

# Alienation in the Novels of Yukio Mishima

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Few novelists dominate twentieth-century Japanese fiction as does Yukio Mishima. Born on January 14, 1925 to an upper middle-class family in Tokyo, Yukio Mishima distinguished himself early as a brilliant student, graduating from Gakushuin or Peers' School in 1944. While still in school, Mishima published his first significant work *Hanazakari no Mori* (1941; *The Florest in Full Flower*), which expresses many of the ideas and influences that had a continuing impact on Mishima's writing throughout his life. While Mishima produced over twenty-five pieces of major fiction, as well as short stories, plays, and critical works, it was not his writing that initially drew him to the world's attention. Frustrated by the lack of spiritual values in Japanese society, as well as a general erosion of Japanese influence and strength, Mishima committed *seppuku* or ritual suicide on November 25, 1970.<sup>1</sup>

For a time, Mishima's literary works were the subject of intense psychoanalysis, as critics looked to find reasons for his extraordinary final act. To approach Mishima only in this way, however, is to do him a disservice, for Mishima stands as a major spokesman for a Japan experiencing immense social and cultural dislocation. In this regard, Mishima very often seems divided, as he at once celebrates the glory of the past and condemns the stagnation and meaninglessness of traditional values. In one way, however, Mishima is very clear: he sees a Japanese society that is stultifying to individual freedom. For Mishima, the only fundamental principle of existence is the right to absolute liberty, in which one accepts the chaotic impermeability of the universe. In tearing down established moral, social, and religious values, then, Mishima signals the need to flee from the protected and contrived world of human society.

Notable in this regard is *Kinkakuji* (1956; *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*), which draws on the events surrounding the destruction of the Zen temple of Kinkakuji by Mizoguchi, one of its order's acolytes. In the twisted thinking and destructive obsessions of Mizoguchi, Mishima condemns the Zen heritage underpinning a traditional world view that is without meaning. Physically ugly and handicapped by a stammer since childhood, Mizoguchi is completely cut off from the world. He finds his life to be "a complete and terrible meaninglessness."<sup>2</sup> Rather than looking to find a connection with the world, however,

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<sup>1</sup> The best biography of Mishima written in English is Henry Scott Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima* (1975; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, trans. Ivan Morris (1950; rpt. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1984) 11. Subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text.

Mizoguchi falls back on a perverse pride in being misunderstood and in being alone. Only one thing in Mizoguchi's world has any substance, the beauty of Kinkakuji, about which he first learns from his father, a former temple priest. When he finally goes as a novice to the temple, it seems the great emptiness in his life is filled, as his dream becomes a reality. This, however, is short-lived, as Mizoguchi discovers that the temple's beauty is as transient and vacuous as everything else in his life. Overwhelmed by life's meaninglessness, Mizoguchi must destroy the source of his suffering if he ever wants to be truly free. As a masterpiece of garden architecture, the temple represents for Mizoguchi, not only a culture that has no meaning, but the fiction of completeness that is the end of religious experience. The beauty of the temple is in its unattainability a cause of human anxiety rather than a cure.

That corruption and perversity intrude on the temple reinforces Mizoguchi's view that beauty is a fiction, and that any thought of escaping the ugly realities of life is a simpleminded dream. The temple's master is revealed to be a hypocrite, wearing the magnificent robes of a temple superior, but given to frequenting the geisha district of Gion. Mizoguchi's only friend is the club-footed Kashiwagi, whose physical deformity overtly expresses a sadistic cruelty and dark skepticism. Beauty, according to Kashiwagi, is like a "decayed tooth. It rubs against one's tongue, hurting one" (144). Finally, Mizoguchi is himself strangely fascinated by the brutality of life. He finds gratification in assaulting the American soldier's female Japanese companion; he experiences "bubbling joy" (77) in feeling "the girl's stomach against the sole of . . . [his] rubber boot" (85). In Mizoguchi's mind sex and death are synonymous, as when he visits the prostitute Mariko and finds comfort in knowing that her "quivering flesh . . . would soon be lying deep in the night's dark grave" (229).

