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YUKIO MISHIMA: THYMOS BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGICAL  
FANATICISM

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**Abstract:** This study attempts to explore the possible motivations, both obvious and problematic, behind the ritual suicide (*seppuku*) committed by the Japanese writer in the name of the Emperor at the Eastern Headquarters of Japan's Self-Defense Forces in 1970. History does not seem to be a coherent or intelligible process, as man's struggle for nourishment is most often replaced by *thymos*, the desire for others to recognize his value or the value system of the ideals or noble purposes he is ready to sacrifice for, ignoring the basic instinct of self-conservation. Yukio Mishima was extremely pessimistic about pragmatic and materialistic contemporary Japan. History brought along increasing consumerism, thus disturbing the harmony of traditional Japanese spirituality. The technological ability to improve human existence seemed to alter inevitably the moral evolution of contemporary Japanese. Against this background of ruling "costs" and "benefits", the Japanese writer seems to believe that it is only the thymotic man, the "man of anger", who can fight for the recognition and salvation of the Japanese soul (*yamato damashii*). Believed for centuries to be the true art of dying, Yukio Mishima's *seppuku* turned from a "beautiful" gesture into one of protest and accusation: the Japanese society had begun the transition from a closed society to an open one, governed by anxiety, in which individuals faced personal decisions.

**Keywords:** *thymos* (desire for recognition), *seppuku* (ritual suicide), aesthetics, ideology, *bushidō* (the samurai code)

„Dress my body in a Shield Society uniform, give me white gloves and a soldier’s sword in my hand, and then do me the favor of taking a photograph. My family may object, but I want evidence that I died not as a literary man but as a warrior.”

Yukio Mishima, Letter to Kanemaro Izawa, 24.11.1970

### Yukio Mishima – *the last samurai*

On 25 November 1970, the Japanese television broadcast live from the Eastern Headquarters of the Self-Defense Forces the death by *seppuku* of the writer Yukio Mishima. The entire world bore witness to a terrible and imprevisible drama. Through his ritual suicide, Yukio Mishima’s destiny became History. The personal biography of the author of the famous novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* became for a moment one with the history of contemporary Japan, to which he had just brought the supreme sacrifice.

“We see Japan reveling in prosperity and wallowing in spiritual emptiness... We shall give it back its image and die in doing so. Is it possible that you value life, given a world where the spirit is dead?... The army protects the very treaty [between Japan and the USA] which denies its right to exist... On October 21, 1969, the army should have taken power and demanded the revision of the constitution... Our fundamental Japanese values are threatened. The Emperor no longer has his rightful place in Japan...”<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of the Japanese writer to the 800 troops gathered before him that morning, as he tried to explain his having taken the General Commander-in-Chief hostage – a testamentary public speech for the soldiers and the mass-media he had called to witness this event he had meticulously prepared for the past year. He probably believed that these last words, which indirectly spoke of humility, hatred and solitude, could become topics of debate for his contemporaries.

However, through an irony of fate and without necessarily realizing it, the Japanese writer changed the notion of ritual suicide by *seppuku*: the samurai no longer died within his shell of silk and steel, but openly exposed himself to a public death. It had been seen for centuries as the true art of dying, but Yukio Mishima’s *seppuku* or ritual death could no longer be appreciated as a mere beautiful gesture. It proved to be the path to death that an intellectual had searched for his entire life and inevitably adapted to the time he lived in. The traditional *seppuku* had become protest and accusation. The disembowelment, immediately followed by decapitation with a sword when the presence of an assistant permitted it,

eventually turned into an admission of the fact that the Japanese society had transformed from a closed society into an open one<sup>2</sup> governed by anxiety, in which individuals had to face personal decisions.

### **The confrontation with history: The Emperor – *the last refuge* The return to *bushidō*, the samurai code**

In Yukio Mishima's case, the motivations behind this exaltation are both obvious and problematic. The Japanese ideological continuum after World War II is closely linked, among others, with the Imperial House, under whose name the entire history of modern Japan inevitably stands.

Yukio Mishima assembled a small private army, "Tate no kai" (the "Shield Society") and attempted a "Shōwa Restoration" in 1970. The coup failed and the organizer demonstratively committed suicide in the name of the Emperor.

In Japanese history, the Imperial House equally represents an important ideological-historical reference and a world of tradition and beauty. After the defeat in World War II, the Emperor seemed to have become the last Other, an object of desire dependent of the one who desires it, and the prototype of something different from the reality of a modern country. He had therefore the fundamental role of being the last personal and supra-personal refuge of post-war Japanese<sup>3</sup>.

The main characters in Yukio Mishima's novel *Yūkoku* (*Patriotism*, 1961) are the handsome and virtuous lieutenant Takeyama (the anagram of a real name: Yamato Takeru) and his young wife Reiko. The revolt of right-wing officers on 26 February 1936 fails and the rebels are executed immediately. Takeyama, initially a participant in the revolt, has been excluded by his comrades at the last minute due to his newlywed status. He does not, however, wish to survive his brothers in arms and thus commits suicide in his apartment along with his beautiful and equally virtuous wife, turning *seppuku* into *shinjū*, a double suicide, a famous theme in *kabuki* theater. The lieutenant dies out of loyalty to his comrades, whom he believes he will meet again in death, his wife dies out of loyalty to her husband, and both out of loyalty to the Emperor for whom they pray before death at the house altar. Death and love are one, twin faces of immortality. Romantic heroes, the two eventually die in the name of the same idea, although their motivations seem somehow different.

