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YUKIO MISHIMA:
DIALECTICS OF MIND AND BODY

Dick Wagenaar and Yoshio Iwamoto

Despite its distinguished tradition in Japan as the *shi-shosetsu*, or "I-novel," raw autobiography in the guise of fiction was a genre Yukio Mishima dismissed with a contemptuous smirk. Like Kafka, who once noted that writing an autobiography would be as easy as recording one's dreams, Mishima was convinced that confessional writing exercised neither the imagination nor the craft to shape it into art, merely one's propensities for self-indulgence. Yet, he submitted to the considerable attraction it must have held for him on several occasions. Apart from work not translated, his early *Confessions of a Mask* (1949) can be cited, as can *Sun and Steel*, written some twenty years later. Neither conforms strictly to all *shi-shosetsu* conventions, however, the former because its material shows evidence of tight artistic control, the latter because its character as abstract discourse excludes much of the quotidian in which the *shi-shosetsu* usually revels. But both works lay bare the essential forces at play, or at war, in Mishima's puzzling psychology.

What emerges most clearly from this psychology is a conflict between two antithetical modes of being, both equally seductive for Mishima. To establish one's existence either within the confines of mentality or to do so within the confines of physicality—that was the dilemma at the center of his thinking about himself. And so consuming was his obsession with it that hardly one of his artistic productions escapes being invested with the problem, whether on the level of theme, characterization, or style.

Early in *Confessions of a Mask*, following an etiological foray into the background of the protagonist's psycho-sexual makeup, there occurs an incident immediately identifiable as one of those core events from which a lifetime's preoccupations can be seen to spring. The pro-

tagonist, a frail, introspective, and excessively sensitive young boy stands before the gate of his family's house, watching with transfixed fascination as a parade of young men carrying a festival shrine on their shoulders passes before him. Unexpectedly they turn in his direction, crash into the garden, and proceed to destroy it in an outburst of physical intoxication. Terrified, the boy rushes into the house, where from a second-floor balcony he observes with "unaccountable agony" the men's expression of "obscene and undisguised drunkenness."¹

Some twenty years later, after intermittent treatments of this pivotal episode of his childhood in his work, Mishima returned to it near the beginning of *Sun and Steel* (1968), a work entirely occupied with the mind-body conflict. He called it "confidential criticism," a genre, he claimed with characteristic braggadocio, never attempted by writers before him.² Here he reveals that his personal history began with "words"—a synonym for mind or intellect, embracing such notions as reason and order—and that dealings with them preceded his recognition of body, the entire physical side of human existence, a category that he endowed with such attributes as passion, action, instinct, courage. He adds that from a certain point in time all his efforts were directed toward forcing his body to match his mind in development and sophistication. This summary slights the complexity of what is a closely argued but often infuriatingly ambiguous piece of self-examination. It is apparent, however, that the boy in the scene from *Confessions of a Mask* represents mind, observing with equal amounts of repulsion and attraction the physical activity of the body, represented by the young men carrying the shrine.

The scene is a figurative projection of the rift between body and mind, muscle and brain, passion and reason, romantic abandon and classical order, that for Mishima defined the two poles between whose claims he fashioned his life. It made it the intense affair it obviously was: at worst, the thrashings of a man hopelessly entangled in irreconcilable conflicts; at best, the admirable explorations of someone exhausting every means at his disposal to find some irreproachable basis for his existence, some foothold in a soil unsusceptible to the erosions of his own psychological vacillations or his culture's compromises with values not native to it.

¹ *Confessions of a Mask*, trans. Meredith Weatherby (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 33. Further parenthetical page references in the text will be preceded by *CM*.

² *Sun and Steel*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1970), p. 7. Further parenthetical page references in the text will be preceded by *SS*.

Seen from the latter perspective, even what seem trivialities—his muscle building, his exhibitionism, his flamboyant theatrics—take on the importance of being the natural consequences of an exalted attempt to settle on the terms of a problematic existence. The teeth-grinding scowls that greet us from so many portraits taken of him, the nearly nude photographs of himself on display in a Tokyo department store, the gangster movies in which he acted—these were not the neurotic tics of an eccentric genius; they were the results of such a fierce longing for a *modus vivendi* between the polarities ravaging him that even a descent into what strikes us as ludicrous offered him some promise of equilibrium. And in light of other pieces of biographical evidence—his disappointment at being rejected for military service in World War II symbolically avenged twenty years later by starting his own army, his fragile constitution strengthened until his frame bulged with muscles worthy of classical Greek sculpture, his legal training abandoned for the practice of art, his homosexuality given vent despite wife and children—it is not surprising to find Mishima's fictional worlds, too, replete with grating conflicts, ideologies hotly contested, emotions in clashing opposition, in short, the aura of battle. But whatever the set of characters or narrative manner, the various battles remain, at bottom, curiously similar. The reason is that the deepest conflicts generated in his art are worked out with the mind-body duality as the point of contention.

