emphasis is indicated in the original text.

²⁵ Masao Miyoshi, *Accomplices of Silence*, University of California Press, 1974, pp. 159-80.

novel's action and characterization follow more clearly and successfully as a logical consequence of Mishima's complex psycho-ideology than of Western notions of what constitutes an appropriate sense of novelistic realism—which is to say, a mimetic and bourgeois sense of reality based particularly on the singular notion that plot ought properly to follow from character.²⁶

Miyoshi himself has made abundantly clear the reasons why native Japanese conceptions of character, plot, and the relationship between the two, should *not* be our own.²⁷ From another point of view, however, we are now in a position to see that in a different but authentically Japanese sense the entire plot of *Kinkakuji* does indeed follow from 'character'. The notion of the fragmentation of the samurai ideal can be understood as a plot in which the alienation of man from his most fundamental religious beliefs gives rise to the deformed character that is a reflection of that alienation, and to the action he takes to heal that estrangement and find a sense of wholeness again. If, to elaborate the pun even further, a sense of the unity of character follows closely upon the unity of script—the integrity of the written word as such *is* the script, the plot—then what we can call description follows naturally as the logical result of its deconstruction. Although recent trends in literary theory may have prepared us for these sorts of theoretical considerations, it may come as something of a surprise to find here in *Kinkakuji* such literal confirmation of Roland Barthes's vision of Japanese as the natural language of deconstruction.²⁸ My earlier remarks about the case of Kawabata should make it clear that this interpretation can hardly be confined to Mishima or this novel alone.

Although it has been an article of faith for two decades of post-Eliot criticism to insist that the details of an author's life can have no possible bearing on critical discussion of his works (while, paradoxically enough, biographies of writers have never been so widely written and read as they are at present), Mishima seems to be a writer whose art finally was the life itself, so compelling that at least in the years since his spectacular suicide it has understandably tended to overshadow his literature. Whether art was mistaken for life or the other way around, either conclusion was something Mishima apparently fought against from early in his career. A somewhat mysterious passage from his personal diary two years after the completion of *Kinkakuji* seems to speak of this problem:

²⁶ By 'mimetic' and 'bourgeois', I mean something like Eric Auerbach as reinterpreted by Georg Lukács, and am not trying to apply either concept to the development of Japanese literature. Lukács, for example, would further have insisted that both character and plot develop from the complex dialectics of social class. It is interesting to conjecture what he would have made of the obsessions and perversions

of Mishima's characters in light of his view of the 'baseness and triviality, the stupidity and depravity' inevitably represented in bourgeois realism. See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, Merlin, London, 1962, p. 238.

²⁷ Miyoshi, pp. xi-xii & 178.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1982, pp. 6-10.

Having finally managed to break away from mistaking life for literature, I now have the premonition that I am rapidly nearing the next dangerous phase of mistaking literature for life. That I get so irritated at the works of younger writers who are ignorant of life is a sign of that danger. I have to warn them away from their attitude that ‘Anyhow, in life only ignorance gets you anywhere, so what good is it to know anything?’²⁹

While Mishima is referring to his own development, his greater text would appear to be the development of Japanese fiction in general; had Japanese writers finally managed to get beyond the stage of the I-novelist’s confusion of ego and narrator only to fall into the error of an uninformed public that must see the novelist in his characters?

It seems inevitable that after his suicide people should have rushed to understand—or misunderstand—Mishima’s literature in terms of his own fascinating life. His insistence that the one had nothing to do with the other seems perhaps ingenuous today. The equation ‘Destiny (Genius) equals Beauty equals Death’ in Mishima’s writing, as John Nathan has formulated it, remains, for better or for worse, the critical center of his ideational universe.³⁰ If he seems less than brilliantly successful at dialogue, perhaps we should say rather than he was less inclined to employ it and other elements as the transparent narrative conventions of the Western novel. It is possible then to understand this ‘problem’ instead as his ultimate principled refusal of Kashiwagi-like sophistry. Principles aside, he remains one of the finest craftsmen of language in the world, and a major spokesman for a difficult but authentically native point of view. That this point of view should be, in both senses of the word, the burden of his writing, is something with which a world less concerned with the problem of action as fitting match to knowledge will have to continue to deal.

²⁹ Itō Sei 伊藤整 *et al.*, ed., *Mishima Yukio Shū* 三島由起夫集, Nihon Gendai Bungaku Zen-

shū 100, Kōdansha, 1961, p. 419.

³⁰ Nathan, p. 41.