The year this novel was published is certainly not a coincidence. The Security Treaty between Japan and the United States of America had been renewed the previous year and this had led to a series of demonstrations against it, as well as to a resurgence of the right wing culminating in the assassination of Asanuma Inejirō, the Socialist Party leader, by a right-winger, with a Japanese sword<sup>4</sup>. Until 1960, Yukio Mishima had kept political and ideological references relatively far from his work. That year, however, with its massive demonstrations and the unprecedented killing,

seems to have inflamed the spirits and made the writer turn from pure aesthetics to a bizarre union of aesthetics with politics and ideology. The thesis of *Yūkoku* is explicit. Praising the virtues of dying in the name of the Emperor, the text turns into obvious pro-imperial ideology, against whose background the protagonist lives his last moments. He is a superior man in every respect: he possesses physical and spiritual beauty as well as the noblest moral character.

“There was some special favor here. He did not understand precisely what it was, but it was a domain unknown to others: a dispensation granted to no one else had been permitted to himself.”<sup>5</sup>

Takeyama’s sense of duty, although manifested somewhat egocentrically in his reading to his bride on their wedding night the code of duties of a soldier’s wife, who must be aware that her husband may die at any moment, and the care with which he prepares for death, removing all possible traces of dirt or ugliness as dictated by the samurai code (“men must be the color of cherry blossoms, even in death”<sup>6</sup>), may impress even the gods: “The last moments of this heroic and dedicated people were such as to make the gods themselves weep.”<sup>7</sup> The reader faces thus an obviously ideological reading. The desire to be special and to participate in an ecstatic, transcendental experience makes the protagonist look for the solution in fanaticism and death. The outside world is not the proper place for such perfect, god-like heroes. By committing suicide, however, they can escape historic time. The novel leaves thus room for the interpretation that Takeyama, choosing a young death, eventually avoided the humiliating defeat that Japan would face in World War II and, implicitly, the inevitable physical decay of old age:

“More perfectly than any of Mishima’s work, *Yūkoku* – in all its claustrophobic passion – offers an escape from historical inevitability and a rewriting of history the way it should have been.”<sup>8</sup>

The writer grew up within a “schizophrenic” perception of the world that began in August 1945: the Emperor announced the country’s defeat and declined his status of deity, the American way of life was implemented in Japanese society and the notion of “Emperor-center”, the living manifestation of the realm of the gods as perceived before the war, was done away with. By dying in the name of the Emperor, Yukio Mishima takes us to the spiritual territory of a contemporary Japan that struggles to find its identity in the postwar age. Although it seemed that the issue of the divine status and the role of the Imperial House had been solved forty years before, as the postwar constitution created the image of an Emperor as central figure of the system but lacking any real political power, the controversy still remained: Why had the Emperor upheld a postwar

democratic constitution? As a natural consequence of this state of fact, a schism appears in Japanese society between the “young patriotic generation” and the “young democratic generation”, a partisan of the western values of liberalism and humanism.

The contradiction, the fact that the ultimate symbol of militarism and imperialism in whose name millions of Japanese had died during World War II had not been removed, and the imperial model continued to co-exist with a modern, democratic Japan, seems to have implacably affected Yukio Mishima’s literary and personal destiny. As the years pass, his writing becomes more and more ideologically charged: literary techniques are used, at one point, for a one-dimensional characterization of the protagonists, and the scenes are created for them to act in a single system of values promoting one fundamental, political “message”. Yukio Mishima’s fiction glorifies the Imperial House, but his fascination for the aesthetic on the one hand, and his inability to believe his own words on the other hand alter the text and place it in an ambivalent dimension. His abstract intellectual treatment of the notions of „Emperor” and „beauty” turns his fiction into a literary association between the Imperial House and death, between honor and transcendental experience<sup>10</sup>. In its confrontation with history, Yukio Mishima’s work attempts to transgress it by rewriting it and looking for various ways of improving it, such as returning to *bushidō*, the way of the warrior, the samurai code.

The novel *Yūkoku (Patriotism)* opens his last decade of creative work, in which he rediscovers traditional Japan in an age when especially the youth tended to reject it. He used everything he considers illustrative for the Japan he rediscovers in his last years, aesthetically and ideologically, in the tetralogy *Hōjō no umi (The Sea of Fertility)*, whose last page he would finish on the eve of his death. Dealing with the topic of metempsychosis, the novels *Haru no yuki (Spring Snow)*, *Honba (Runaway Horses)*, *Akatsuki no tera (The Temple of Dawn)* and *Tennin gosui (The Decay of the Angel)* follow the reincarnation of the protagonist, Matsugae Kiyooki. His fate (=reincarnations) becomes the symbolic illustration, the final vision of Japan’s destiny in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as perceived by the author.

The title of the tetralogy is taken from an old selenography of astronomer-astrologers in Kepler’s age<sup>11</sup>, where “the Sea of Fertility” was the name of the great plain in the centre of the lunar globe, which today we know is an endless desert. What remains, after four successive generations followed in the four volumes of the novel, is *nothing*, but a different *nothing* from the French *rien* or the *nada* of Spanish mystics. In Zen Buddhism, the Absolute is identified with *mu*, the endless *nothing*, which is entirely non-substantial. *Nothingness* surrounds the individual, and he can thus establish a direct connection to his own self. The tension between *to be (u)* and *not to be (mu)* which governs human condition is overcome by *mu*, as *nothing* is the transcendence of the existence/nonexistence opposition. But *mu* must not be read as the

negation of *u*. As the counter notion of *u*, *mu* is a stronger form of negation than the mere *not to be*. Absolutized, it transcends both *u* and *mu* in their relative meaning:

“... *mu* is on equal footing with and is reciprocal to *u*. Accordingly, it can both be said that *mu* is the negation of *u*, and also that *u* is the negation of *mu*. But if *mu* is absolutized in principle, it can transcend and embrace within itself both *u* and *mu* in their relative senses. The Buddhist idea of Emptiness may be taken as *Mu* in this absolute sense.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, life is no longer different from death, good from evil, etc. Buddhists believe that life is not superior to death, as life and death are two antagonistic, mutually exclusive processes which thus become inseparably linked.