What readership Mishima has acquired in the West by way of translation is partly due no doubt to this characteristic of his fiction. Despite a Japanese literary tradition that acknowledges duality, the aim of artistic production and enjoyment, no less than the aim of the Zen *koan*, was to shatter the earthly habit of thinking in opposites. Mishima, particularly in the years prior to his death, spoke more and more frequently of the Japanese sources that deal with polarities. More than once he invoked *bumbu-ryodo*, referring to the dual pursuit of letters and the martial arts, particularly as propounded by Heihachiro Oshio, a nineteenth-century warrior-scholar whose brand of Wang Yang-ming philosophy stressed the obliteration of all contradictions and dichotomies by harmonizing thought and action.³

But before Mishima is pictured following a well-trodden indige-

³ For a short but excellent description in English of the life and thought of Oshio, see Tetsuo Najita, "Oshio Heihachirō (1793–1837)," in Albert M. Craig and Donald H. Shively, eds., *Personality in Japanese History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), pp. 155–79. Oshio figures importantly in shaping the thought of the hero of *Runaway Horses*, the second volume of the tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*, with which Mishima ended both his life and art.

nous path, it must be remembered that in the artistry of the Japanese poet or in the ideal behavior proposed by the philosopher, the paramount concern was the resolution of the duality, not the substance of the conflict itself. It was the lyricism of an attained harmony that comprised the substance of the work, not the drama of unresolved conflict. What helps to explain his enthusiastic reception in the West is the drama in Mishima's literary manner, the drama intrinsic to a matter and mind, body and soul, flesh and spirit dualism—an idea the West has lived with since at least Plato. If Mishima revered *bumbu-ryodo*, he also, especially in his early career, admired Thomas Mann, praising his work for the marvelous architectural solidity a structure of contrasting elements achieved.⁴ And scattered throughout his writing are references to the Apollonian and the Dionysian—the result of an ardent reading of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, whose division of Greek culture between those two concepts Mishima applied with youthful zeal to the immediacy of his own life.⁵

Consider the scene again: the solitary observer on the balcony and the sweaty, ecstatic group of men down below; the dispassionate, rational mind spinning words, and down in the garden, the violent, rapturous body in action. The former is associated with weakness, timidity, fear, the latter with strength, ecstasy, sex. All of Mishima's work, and the life he so intimately bound up with it, can be seen as an attempt to relinquish as a predominant perspective the Apollonian heights of the balcony and thereby to disentangle himself from the web of words that he believed falsified a pure perception of the external world while it corroded the purity of physical action. He wanted to look at the world not solely from a position of rationality inspired by fear, but from a position of communal abandon inspired by an acceptance of destruction, chaos, and death. This perspective alone could provide, as he maintained in *Sun and Steel*, the tragic view of life, the

⁴ "My Age of Travels" (1964), p. 401, in *Collected Essays of Yukio Mishima* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1966). This essay deals primarily with Mishima's reminiscences of his literary career from its beginnings during the Pacific War to the time of his *The Sound of Waves* (1954). Here, as elsewhere in this article, an asterisk before a title indicates the work is not available in translation.

⁵ In an interview in early 1970, the year of his suicide, Mishima noted that he had read a great deal of Nietzsche and had derived "great strength" from his *The Birth of Tragedy*. Cited in Masao Yamazaki, *Sodomy and the Emperor System as They Pertain to Yukio Mishima* (Tokyo: Gurafkkusha, 1971), p. 237. Hiroshi Watanabe in his studies on Yukio Mishima, collected in his book entitled *Treatise on The Sea of Fertility* (Tokyo: Shimbisha, 1972), focuses on the influences of Western writers and philosophers, including Nietzsche, in Mishima's work.

only view he believed to confer dignity and nobility on man. Digging at the obscure roots of human motivation, he discovered, like Nietzsche, a failure of nerve at the origins of the urge toward rationality, a cowardly trembling before the wild, primitive, animalistic frenzy of man's deepest instincts. Dispassionate rationality he excoriated as a makeshift bulwark against man's fear of himself, granting a false comfort in the face of pain and suffering, turning at last into a denial of death itself, cheating it of meaning, glory, and beauty.

The fly in the ointment was that, of course, Mishima as a writer could not reject words. They were what he had started with, based a career on, found himself, voluntarily or not, deeply involved with. "For however destructive a garb they might assume, words were deeply bound up with my instinct for survival, were a part of my very life" (*SS*, p. 67). A *sacrificium intellectus* was out of the question, for the impulse to write and think, especially in view of his decidedly meta-physical turn of mind, was just as strong in him as any desire to explore the potentials of his physical being. And as a choice between them offered no solution, so too did the effort to integrate and reconcile them fail. His unfortunate discovery was that though he might invoke *bumbu-ryodo*, in the depths of his being, the practice of letters and the practice of the martial arts, thought and action, mind and body, could not be harmonized.

As a writer, commitment to words was the *sine qua non* of his being. But words, he complained, falsified a pure experience of physicality's ultimate reality. "As a result," Mishima said, "men end up by coming into contact only with shadows . . ." (*SS*, p. 36). On the other hand, an act, no matter how pristinely physical it tries to be, cannot be performed without being permeated by thought, if only because consciousness is at the heart of being alive. In a nutshell, then, mind undoes action, while body strips words of their essential and legitimate function as tools in the ordering of reality. As the thematic strands of so much of his fiction demonstrate, Mishima, conferring equal value on mind and body, found life a slow corruption of each by the other.

His deepest need was an existence of unwavering intent, uncomplicated by contrary claims to his allegiance. But neither was it possible to choose the body and live like one of the beautiful, mindless, young men who swagger through his stories as regularly as Genet's hoodlums do his, nor was it possible to choose the mind and live like one of the intellectuals who talk of beauty but stalk his fiction like flabby, wrinkled ogres.