The writer is so determined to make his ideological beliefs known, that *The Sea of Fertility* turns at times from a narrative text into a manual of modern and contemporary history. The main thesis is presented directly<sup>13</sup>, and the novel can be read as a romantic call to arms insisting on the fact that reality can be destroyed or at least saved by using the proper ideology combined with the power of imagination.

The second volume of the tetralogy, *Honba (Runaway Horses)*, was published at a time when the imperial symbol seemed to have lost its ideological power. The famous 1969 public debate between Yukio Mishima and the students of Tokyo University<sup>14</sup> is an illustrative example. The writer could then see the hostility with which the students received his appreciation of imperial values, perhaps due in part to the way he expressed his notion of the Emperor, in very abstract terms:

“My conception of the emperor ... is Yamato Takeru turning into a white bird... What I call the emperor is a single being with a double image, a dual structure, the human emperor, in other words the continuously reigning emperors, along with, to put it in cultural terms, the poetic mythical emperor: the core of my thought is that [this poetic mythical emperor] has no relation to the personality of any one living emperor.”<sup>15</sup>

It had been a polite debate between Right and Left and it appears that Yukio Mishima afterwards stated:

“I found we have much in common – a rigorous ideology and a taste for physical violence, for example. Both they and I represent new species in Japan today... We are friends between whom there

is a barbed-wire fence. We smile at one another but we can't kiss... What the Zenkaguren students and I stand for is almost identical. We have the same cards on the table, but I have a joker – the Emperor.”<sup>16</sup>

Against the background of the events in the '60s and the changes in the mentality of the youth, Yukio Mishima also tries to keep the imperial ideal alive through works such as *Yūkoku*, *Honba* or *Eirei no koe* (*The Voices of the Heroic Dead*). In the latter, he invokes the return of the spirits of kamikaze pilots who accuse the Emperor, seated on a white horse and mourning his soldiers, of treason by renouncing his divine condition.

Yukio Mishima's "Tate no Kai" organization (the "Shield Society") was a group of about 100 people who were given paramilitary training at his expense, in order to protect the Emperor from alleged left-wing activists:

“The Shield Society is a stand-by army. There is no way of knowing when our day will come. Perhaps it will never come; on the other hand, it may come tomorrow. Until then, the Shield Society will remain calmly at the ready. No street demonstrations for us, without signs, no placards, no Molotov cocktails, no lectures, no stone throwing. Until the last desperate moment, we shall refuse to commit ourselves to action. For we are the world's least armed, most spiritual army”.<sup>17</sup>

Seen abstractly, the writer's final, suicidal gesture in the name of the Emperor, an act which also dissolves this organization, could apparently be interpreted as a mere excuse for suicide or an attempt to give more weight to his own death. At a closer look however, beyond the importance this screen must have had for the writer hides perhaps the image of the Emperor as a symbol of the dying Japanese culture/spirituality, drowning in a consumerist society that promoted purely mercantile values.

The one who had remained untouched by the war or at least thought so, had followed the course of history in his turn, even without being aware of it. He had evolved fast, like Japan itself, from the heroism of the battlefield to the passive acceptance of occupation. He turned his energy toward the new form of imperialism represented by exaggerated westernization and the development of the economy at all cost<sup>18</sup>. But one day he woke up from his apathy and associated Japan's decay with modernization and, inevitably, with a contamination with western values. He explained this historical evolution through the disappearance of the imperial symbol, the sign of a glorious millenary tradition, of the spiritual beauty of the Japanese soul:

“And one clouded stream that never ran dry was that choked with the scum of humanism, the poison spewed out by the factory at its headwaters. There it was, its lights burning brilliantly as it worked even through the night – the factory of Western European ideals. The pollution from this factory degraded the exalted fervor to kill, it withered the green of the sakaki’s leaves.”<sup>19</sup>

The change from apparent indifference to an active defense of traditional Japanese values is a turning point<sup>20</sup> in the writer’s personal biography that may be explained by his encounter with the country he called “the land of his dreams”: Greece.

Yukio Mishima was a sickly man, suspected of tuberculosis in his early youth, which led not only to his rejection from the army during the war but also to his carrying this burden of shame for the rest of his life. He visited Greece in 1952 and discovered the image of Apollo, the ideal of beauty, health and strength. He was so impressed by understanding that beauty and ethics can be one and the same, that he began to wish not only to create beautiful art, but also to become more beautiful himself, like a Greek statue. “Greece cured my self-hatred and my loneliness and awoke in me a *will to health* in the Nietzschean sense”<sup>21</sup>, he wrote in his travel diary, as the Mediterranean sun became for a moment an antidote to romanticism and a catalyst to his conversion to the values of classicism. His attention thus refocused from literary aestheticism onto the body and physical beauty. A believer in strict discipline, he spent several hours a day on rebuilding his body, alternating the fitness room with the fencing school:

“As I pondered the nature of that “I”, I was driven to the conclusion that the “I” in question corresponded precisely with the physical space that I occupied. What I was seeking, in short, was a language of the body. If my self was my dwelling, then my body resembled an orchard that surrounded it. I could either cultivate that orchard to its capacity or to leave it for the weeds to run riot in. I was free to choose, but the freedom was not as obvious as it might seem. Many people, indeed, go so far as to refer to the orchards of their dwellings as “destiny”.

One day, it occurred to me to set about cultivating my orchard for all I was worth. For my purpose, I used sun and steel. Unceasing sunlight and implements fashioned of steel became the chief elements in my husbandry. Little by little, the



orchard began to bear fruit, and thoughts of the body came to occupy a large part of my consciousness.

All this did not occur, of course, overnight. Nor did it begin without the existence of some deep-lying motive.”<sup>22</sup>

The world changed for Yukio Mishima, and this metamorphosis implacably brought him closer to the fulfilling of his destiny. The body, apparently a prisoner of time, seemed able to avoid its merciless flow through the attempt to recover it, so that this notion of recovering the body naturally also brought along the reverse: the idea of being able to recover time. Moreover, the exercise of the muscles contributed to clarifying the myths “created by words”, revealing a new personal hierarchy. To Yukio Mishima, the language of the body became first and foremost, to the disadvantage of language articulated through words, which the man of letters revealed as eroded and rusted through. Turning words into mere “work objects”, the Japanese writer felt increasingly ready to face reality in a space where words lack all relevance<sup>23</sup>, that of the body:

“(…) feeble emotions, it seemed to me, correspond to flaccid muscles, sentimentality to a sagging stomach, and overimpressionability to oversensitive white skin. Bulging muscles, a taut stomach and a tough skin, I reasoned, would correspond to an intrepid fighting spirit, the power of dispassionate intellectual judgment, and a robust disposition.”<sup>24</sup>

However, this educational process is grafted onto another one, of romantic origin, which the sun of Greece could not definitively cure in him: the romantic attraction of death. A noble, romantic death implied for him, since adolescence, a strong, tragic appearance, a body with sculpted muscles, which is why he did not feel ready for it as long as his body did not fulfill these requirements:

“Longing at 18 for an early demise, I felt myself unfitted for it. I lacked, in short, the muscles suitable for a dramatic death. And it deeply offended my romantic pride that it should be this unsuitability that had permitted me to survive the war.”<sup>25</sup>

Death gained ground in the writer’s mind as the warrior experienced more and more of the sensational. Although he had openly proclaimed his distrust of words, Yukio Mishima returned to them in order to record unique experiences: as a parachutist in the cockpit of an F-104 jet fighter flying at the speed of sound, at a (simulated) altitude of 45,000 m, he

realized so far above the earth that intellectual and physical adventures may easily correlate. His stay in the astronauts' compression chamber gave him the time to understand that the outer and inner world, mind and emotion, may become interchangeable: the spirit already knew what the experiment meant, unlike the unknowing body, but the latter eventually managed to smuggle the unease of death into the realm of the spirit as well:

“If the giant snake-ring that resolves all polarities came into my brain, then it is natural to suppose that it was already in existence. The snake sought eternally to swallow its own tail. It was a ring vaster than death, more fragrant than that faint scent of mortality that I had caught in the compression chamber, beyond doubt, it was the principle of oneness that gazed down at us from the shining heavens.”<sup>26</sup>

The successful writer had turned into a warrior determined to die. A predilection for death seems to be frequent in beings endowed with a thirst for life and perhaps this was precisely why Yukio Mishima knew how to turn it into his own masterpiece:

“What distinguishes the heroic from the decadent death? (...) What difference there might be resolves itself into the presence or absence of the idea of honor, which regards death as “something to be seen”, and the presence or absence of the formal aesthetic of death that goes with it, in other words the tragic nature of the approach to death and the beauty of the body going to its doom. Thus, where a beautiful death is concerned, men are condemned to inequalities and degrees of fortune commensurate with the inequalities and degrees of fortune bestowed on them by fate at their birth, though this inequality is obscured nowadays by the fact that modern man is almost devoid of the desire of the ancient Greeks to live “beautifully” and die “beautifully”.”<sup>27</sup>

*Seppuku* descriptions pervade the last decade of Yukio Mishima's writing and it is rather difficult to understand whether it was only an exhibitionist imagination and a morbid obsession with death or a methodical preparation for it as recommended by *Hagakure*, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century conduct manual for the samurai, that Yukio Mishima read again and again in his last twenty years:

“Each day await death so that when the time comes, you may die in peace. When it happens it is not as awful as we think... Work each morning to calm your spirit, and imagine the moment in which you will be cut to pieces or mutilated by arrows, fire, spears and sabers, carried away by enormous waves, cast into the flames, struck by lightning, battered by an earthquake, fallen over a precipice, or dying of an illness or during an unforeseen event. Die in your thoughts every morning, and you will no longer fear death.”<sup>28</sup>

*Hagakure*, a classical code of ethics and conduct for the samurai, contains in the original version the teachings of the samurai monk Jōchō Yamamoto (1659-1719), collected and edited by his disciple Tsuramoto Tashiro. For more than one hundred years it was a secret book and it only became accessible to the public in the Meiji period (1868-1912), when its loyalty principles were interpreted as principles of loyalty to the Emperor and the nation. Many editions and interpretations of this book were published in the nationalist fervor that engulfed Japan in the 1930s and the text became for the Japanese the illustration of *yamato damashii*, ‘the unique spirit of the Japanese’. *Hagakure* thus easily turned into a “Bible” for *kamikaze* pilots but was abandoned after the defeat, as it was considered dangerous and subversive, and the occupation forces ordered that all copies be destroyed. It would however return to the attention of the Japanese public after Yukio Mishima’s dramatic suicide. Three years before, the writer had reused the content of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century text, where he discovered the sentence that guided him in his last years: “the way of the samurai is death”, in a personal interpretation titled *Hagakure nyūmon* (*Introduction to Hagakure*). The suggestion for the ultimate understanding of the book is that promoted by the doctrine of the philosopher Wang Yang-ming, according to whom reasoning is only valid if turned into action<sup>29</sup>. His almost tantric search, visible in photographs that show a bare-chested Yukio Mishima with the raised *kendō* sword or the dagger that would one day eviscerate him pointed at his stomach, truly ended in action.