Recognizing the negative aspects of each alternative, he could not envision either as a solution. The first would have required him to turn

himself into the very image that animated his sexual fantasies. The second would have required him to turn himself into the very image that inspired his fear of old age. Though his narcissistic and masochistic tendencies certainly exceeded the average and might be diagnosed to approach the pathological on, say, the evidence of that St. Sebastian photograph which shows him tied to a tree, half naked, pierced by arrows—a pose exactly reproducing the one which, in the Guido Reni original, had provoked his first ejaculation—the lucidity of his self-knowledge always punctured the pompous seriousness of these exhibitionistic displays with its razor edge of self-irony. His suicide is another matter. That was *not* one of his pranks. And if it must be pronounced pathological, it must also be recognized that other elements were involved, not the least of which was his painful awareness that time itself was rushing him toward the consummation of the second alternative. But while he lived, with a spiritual and physical dedication that formed such an admirable part of his personality, he pursued his elusive ideal beyond the choice of either:

My mind devised a system that by installing within the self two mutually antipathetic elements—two elements that flowed alternately in opposite directions—gave the appearance of inducing an ever wider split in the personality, yet in practice created at each moment a living balance that was constantly being destroyed and brought back to life again. The embracing of a dual polarity within the self and the acceptance of contradiction and collision—such was my own blend of “art and action.” (SS, p. 49)

The ultimate point which interested him was where pure experience of consciousness and pure experience of flesh coincided—a point living, however, refused to grant him:

One may well ask if it is possible for anyone to live this duality in practice. Fortunately, it is extremely rare for the duality to assume its absolute form; it is the kind of ideal that, if realized, would be over in a moment. For the secret of this inwardly conflicting, ultimate duality is that, though it may make itself constantly foreseen in the form of a vague apprehension, it will never be put to the test until the moment of death. (SS, p. 51)

And so, like all his heroes—those who come closest to embodying his ideal, those young, beautiful, intelligent protagonists who throw the entire force of their youth and beauty behind some passion, only to be frustrated by the requirements of everyday life, adulterating the purity of either mind or body—Mishima sought this transcendent point only at last in death.

II

That such an obsessive quest for personal fulfillment should find expression in his artistic output seems only natural, especially since art itself constituted one of the terms of the conflict he tried so desperately to resolve. That it also proved a felicitous influence is more difficult to establish. In fact, though Mishima's art is inconceivable without the various imprints of his *idée fixe*, whatever faults mar his books can often be directly traced to his obsession with the mind-body duality.

Almost every one of his works contains some permutation of this dichotomy. Except in the pages of *Sun and Steel*, a bald statement of the theme is rare. But it emerges from every book whose set of characters Mishima divided between those he endowed with the qualities he associated with mind and those he endowed with the qualities he associated with the body. Set in opposition (as, in his own mind, were the philosophical principles they stood for), these are the people who engender the tension from which any particular story derives its impetus.

The unfortunate consequence is that often the merit of a work depends almost exclusively on how well the duality is integrated into and not simply imposed on the stuff of his fiction. This means that Mishima achieved his most consistently acclaimed work either by restraining his tendency to exaggerate, or, what may amount to the same thing, by immersing all theoretical considerations of the duality sufficiently within the human context so that his characters do not reduce to mere caricature whatever situational and human complexity he intends.

His *The Sound of Waves* (1954), for instance, limited in scope and ambition, shows none of that strenuously intellectual debate or wrenching emotional stress so prevalent in his other work. Written in the afterglow of a journey to Greece and a study of its culture, which, in Mishima's opinion, maintained a harmonious balance between intellect and flesh,⁶ it radiates an aura of gentle affection and endearing innocence. Evil, in the form of two characters who represent the mind principle, remains on the periphery, failing to corrupt the pure love between its Daphnis and Chloë-modelled lovers.

What Donald Keene calls the most perfectly constructed of Mishima's novels,⁷ *After the Banquet* (1960), places the mind-body conflict solidly within the framework of a socio-political situation. The model here was an actual occurrence in postwar Japanese politics, so

⁶ *"My Age of Travels," p. 404.

⁷ *Landscapes and Portraits* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971), p. 217.

actual in fact that Mishima was sued for libel and lost. Due in part to the politically-charged atmosphere surrounding his characters, providing a dimension through which the working out of the conflict could be refracted, Mishima managed here not to appear to slight the human complexity of his central characters. Kazu, the instinctive, emotional, impulsive heroine deals with the world from a “body” perspective. Noguchi, the aging, intellectual politician, his emotional life desiccated by reason, deals with the world from a “mind” perspective. As usual, their mutual attraction soon changes into a tug of war, but because each is firmly anchored in their respective social milieus, they do not destroy each other as irrevocably as their counterparts in other novels.

In this regard, *After the Banquet* is an exception. Murder or suicide forms the much more frequent termination of the conflict. And so it does in *Forbidden Colors* (1951–53), whose treatment of the problem strikes so many false notes that even Mishima admitted its failure. Despite a delectably nasty plot, the book must be judged one of the most stilted and contrived he wrote. In it, the mind-body duality is so accentuated, so obviously pushed and dragged to the forefront by whatever devices of plot, scene, and character seem serviceable, that the entire enterprise creaks like some ancient and cumbrous machine.

Two protagonists represent the two sides of the question: Yuichi, a beautiful young homosexual, and Shunsuke, a cynical, ugly and old writer about whom Mishima writes with obvious disgust. He typifies, at any rate, the bald, flabby, wrinkled intellectual he so scorned in *Sun and Steel*. But in such ridiculous extremes does Mishima describe his ugliness of body and hate-filled mind that most readers will probably reserve some amount of affection for the old man. And Yuichi’s physical perfection is so insisted on, so repeatedly demanded of the reader to accept, that for that reason alone most will no doubt despise him at least a little.

To establish somewhat more precisely Shunsuke and Yuichi’s natures, it is necessary again to consider Mishima’s habit of dividing his stock of characters between mind and body representatives. As suggested previously, Mishima seems to have envisioned human nature as ranging along a spectrum that at one extreme concluded in pure physicality, and at the other in pure mentality. Both of course are hypothetical modes of being, but figures such as Omi in *Confessions of a Mask*, Saburo in *Thirst for Love* (1950), and all those young toughs, farmhands, and soldiers who pass through his pages without a name, approach as nearly as possible what Mishima meant by living exclusively within a pure sense of their own physical presence. In his

characteristic narrative manner as omniscient author (after the first-person account of *Confessions of a Mask*), Mishima never divulges their thinking; they exist within the silence of their muscles, often only as objects of erotic reverie, living in what in *Sun and Steel* he called “the world of those who are ‘seen’ ” (p. 45), those who find proof of their existence in the gazes of others, or in their own gaze before a mirror. At the other extreme are those who approach a mode of being in which only a pure sense of their own consciousness is experienced. Such people derive their sense of existence from their own introspection, their thinking about themselves, and the proof of their existence lies in words. “It is,” Mishima said, “the classical type of existence experienced by the solitary, humanistic man of letters” (SS, p. 64).

The archetypal situation in Mishima’s fiction, the one for which the balcony scene in *Confessions of a Mask* served as prototype, involves the “solitary, humanistic man of letters” who, suspecting his dealings with words empty, false, or simply insufficient to give himself a firm sense of his own existence, turns his attention outward and finds himself enthralled by some arresting vision of physical perfection. And in his efforts to appropriate the experience of that mode of being, he corrupts it, kills it, or is destroyed himself. The situation parallels what Mishima tried to achieve within his own being. His craving for proof of his existence not satisfied with the evidence consciousness permitted him, he sought confirmation through muscle:

Admittedly, I could see my own muscles in the mirror. Yet seeing alone was not enough to bring me into contact with the basic roots of my sense of existence, and an immeasurable distance remained between me and the euphoric sense of pure being. . . . In other words, the self-awareness that I staked on muscles could not be satisfied with the darkness of the pallid flesh pressing about it as an endorsement of its existence, but . . . was driven to crave certain proof of its existence so fiercely that it was bound . . . to destroy that existence. (SS, p. 66)

That is to say, once there is self-awareness of the muscles, once the “seen” and the “seeing” occur in the same person, the “euphoric sense of pure being” vanishes. To close the gap between “seeing” and the silent, impassive sense of existence granted by muscle, a blow must be dealt “to the realm of the senses fierce enough to silence the querulous complaints of self-awareness. That, precisely, is when the knife . . . must come cutting into the flesh of . . . the body” (SS, p. 67). Whatever the personal or political motivations behind Mishima’s suicide, certainly here can be found the philosophical basis for it.

In *Forbidden Colors*, however, as in most of his books, this dialectic takes place between two figures, not within one. Mishima intentionally avoided the portrayal of just one hero. Perhaps feeling that his proscriptions concerning the autobiographical would otherwise be violated, he chose to reveal the various aspects of himself through different heroes. In the journal he kept while writing *Kyoko's House* (1959), he also noted that he had "for the time being given up any attempt to create characters as single, coordinated, organic entities."⁸ The result of such a program is that both Shunsuke and Yuichi strike us as caricatures, mechanical, puppet-like creations, arbitrarily manipulated by the psychological needs and philosophical ideas of the author.

Shunsuke, seething with spite because of his failure to inspire women with love for him, devises a scheme to avenge himself. By insuring that his women fall in love with the irresistible Yuichi, who, his sexual proclivities being what they are, will certainly disappoint them, Shunsuke means to inflict on them the same torture he has had to endure. Yuichi, innocent and mindless, falls easily under the old writer's crafty influence. And Shunsuke comes to think of Yuichi not only as an instrument of revenge, but also as a pliant piece of natural material from which he hopes to carve a work of art, his last creation before death. Finally he wonders if he himself has not fallen in love with Yuichi. But as Yuichi loses his innocence, corrupted by Shunsuke's *ressentiment*, the old man discovers that Yuichi has less and less need of him. Forlorn in the knowledge that "spirit and body can never engage in dialogue,"⁹ Shunsuke commits suicide.

Despite its failure to provide characters who go beyond the limits of their categorization, *Forbidden Colors* does foreshadow the terms and the movement of the dialectical pattern worked out more satisfactorily in later novels such as *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956). In this work, which succeeds where *Forbidden Colors* fails, the "world of those who are seen" is represented by a temple, an inanimate structure which partakes of that world by virtue of its extraordinary beauty. For the spark to set his dialectic in motion, Mishima relied on the story of an actual young Zen acolyte who in 1950 burned

⁸ Quoted by Donald Keene in *Landscapes and Portraits*, p. 216. In the section of the journal (called "Nakedness and Clothing" [1959] and covering the period from February 1958 to June 1959) from which this passage is taken, Mishima states that he intended this method of characterization to correct the faults of his previous method, employed in such novels as *Forbidden Colors*. It is difficult to discern any essential difference in the two methods, however.