Of all Buddhist notions, detachment, impermanence and void (*nothingness*) may be translated in the case of the Japanese writer with a single word: death. In his desire to be a tough man<sup>30</sup>, Yukio Mishima eventually neglected however another Buddhist notion: that of compassion.

### On thymos or the desire for recognition in Yukio Mishima's work

Art, more precisely the art of writing, may turn its unconditional energy towards itself, but words have lost their power and the Japanese writer felt that the road to follow lay elsewhere. Politics, with all its ambitions, compromise, lies, indignities or crimes, more or less camouflaged into state reasons, certainly seemed to be the road to avoid. Still, Yukio Mishima's last gestures and his death would be intensely political in his attempt to save the Japanese soul.

Although Yukio Mishima always denied possible influences on his personal biography, the events that took place before, during or after Japan's defeat had all been traumatic experiences that the twenty-year-old man had denied or not understood. Among these were the mass suicides of soldiers and civilians on the conquered islands, Hiroshima only mentioned in passing, the bombing raids described in *Kamen no kokuhaku* (*The Confessions of a Mask*, 1949) as effects of natural catastrophes such as a typhoon or earthquake, or the political processes in which only the "winner's justice" was upheld. The sacrifice of kamikaze pilots, the radiobroadcast discourse of the Emperor who reneged his status as the representative of a solar dynasty did not seem to have troubled him much at the time. The memories would resurge, however, like a merciless boomerang, twenty years later. In *Voices of the Heroic Dead* (1966), he deals with the pointless sacrifice of the kamikaze heroes:

"Brave soldiers died because a god has commanded them to go to war; and not six months after so fierce a battle had stopped instantly because a god declared the fighting at an end, His Majesty announced: 'Verily, we are a mortal man'. Scarcely a year after we had fired ourselves like bullets at an enemy ship for our Emperor, who was a god! Why did the Emperor become a man?"<sup>31</sup>

These heroes' voice had become the voice of another world, which clamored the decay of the age at a time when the old Nippon ideal seemed betrayed. In the novel *Kinkajuki* (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*<sup>32</sup>, 1956) he mentions the American occupation, even if apparently only in passing, through the scene in which the uniformed American giant, almost drunk, asks the seminary student to walk on the stomach of the young Japanese woman accompanying him, and then rewards Mizoguchi with two packs of cigarettes.

The characters are created like a new I, a double of the writer, similar to him in his egocentric manipulation of the world, in his erotic and narcissistic fascination with death and in his obsession for the period that

ended in August 1945. What Plato in his *Republic*<sup>33</sup> called *thymos*, ‘courage’ or ‘desire for recognition’ is manifest here in desire and resentment.

History does not seem to be a coherent or intelligible process at all. An example to this effect is the Japan of the Meiji period (1868-1912), in which a technologically advanced capitalism coexisted with political authoritarianism<sup>34</sup>.

In the historic process, human beings, like animals, strive for food, shelter and, first and foremost, physical self-preservation. Unlike animals, however, man also desires other people’s desire, that is he wants to be “recognized”<sup>35</sup> in circumstances where he can ignore the basic instinct of self-preservation and risk his life for ideals or noble purposes. The bloody fight at the beginning of history is not about food, but about prestige, and as the purpose of fighting is not biologically determined, we could see here the first manifestation of human freedom.

The desire for recognition is first mentioned by Plato in *The Republic*, where he notes that there are three sides to the soul: a desiring one, a reasoning one and one that he called „thymos” or “courage”<sup>36</sup>. One may generally explain human behavior through the combination of the first two, as desire makes people always yearn for new things and reason shows them the best way to attain them. But human beings also yearn for the recognition of their own value or the value of those they trust. *Thymos*<sup>37</sup> is an innate human sense, as each person believes he/she has a certain value. When this value is not recognized he becomes angry, and when he feels he is not worthy of his own perception of value he is ashamed, just as the correct evaluation of value leads to pride<sup>38</sup>. The desire for recognition and the feelings of anger, shame or pride derived from it are essential elements of human personality, decisive for political life, and they accompany the entire historical process of humanity:

“*Thymos* or the desire for recognition is thus the seat of what social scientists call ‘values’. It was the struggle for recognition, as we have seen, that produced the relationship of lordship and bondage in all of its various manifestations, and the moral codes that arose out of it – the deference of a subject to his monarch, the peasant to his landlord, the haughty superiority of the aristocrat, and so forth.”<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps what truly satisfies man is not necessarily given by material wealth, but by the recognition of personal value. By recognizing the role of the desire for recognition as the motor of history, one can see essential phenomena for the destiny of humanity, such as religion, work, war or nationalism, in a new light. If a believer asks for the recognition of the gods or practices he cultivates, a nationalist will ask for the same recognition for his linguistic, cultural or ethnic group, just like a Japanese

after the Meiji period will ask that his work be recognized. *Thymos* is thus a state of consciousness and, in order to have the subjective certainty of the perception of one's own value, this must be recognized by another conscience. Thus, typically but not inevitably, *thymos* makes people look for recognition<sup>40</sup>.