⁹ *Forbidden Colors*, trans. Alfred H. Marks (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 397.

down the real Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto. The working out of the dialectic does not strike the reader as too ruthlessly excessive here, perhaps because from an inanimate object we expect none of the human complexity an “organic entity” implies, and because the hero’s prototype, apparently somewhat of a psychopath, was the sort of person we have come to expect writers to use for shedding light on certain features of the contemporary condition.

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* his name is Mizoguchi, a lonely, introspective boy, saddled with a stutter that is at once cause, symptom, and symbol of his difficulty in making contact with external reality. Visions of the Temple of the Golden Pavilion aggravate his trouble in achieving a balance between inner and outer world. As an acolyte at the temple itself, he finds its beauty disillusioning in one sense, even more terrifyingly radiant in another. The temple’s aesthetic perfection points to a transcendent sphere, to the eternal, but for that reason it appears to negate the human, all the actualities of living in the world. Mizoguchi flounders hopelessly between the appeals of both. He wants to possess both, but because such a hope in Mishima’s view of things must end in frustration, he offers his hero a choice. In his friend Tsurukawa’s bright, honest, and open personality we may see Mizoguchi being shown the example of a relationship with external reality that is basically healthy, while in his friend Kashiwagi, a somewhat younger version of the novelist in *Forbidden Colors*, we may see a kind of Mephistopheles, tempting Mizoguchi with a way of accommodating life that is even more warped than his own.

Brought to a point of unbearable tension, unable to reconcile the ideal and the real, art and life, beauty and ugliness, humiliated by his own failure and seeing in the temple an embodiment of everything that has made him suffer, Mizoguchi decides to destroy it, an act he hopes will free him to live. Whether or not it does remains just as ambiguous as whether or not Etsuko in *Thirst for Love* escapes from her obsession with Saburo, the farmhand, by beating him to death with a mattock. At any rate, the stark terms in which Mishima saw the world dictated that the love-hate relationship between “seen” object and “seeing” subject, carried to a point of ultimate confrontation, had to end in death. And when, within *one* person, consciousness elevates “seen” object and “seeing” subject to a level where they balance with equal weight and value, the ultimate gesture must be, as Mishima came to realize as he pursued his relentless logic, an act of both suicide and murder at once.

He waited, however, until completing what he planned on being a last testament to everything he had “felt and thought about life and

this world,"¹⁰ the massive tetralogy whose concluding installment his publishers received only on the day of his death. For *The Sea of Fertility* (1969–71), too, Mishima found a model—the eleventh-century Japanese work, *The Tale of Hamamatsu*. Only its notion of reincarnation was borrowed from this work, however. Conveniently, it provided him with both a device to string the four volumes together and a philosophical framework by means of which all he “felt and thought” might be conveyed. That much of what he hoped it would contain is certainly present can be substantiated by the wide range of interpretation it allows. But whether judged the expression of a Buddhistic cosmic view, a distillation of the Japanese experience in the modern age, or an accounting of the various psychological forces at work in his own personality, the mind-body dialectic again plays an important part in the entire work.

Within limits that bar the outrageously eccentric, a writer must be granted his thematic material. Since there is nothing unusual about the mind-body problem, no one could seriously quarrel with Mishima’s choice of subject matter. Only the means employed to give expression to the theme can be legitimate targets of critical evaluation. By the time he began the tetralogy, Mishima had either abandoned his program against creating characters as “organic entities,” or had mastered the technique of doing so. In any case, there is no one in *The Sea of Fertility* as perfunctorily drawn as Shunsuke and Yuichi in *Forbidden Colors*. But while the dialectic at the heart of his themes may be sanctioned by tradition and the dialectic at the heart of his characters made credible by craft, the mind-body problem (or better in this context, the word-action problem) lying also at the heart of style led him to a kind of language which flaws his work as surely as did his earlier renunciation of what Forster called “round” characters. “I shunned the latest styles like the plague,” (*SS*, p. 77) Mishima said. Whatever else may cause reservations about the work, one of its shortcomings has its source in the consequences of that short remark.

Once more Mishima adheres to his formula of assigning his major characters to either side of the mind-body question. And reverting to the body principle as it applies to the human rather than to something inanimate like a temple, the emphasis falls on passionate action rather than on physical beauty alone. As the account of the balcony scene in *Sun and Steel* makes clear, those who belong to the world of the “seen” are also those who “do.” The first three incarnations in the cycle of rebirths are all creatures of passion. Kiyooki, the elegant young hero

¹⁰ Quoted on the inside flap of the dust jacket for *Spring Snow*.

of the first volume, *Spring Snow* (1969), lives only for the emotions, “gratuitous and unstable, dying only to quicken again, dwindling and flaring without direction or purpose.”¹¹ Direction and purpose crystallize, however, when his ambivalent love for the beautiful and aristocratic Satoko is thwarted by her betrothal to an imperial prince. At the risk of committing a sin against the emperor, Kiyooki plunges into one reckless act after another in order to fulfill his love, finally dying as he tries to enter the Buddhist nunnery where Satoko has taken vows.

What is the passion of love in *Spring Snow* turns into political passion in *Runaway Horses* (1969), the second volume of the tetralogy. The time is two decades since Kiyooki’s death: the early thirties, years when military nationalism began to sweep Japan. Isao, the hero of *Runaway Horses*, lacking Kiyooki’s refinement but compensating for it with the highest manly virtues, is a fervent patriot obsessed with the idea of purity, both for himself and for the nation. He leads a small band of fellow patriots in the plotting of an insurrection which he hopes will dispel the defilement of Westernization and arouse the nation to return to a pure state of unity with the ancient gods. The attempt is betrayed and the youths are apprehended. Released some months later, Isao, fearing the contamination of his purity by an encroaching adulthood, rushes to assassinate the leading capitalist of the nation before putting an end to his own life in an ecstatic act of self-immolation.

The next incarnation in the series, a Thai princess named Ying Chan, appears in the third volume of the tetralogy, *The Temple of Dawn* (1970). A voluptuous beauty with an air of exotic mystery about her, she embodies more emphatically than the previous two a specifically *sexual* passion. But this sexual passion, explicitly revealed in a scene near the end of the book, deviates from customary expressions of it. Honda, the representative of the mind principle who witnesses the entire chain of rebirths, observes her through a peephole engaging in an act of lesbian love. (The scene suggests that, however Mishima might have envisioned the degeneracy of the “seen” short of actual physical decay, the “seeing” component of the mind principle, instead of the insightful understanding the concept implies, often struck him as nothing more than voyeurism.) Just as Kiyooki and Isao had possessed three moles under their left arm as a sign of their special destiny, so does Ying Chan, and she too dies at the requisite age of twenty. But compared to the roles assumed by Kiyooki and Isao in

¹¹ *Spring Snow*, trans. Michael Gallagher (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 15.

their respective worlds, Ying Chan's part in hers remains minor. In short, some doubt surrounds the authenticity of her spiritual lineage.

Doubts multiply with the appearance of Toru, the hero of the last volume, *The Decay of the Angel* (1971). Even within the book itself he is pronounced a fake. Though properly spotted with the three moles and, in the earlier pages at least, blessed with the physical beauty that marked the former three, Toru constitutes their antithesis in every other respect. In contrast to the passion informing their lives, he is ruled by intellect, and for their acts of ecstatic abandon, he substitutes gestures of calculated evil.

If Honda is Shunsuke without the initial *ressentiment*, Toru is Yuichi without the initial innocence. In fact, Honda finds in Toru a mentality equivalent to his own. A lawyer described as the very epitome of Western-derived rationality, Honda plays only a smart role in the first two volumes. But as he ages, shrivelling into an ugly old man who has seen everything but accomplished little, he begins to occupy center stage in the last two volumes, first falling in love with Ying Chan, then adopting Toru—both in an attempt somehow to participate in the mystique of the physical.

Being too similar in existential outlook, however, Honda and Toru manage little but mutual torment. The world they inhabit is one in which the body principle has been completely superseded by that of the mind. All is touched by decay, penetrated by evil. Not even what for Mishima was irresistible in his earlier work, the depiction of a mindless specimen of physical beauty, gains entry into these final dark pages. With a heavy-handed wit that speaks volumes of savage disillusionment, Mishima weds Toru to a companion who, though constantly prattling about her own beauty, is in reality as homely as anything in creation. In solipsistic extreme, she represents a variety of the “seeing” subject grown absolutely impervious to reality. In revulsion, Honda tries to regain contact with the body principle by seeking out Satoko, Kiyooki's former lover and now the abbess of the temple she entered when a young woman. Perplexed, he hears her insist that she retains no memories of Kiyooki. His entire existence questioned, Honda is led by a novice to the temple garden where he concludes that “he had come . . . to a place that had no memories, nothing.”¹²

¹² *The Decay of the Angel*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 236. Further parenthetical page references in the text will be preceded by *DA*.

III

Even this sketch of the mind-body duality in *The Sea of Fertility* as it relates to character should suggest the elaborate formal properties of the work. Here, however, the shortcoming alluded to previously becomes apparent. Briefly stated, the nature of Mishima's language often subverts the credibility of the intense emotional ferment meant to be seen at the root of the events depicted. With the distinction between form and content generally acknowledged to be artificial, the use of it as a basis for criticism of Mishima must seem highly suspect. But not in every type of literary expression does the "how" absolutely determine our sense of the "what." Mishima himself was fond of the distinction. For just as the ideal male for him was a classically proportioned physique enclosing an active mind in harmony with it, so a work of art was, ideally, a classically proportioned form containing a richly emotional and vibrantly intellectual content.¹³ But where nature may succeed, art sometimes falters. In the give-and-take between form and formlessness, in whose process Mishima felt to reside the central impulse behind his aesthetics, one or the other may gain the upper hand, seriously compromising the finished work.

The one element of form conspicuously at odds with Mishima's favorite subject matter is his style. The rigid cast of his language—the stately rhythms, the solemn tones, its general grace and decorum—often works against the passionate nature of the people and circumstances his novels take for subject. Just as for his life he postulated a rupture between mind and body that he tried but could neither synthesize nor transcend (except through death), so he postulated for his art a rupture between form and content that allied Apollonian concepts of lucidity, restraint, and calm with the former and Dionysian concepts of spontaneity and turbulence with the latter. And here, too, the gulf is unbridgeable. In at least the first two volumes of *The Sea of Fertility* he attempted to tell romantic stories with romantic characters through a framework of classically conceived rhetoric. The attempt is not wholly successful. Both Kiyooki and Isao—characters through whom Mishima intended to celebrate the sense of ecstatic abandon stemming from a physical, as opposed to a mental, relationship to existence—remain somewhere behind his screen of words, too weak in novelistic presence to leap out at us from the confining texture

¹³ This can be inferred from *Sun and Steel*, *passim*.

of his language.¹⁴ And for that reason, despite the considerable effort Mishima expended to show how motive leads to act, they fail to infect the reader with a sense of their passion. This would not be the flaw it is, if he did not offer them as his ideal human type precisely on the strength of that passion.