The desire for recognition seems to be the psychological source of two passions: religion and nationalism<sup>41</sup>. The believer values everything his religion considers sacred: moral laws, way of life or objects of worship, just as the nationalist does for his national or ethnic group. Older or newer forms of recognition, not entirely rational, religion and nationalism have most often been the propagators, hidden behind something higher called ideology, of the fight for recognition and the source of strong conflict. In Yukio Mishima's case, his religion was called *bushidō*, the ethics of the samurai class, an aristocratic warrior ideology<sup>42</sup> that focused on risking one's life and did not encourage the rich and leisurely life of the master but asceticism, restraint and study. And the ultranationalism that he wanted recognized determined the Japanese writer to prepare the fight to save the traditional Japanese values, among them that of the Emperor's image. Compromise no longer had a place among these thymotic passions. In the search for "justice", *thymos* had turned into pure fanaticism, obsession and hatred, as strong thymotic pride becomes irrational in what concerns the political system and the way of life. The most important problem of politics in the course of human history seems to have been precisely the attempt to solve this issue of recognition.

Due to a particularly strong *thymos*, Yukio Mishima managed to defeat one of the strongest natural instincts, self-preservation, in the name of an ideal: the salvation of the Japanese soul.

For Nietzsche<sup>43</sup>, the typical citizen of liberal democracy was a "last man" who renounced his own superiority in favor of self-preservation. His contemporaries thus became only desire and reason, lacking *thymos* entirely, which makes them find various little ways to fulfill their various desires, calculating only long-term personal interest. The philosopher (Nietzsche) believes that if a man loses his *thymos*, he loses his very human essence. Content with his fate and incapable to feel shame for his inability to be superior to others, man slowly ceases to be human. Without ambitions and aspirations, man avoids fight, danger and risk, thus threatening his own survival. Even if men were indeed born equal, they would not try to overcome their own limitations if their only interest were being equal to the others. Any human creation is due to this desire to be recognized as superior to the others. Self-contentment leads to passivity and only *thymos* deliberately searches fight and sacrifice. And those who have this *thymos* also have a thirst for knowledge that cannot be satisfied by being recognized as equals to others.

The novel considered to crown Yukio Mishima's work, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkakuji*, 1956), has a not unusual plot, centered on the

present and immediate reality: in 1950, a novice at the Golden Zen Temple in Kyoto, sets fire to the temple, a five-hundred-year-old building famous for its architectural beauty, testimony to the glorious age of Yoshimitsu. The Japanese writer attempts to reconstruct the actions and the motivation behind them based on court evidence. He notes, along with frustrated ambition and rancor, the novice's hatred for the beauty of the temple, "steadfast in its secular perfection"<sup>44</sup>. The protagonist, Mizoguchi, an ugly stuttering man, escapes existential monotony through his contradictory feelings for the temple. On the one hand, under the threat of bombing raids, a danger they both share, he comes to love the temple. On the other hand the stone thrown into the lake that reflects the perfect object, breaking and spreading in moving waves the Buddhist image of a world in which nothing is permanent makes him want to destroy the masterpiece. This is probably why beauty becomes so difficult to grasp for Mizoguchi:

"It occurred to me that the Golden Temple might have adopted some disguise to hide its true beauty. Was it not possible that, in order to protect itself from people, the beauty deceived those who observed it? I had to approach the Golden Temple closer; I had to remove the obstacles that seemed ugly to my eyes; I had to examine it all, detail by detail, and with these eyes of mine perceive the essence of its beauty. Inasmuch as I believed only in the beauty that one can see with one's own eyes, my attitude at the time was quite natural."<sup>45</sup>

„When ye meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; when ye meet your ancestor, kill your ancestor; when ye meet your father and mother, kill your father and mother! Only thus will ye attain deliverance!"<sup>46</sup> – Mizoguchi remembers a Zen principle from Rinzai-roku when he first thinks of setting the temple on fire. Freedom, it seems, can only be earned by extreme gestures; through a criminal act, it awakens from its slumber and turns into life:

"I was there alone and the Golden Temple – the absolute, positive Golden Temple – had enveloped me. Did I possess the temple, or was I possessed by it? Or would it not be more correct to say that a strange balance had come into being at that moment, a balance which would allow me to be the Golden Temple and the Golden Temple to be me?"<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, at first, after Mizoguchi sets the temple on fire, he lets the flames engulf him, but then he changes his mind. He is caught on the neighboring hill, after he also gives up his plan to commit suicide after the

arson, for which he had bought a dagger. He eventually wanted to live without being tormented by the obsession of absolute beauty...

For Yukio Mishima, the age of contemporary Japan, pragmatic and materialistic, seemed to become extremely pessimistic. History brought along an increase in consumption, altering the harmony of traditional Japan. The technological ability to improve human existence seemed to inevitably alter the Japanese people's moral evolution. The resulting product of the Japanese consumerist society was the bourgeois man, first and foremost concerned with his own material welfare, without civic spirit and without ideals. And the economic man, who lives his life only between "costs" and "benefits" will never desire to get out of the system. Only the thymotic man, the "man of anger", is the one who, in order to have his value system recognized, a system which consists of more than an accumulation of desires that make up his physical existence, is ready to stand before a death squad. The act of ritual suicide, although it seems only an act of defiance, is the way in which Yukio Mishima tried to fight for the recognition of the Japanese soul in a world that seemed to bury it deeper every day.

If, according to Hegel<sup>48</sup>, an individual cannot become self-aware, that is aware of himself as an individual, without being recognized as such by other human beings, the most deeply human feature in this fight for recognition seems to be that of risking one's own life against the strongest natural instinct, creating a *new self for oneself*. However, in a world of thymotic selves for whom the content of moral values is never the same, most often will the result inevitably be disaccord, as *thymos*, even in its most humble form, can be a source of conflict<sup>49</sup>. Moreover, people generally do not see themselves as equal to others, but will try to be recognized as superiors in the family, in the work place, nationally or universally. *Thymos* can create, just as well as it can destroy.