Not due to a lack of skill, however, the problem is the result of a deliberate stylistic program. In the final pages of *Sun and Steel* Mishima spoke of driving language to emulate the body. And since, as he maintained there, the body's ideal destiny was to attain a tragic heroism through participation in group action, words should likewise aspire to that heroic, public quality. Such words he found in the suicide notes of the *kamikaze* pilots, not in any stylistic experiments of contemporary literature:

They were not simply beautiful phrases, but a constant summons to superhuman behavior. . . . [These words] were filled with a glory not of this world; their very impersonality and monumentality demanded the strict elimination of individuality. . . . [And] they, more than any other words, constitute a splendid language of the flesh. (*SS*, p. 81)

Missing the rationale, but responding as one artist to another, Gore Vidal termed his style "unadventurous."¹⁵ And it must be granted that a style with the bearing of a "military gentleman" (*SS*, p. 47) is not likely to impress us with its innovation.

Mishima, however, was embarked on a project just as adventurous as the effort to map out new areas of experience by new ways of talking about it. While his Western counterparts strove for an exact formulation of their discoveries on the frontiers of human consciousness, Mishima strove for the language of the public hero, not the language of the private explorer of a personal vision. And while the Western writer despaired over the resistance language mustered against precision, Mishima's distress sprang from his own inability to pull language back, to make it innocent again, to cleanse it until radiant with the poignant simplicity and universality of *samurai* or *kamikaze* pilot utterance.

Despair was inevitable because, notwithstanding his distaste for the modern, Mishima could not escape being a product of his age,

¹⁴ Shiro Hara comments in a similar vein when he notes that Mishima's peculiar brand of dazzling rhetoric has the effect of weakening the sense of actuality in his work. *"Yukio Mishima's Style," p. 157, in Izumi Hasegawa, *et al.*, eds., **Studies on Yukio Mishima* (Tokyo: Ubun Shoin, 1970).

¹⁵ *The New York Review of Books*, June 17, 1971, p. 10.

sharing with his Western colleagues an overriding concern with self, world, and the consciousness that mediates between them. The psychological and philosophical complexities that such issues involve, however, do not lend themselves to expression in the simple utterance of Mishima's ideal, just as the "weighty solemnity," the "ceremonial, grave pace" (*SS*, p. 47) of it undermines an adequate expression of the youthful passion of his romantic characters. Whether or not he ever succeeded in bestowing his discourse with the public stylistic dimension he desired is highly debatable. What is not debatable is that in the original Mishima is one of the most difficult of the modern Japanese writers to read—hardly the stuff for easy public consumption. Undebatable too is that most Japanese critics admire his rhetoric for a beauty few of his contemporaries have rivalled.

And there was little that mattered more to Mishima than beauty. Hardly a major character in the entire *oeuvre* is not concerned with it. Mizoguchi of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* provides the best example—his very being revolves around the meaning of the temple's beauty. That meaning is elusive—at one time, beauty hints at the eternal, at another, the ephemeral. But Mizoguchi concludes that beauty synthesizes contradictions, and ultimately equals nothingness. Gazing at the temple before setting it afire, he observes that its beauty is never consummated in a single detail, that each detail only adumbrates the beauty of the next detail:

The beauty of the individual detail itself was always filled with uneasiness. It dreamed of perfection, but it knew no completion and was invariably lured on to the next beauty, the unknown beauty. The adumbration of beauty contained in one detail was linked with the subsequent adumbration of beauty, and so it was that the various adumbrations of a beauty *which did not exist* had become the underlying motif of the Golden Temple. Such adumbrations were signs of nothingness. Nothingness was the very structure of this beauty.¹⁶

The beauty Mizoguchi pursued is at once a phenomenon that synthesizes opposites, hints at the unknown, and signals nothingness. Ultimately, it is connected with death. Have we not here a clue to solve that puzzling ending of *The Sea of Fertility*? With allowances made for their respective temperaments, is Honda not another Mizoguchi? Gazing at the temple, drawn by intimations of perfection toward the realm of the absolute, Mizoguchi finds nothingness at the heart of

¹⁶ *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, trans. Ivan Morris (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 255.

beauty. And does not Honda in the temple garden, recalling his past with its three-fold look into ideal human life, come to a recognition of the nothingness at the heart of human endeavor? If so, *The Sea of Fertility* does not end with the despairing negation some Western critics have found in the conclusion. Rather than pulling the rug out from under Honda's feet, Mishima plucks the wool from his eyes, removing the veil of ignorance and forcing him to experience the void underlying everything. How persistent we suppose Honda's Western rational sensibility to be (there are scattered hints of its gradual erosion) will also determine whether we imagine him living out his life as the sufferer of Sartrean anguish or the beneficiary of mystic enlightenment.

Whatever the exact nature of Honda's experience, however, its happening in a garden where "the noontide sun of summer flowed" (*DA*, p. 236) inevitably calls to mind another garden, from which on a "cloudless noonday of early summer" (*CM*, p. 31) a small boy fled in fear and, as explained in *Sun and Steel*, was granted his first acquaintance with the body principle. In the figure of Honda, Mishima some twenty years later has found his way back—only to be confronted by the void:

I am one who has always been interested only in the edges of the body and the spirit . . .