After the shogun Hideyoshi seized power at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Japan enjoyed a period of internal and external peace that looked very much like the end of history postulated by Hegel<sup>50</sup>. But instead of succumbing to the pleasures of the senses and returning to animality against this rich economic backdrop, the Japanese proved that one can be human by coming up with arts for art's sake, such as *noh* theatre, the tea ceremony, the art of flower arrangements, etc. A tea ceremony does not serve any economic or political purpose, but it is a proof of superiority: there are several schools for the tea ceremony and *ikebana*, each with its own traditions and canons, which create codes and rules lacking all utilitarian purpose.

To the contrary, however, the process of modernization described by contemporary social sciences may be understood as a gradual triumph of the desiring part of the soul, lead by reason, over the thymotic one<sup>51</sup>. Renouncing thymotic pride ensures, in exchange, a quiet life with increasing material prosperity:



“In some countries like Japan, this trade was made overtly: the modernizing state set up members of the former samurai or warrior class as businessmen, whose enterprises grew into the twentieth-century *zaibatsus*.<sup>52</sup>”<sup>53</sup>

Yukio Mishima’s point of view categorically rejected this tendency for Japan. The writer who described in the tetralogy *Sea of Fertility* a Japan that had probably reached “the point of no return”<sup>54</sup>, believed now that only a violent gesture could change things. He saw the moment of action from the perspective of the Nietzschean conclusion according to which the decisive issue will always be whether one is ready to sacrifice, not what one wants to sacrifice for<sup>55</sup>. Opting for an absolute moral value through which one can demonstrate inner strength and superiority to material issues and natural determination, Yukio Mishima understood that this was the only possible beginning for freedom and creativity.

Man’s opinions and passions are interconditioned, however, as the former becomes the object of the latter. The desire for recognition is the most specifically political part of human personality and Yukio Mishima stated his own by exacerbating it to fanaticism, which made him want to assert himself in front of the others, Japanese and foreigners alike. Contemporary Japanese society thus became the scene for the manifestation of his own thymos, as the writer fought for the recognition of his personal view of the contemporary world.

The reaction of his contemporaries to his gesture was one imposed by the historic moment. Taking him seriously would have meant that the Japanese society denied<sup>56</sup> not only its adaptation to defeat, but also its comfortable settling into a world considered problem-free, governed by the progress of modernization and prosperity. Thus, it was better to see in the violent act merely an absurd mixture of literature, ideology and theatricality: the writer’s thymos was called “love of fame” and interpreted as the thirst for glory of a strong ambitious man.

Yukio Mishima was, ultimately, a sociologist and a social philosopher who tried to predict and draw the attention to the subsequent historical development of the archipelago, resonating to the tensions of civilization and the personal responsibilities this requires in a society that strived for humanism and rationality, equality and freedom. Platonic to a certain extent, the world proposed by Yukio Mishima seemed to be the intellectual intuition of the world of pure beauty<sup>57</sup>, and politics became to him the “royal Art”. Similar to Plato’s political man, the Japanese writer had imagined citadels meant to embody the beautiful, hence the aestheticist rejection of any compromise:

“The moment I set the wordless body, full of physical beauty, in opposition to beautiful words that imitated physical beauty, thereby equating

them as two things springing from one and the same conceptual source, I had in effect, without realizing it, already released myself from the spell of words. For it meant that I was recognizing the identical origin in the formal beauty in the wordless.... body and the formal beauty in words, and was beginning to seek a kind of platonic idea that would make it possible to put the flesh and words on the same footing. At that stage, the attempt to project words onto the body was already a stone's throw away.”<sup>58</sup>

Yukio Mishima proposed, however, a world in which those who had expressed the wish to cooperate and the institutions that would make their dreams and projects for a better world possible manifested standards of decency and morality that belonged to a social system that would disappear. This inevitably implied not only the destruction of his utopic plan, but also self-destruction. The political artist demanded a point outside of the social world from where he could lever the world out of its joints, and found it in the notion of death promoted by *bushidō*, the way of the samurai. Naturally, however, the social world must go on during any reconstruction.

Aestheticism and radicalism lead the Japanese man of letters to abandon reason and replace it with a desperate belief in political miracles. But the irrational attitude rooted in the belief in a beautiful world speaks ultimately to the emotions, not to reason:

“At one time, I had been the type of boy who leaned at the window, forever watching out for unexpected events to come crowding in towards him. Though I might be unable to change the world myself, I could not but hope that the world would change of its own accord. As that kind of boy, with all the accompanying anxieties, the transformation of the world was an urgent necessity for me; it nourished me from day to day; it was something without which I could not have lived. The idea of the changing of the world was as much a necessity as sleep and three meals a day. It was the womb that nourished my imagination. What followed in practice was in one sense a transformation of the world, in another it was not. Even though the world might change into the kind I hoped for, it lost its rich charm at the very instant of change. The thing that lay at the far end of my dreams was extreme danger and destruction; never once had I envisaged

happiness. The most appropriate type of daily life for me was a day-by-day world destruction; peace was the most difficult and abnormal state to live in.”<sup>59</sup>

Yukio Mishima fought for the recognition of spiritual values, then of physical ones and ultimately for the affirmation of total freedom, that is becoming free from any physical constraints and conquering the metaphysical, completely undetermined by nature. For him, it was not the calculation of economic profit that made human life noble, but precisely this freedom of moral option, which values man himself in the first place, but also the people, events and objects that surround him.

### Instead of conclusions

In this age, so interested in the anecdotic, we show interest not only in the writer, who reveals himself inevitably in his books, but also in the individual, often contradictory and shifting, and in the character, sometimes a shadow of the individual – in Yukio Mishima’s case, for instance – beyond whom the real man lived and died in the impenetrable mystery of life.