What is there, then, at the outermost edge? Nothing . . . (*SS*, p. 91)

Whatever wisdom is implied here, Honda gains it not by the lucidity of consciousness with which he has constructed a life, but by Satoko saying, "I fear I have never heard the name Kiyooki Matsugae" (*DA*, pp. 234–35), and thus, in effect, depriving him of his past. It is a blow to the spirit much like that "blow to the realm of the senses" Mishima believed would "silence the querulous complaints of self-awareness" (*SS*, p. 66). For if *The Decay of the Angel* is unambiguous about anything, it is in the condemnation of self-awareness, consciousness exploring itself, as evil. Toru writes in his diary: "I know well enough the nature of evil within me. It is in the insistent demands of awareness itself, awareness transformed into desire. Or to put the matter differently, it has been clarity in its most perfect form acting out its part in the darkest depths" (*DA*, pp. 140–41). It is a curious declaration, one through which Mishima himself seems to cast the value of his own life and work into doubt. For if we substitute "mind" for "clarity" and "body" for "darkest depths," what have we but what for Mishima was his life's project? Are we, then, to suppose that, nearing the end, he was led to denounce the mind's pursuit of

body as evil? And since this had formed the drive behind his psychology, are we invited to infer that finally he damned himself as evil?

He rescued himself from such a chilling conclusion by claiming that he pursued the body not with the intent of “mind” appropriating it for its own uses, but precisely with the intent of losing “mind.” The euphoria he felt in physical effort seems to have depended largely on the attendant self-forgetfulness. And because it went further than solitary action could in dissipating self-awareness into the void, he was brought to value group action even higher, seduced by the exhilaration of feeling the burden of self subsumed by the common and collective act. Finally, of course, in the logic his body pressed on him, only death, and particularly suicide, could satisfy his hunger for nothingness. Suicide, especially in the public setting he chose to commit it, allowed him to place, as it were, the entire force of his self-awareness at the disposal of others, in whose gaze, losing himself, he completely entered the world of the “seen,” his identity forever fixed at a time his body still retained the beauty to inspire admiration. Then, at the moment self-objectification reached its limits, the thrust of the dagger delivered his body back to himself but, his consciousness filled to the brim with excruciating pain, cleansed of self-awareness.

If, however, he succeeded in annihilating the evil of awareness within the context of his life (through the agency of death), how did he fare in the context of his art? Did not his art, too, aspire toward the body, enacting the deepest chaos in man in the light of clarity and self-awareness? Is not the essential prerequisite of art that even in full pursuit of the body it cannot relinquish mind? Looking back on the considerable body of work he had amassed, was Mishima led to judge it a product of evil? “I defined the essential function of words as a kind of magic in which the long void spent waiting for the absolute is progressively consumed by writing,” he said in *Sun and Steel* (pp. 78–79). Here again death came to the rescue. The certainty of an imminent death stripped a man’s words of their aura of individuality, their qualities of self-conscious introspection. The suicide notes of the *kamikaze* pilots had shown him this kind of divestiture. Though the style he proposed as ideal emulated the body, it was not mind which gave it form (or whatever permitted it to be considered art) but the knowledge of death. As Shunsuke had similarly considered it in *Forbidden Colors*, the artistic work is a kind of refined death (p. 136). Instead of writing “to translate the void into substance of a kind” (*SS*, p. 69), he wanted to use language in such a way that through it the void could again appear. Through this strategy he meant to obliterate the evil of awareness in his art.

The significance his suicide has for the life preceding it must resemble then the significance Honda's final experience has for the art preceding that. Honda ends up with the void staring him in the face. By losing possession of his own past, he loses the sense of self constructed from that past. But the loss is not restricted to Honda. He is not the person through whom *The Sea of Fertility* is told. The very narrative consciousness which has just stamped some 1,400 pages with its own awareness is thrown into question. Mishima, as author, denies himself the very events he has spent four volumes writing about. This was Mishima's peculiar, perverse, but scintillatingly audacious solution to the evil he felt adjunctive to art. "Nothingness was the very structure of this beauty," Mizoguchi says of the Temple of the Golden Pavilion. With an ingenious stroke, Mishima succeeded in incorporating that nothingness into the very fabric and design of his last work. As paradoxical as it may sound, it may be said that he redeemed his life by suicide and his art by installing within it its own negation.

To divest mind of its self-reflective power and prevent the body from slipping into decay, and, furthermore, to reach thereby a point where some ultimate and pure experience of each coincided—what more impossible task could Mishima have set for himself? No wonder some have seen in the cultivation of his dualistic world view nothing more than a pretext to act out a diseased craving for self-destruction. Certainly someone less obstinately intense would have repudiated an idea that argued more and more persuasively for death. And certainly someone less serious about his art would not have dared end his *magnum opus* on a note so literally effacing. Let us match seriousness for seriousness and think of his mind-body fixation as a gigantically conceived spiritual exercise through which he hoped to encounter not simply oblivion but a condition receptive to the ecstatic embracing of nothingness. Perhaps in his self-inflicted death he found such a moment. And it is somewhat of an artistic triumph that, despite his inability to fuse theorizing and the requirements of fiction, those last pages of *The Sea of Fertility* manage to impart a masterly analogue of the nothingness he yearned for.

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