“Why should a man be associated with beauty only through a heroic, violent death?”, Yukio Mishima asked himself rhetorically in his essay *Sun and Steel*<sup>60</sup>, written short before his tragic end, implying that the characters in his fiction, if they do not explain the writer’s life and death, can perhaps at least authenticate them. Lieutenant Takeyama in *Yūkoku (Patriotism)* doubtlessly represents to a certain extent Yukio Mishima in his burning quest for an experience of utmost intensity, in his narcissism and passionate nature. Lieutenant Takeyama’s *seppuku*, in comparison to Yukio Mishima’s, seems to implacably reveal, however, the distance between the perfection of art, which reveals the essential in the light of eternity, and life with its losses, its confusing misunderstandings, its sometimes strange cruelty. There is, perhaps, in Yukio Mishima, beyond everything, a longing for divinity, which he identified with the Emperor in a glorious and often morbid vision.

The aesthetic idea of the Emperor is doubtlessly as important as the personal one. Can he have felt, at some point, like the spirits of the *kamikaze* pilots in *Eirei no koe (The Voices of the Heroic Dead)*, betrayed by this Emperor and only be left with the thought of the beauty of a young death for a noble cause? In any case, the Emperor seems to be for him the suggestion of belonging to an entity<sup>61</sup> far from the atomic reality in the immediate vicinity created in Japan after 1945, and he created an aesthetic fanaticism of cold logic for this transcendental unity.

„Human life is limited, but I would like to live forever”<sup>62</sup>, are the words the Japanese writer jotted down on a note he left in plain view on his desk at dawn on the tragic morning. He seems to have feared the

Emperor's abandon and implicitly that of history, to have felt the threat of the implacable flow of time and his own life... Looking for his freedom, he had to scream out his anger ruthlessly. And the ritual suicide he chose to enter death seems to be the attempt of a man who, joining together his "patriotic" and literary activities, tried to find (again) the communion with the great All that he had come to worship.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Apud Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mishima: A Vision of the Void*, (translated by Alberto Manguel, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 146.

<sup>2</sup> See K.R. Popper, *Societatea deschisă și dușmanii ei/ The Open Society and Its Enemies*, volumul I: *Vraja lui Platon*, (București: Editura Humanitas, 2005), 232-236.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Susan Napier, "Death and the Emperor: Mishima, Oe, and the Politics of Betrayal", in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 48. No. 1 (Feb., 1989): 72.

<sup>4</sup> See Ibidem: 74.

<sup>5</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Patriotism*, (translated by Geoffrey W. Sargent), in *Death in Midsummer*, 93-118, (New York: New Directions, 1966), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Yukio Mishima, *The Way of the Samurai: Yukio Mishima on Hagakure in Modern Life* (translated by Tsunetomo Yamamoto, New York: Basic Books, 1977), 84.

<sup>7</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Patriotism*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Napier: 79.

<sup>9</sup> See Ibidem: 73.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Yourcenar, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1985), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Napier: 82.

<sup>14</sup> See Ibidem: 80.

<sup>15</sup> Apud Ibidem: 85.

<sup>16</sup> Apud Yourcenar, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Apud Ibidem, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, (trans. Edward Gallagher, Tokyo: Tuttle Books, 1973), 292.

<sup>20</sup> See John Nathan, *Mishima: A Biography*, (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2004), 114-115.

<sup>21</sup> Apud Ibidem, 115.

<sup>22</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel* (translated by John Bester, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2003), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> See Ibidem, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 27.

- <sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 28.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 103.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 54.
- <sup>28</sup> Yukio Mishima, *The Way of the Samurai*, apud Yourcenar, 130.
- <sup>29</sup> Apud Yourcenar, 104.
- <sup>30</sup> See Ibidem, 78.
- <sup>31</sup> Apud Yourcenar, 113.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, (translated by Ivan Morris, New-York: Knopf, 1959).
- <sup>33</sup> Cf. Platon/ Plato, *Opere V*, (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1986), 381.
- <sup>34</sup> Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New-York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 8.
- <sup>35</sup> See Ibidem, 147.
- <sup>36</sup> See Platon/Plato, 394.
- <sup>37</sup> *Thymos*, translated by “courage, spirit”, is mentioned in Socrate’s example, where he compares a man with *thymos* to an angry dog that defends its city against strangers, and the term is associated with bravery and the will to risk one’s own life.
- <sup>38</sup> See Fukuyama, 165.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibidem, 214.
- <sup>40</sup> Cf. Ibidem, 147.
- <sup>41</sup> Cf. Ibidem, 214.
- <sup>42</sup> See Ibidem, 227.
- <sup>43</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Așa grăit-a Zarathustra. O carte pentru toți și nici unul/ So Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for Everyone and No One* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2000), 329-338.
- <sup>44</sup> See Yourcenar, 34.
- <sup>45</sup> Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, 25.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibidem, 244.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibidem, 131.
- <sup>48</sup> See Fukuyama, 149-154.
- <sup>49</sup> Cf. Ibidem, 182.
- <sup>50</sup> See Ibidem, 310.
- <sup>51</sup> See Ibidem, 185.
- <sup>52</sup> *Zaibatsu* – Japanese commercial enterprise controlled by a powerful family (*zai* ‘richness’ + *batsu* ‘powerful person, family’)
- <sup>53</sup> Ibidem, 186.
- <sup>54</sup> See Yourcenar, 125.
- <sup>55</sup> Apud Fukuyama, 332.
- <sup>56</sup> See Yourcenar, 102.
- <sup>57</sup> Cf. Popper, 222.
- <sup>58</sup> Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 18-19.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibidem, 56-57.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 54.
- <sup>61</sup> Cf. Napier, 86.
- <sup>62</sup> Apud Yourcenar, 141.