Underpinning the novel is the Zen world view that stands in ironic juxtaposition to any notion that the world can be defined with absolutes. According to Zen teaching, human suffering is rooted in the human compulsion to define the world, for in such definition the individual self is affirmed as possessing a discrete and absolute reality. In reducing the temple's beauty to a fiction, Mizoguchi is consistent with the Buddhist rejection of all absolutes, except that Mishima represents the Zen world view as just another fiction that has no meaning. An important episode in this regard is when Kashiwagi demonstrates *Ikebana*<sup>3</sup> which stands as an embodiment of the Buddhist notion of *tathata* or "suchness,"<sup>4</sup> itself pointing to the religious completeness found in an unhindered experience of reality. But Mizoguchi senses another dimension in Kashiwagi's demonstration; he observes a cruelty in his hands,

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<sup>3</sup> To translate *ikebana* as the art of arranging flowers is to reduce this traditional Japanese art form to the trivial. In dwelling on the great rhythms of life, death, and renewal, *ikebana* draws on the richness of Shinto, Taoism, and Buddhism, and, like the cherry blossom, evokes the aesthetic of perishability that is so deeply Japanese.

<sup>4</sup> The Sanskrit word, *tathata* or "that-way-ness" is the Real or Absolute Truth. Often translated as "suchness," it is the one, uniform, undifferentiated reality beyond subject-object distinction. It is *sunyata*, or the emptying of oneself of all those things that define one as a limited human being, it is to see things such as they are, not as we would wish them to be; it is something being what it is, different from anything else.

"as though they had some unpleasant, gloomy privilege in relation to the plants" (145). Kashiwagi offers, as well, his own corrupted interpretations of Zen teachings. When he offers a commentary on the famous *koan*,<sup>5</sup> "When ye meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha" (143), he does not intend to reveal the futility of metaphysical speculation, but to provide justification for real violence in a real world, and for how in the destruction of beauty there is removed the despair of knowing that one has failed in one's ambitions.

The absence of wholeness or completeness is, in *Kinkakuji*, the true nature of reality. The last page of the novel makes Mishima's position clear. Having set fire to the temple, and thrown away the arsenic intended for himself, Mizoguchi smokes a cigarette as would any workman following a good day's work. But the point is that his primary motivation is destruction of the present order, even while there is nothing to replace what is torn down. Mizoguchi may be free in destroying the temple, but he is also left with no sustaining reason to participate in life.

This rejection of absolute values similarly pervades Mishima's short novel, *Gogo no Eiko* (1963; *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*). The novel is about thirteen-year-old Noboru, who, along with his friends, rejects the sentimentality of the adult world for a toughminded view of life; at thirteen Noboru is convinced that "life consisted of a few simple signals and decisions" and that it "took root at the moment of death."<sup>6</sup> When Noboru's mother takes up with the sailor Ryuji, Noboru is especially pleased, for he views his mother's new lover as one who has directly experienced the power and destructive indifference of the universe. For Noboru and his friends, Ryuji's experiences at sea comprise the "real danger [that] is nothing more than just living" (51).

It is therefore a great disappointment to the boys when they discover that Ryuji is not what they had first thought. For Ryuji, life at sea is not the adventure of new and exotic lands but the monotony, the "prosaic tedium" (74) of solitary life. In Noboru's mother Ryuji finds the anchor for which he has been searching, and moves quickly into the comfortable life of lover and father. He becomes the soft, predictable person that Noboru and his friends hate. In becoming Noboru's father, Ryuji becomes an instrument of repression; he is, in other words, the enemy, representing the conventional values of a society that stultifies true freedom. Like Mizoguchi in *Kinkakuji*, then, Noboru and his friends must destroy what threatens their understanding of the world order, and they plot to murder Ryuji.

The world of *Gogo no Eiko* is also one in which beauty is absent; the universe for Noboru and his friends is empty. The "supreme command" is the ex-

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<sup>5</sup> The *koan*, as an exercise of mind, is prescribed by a Zen master as a way of violating the logic which limits conventional understanding. The *koan* often takes the form of a question and answer between which there is no apparent relationship, and that thereby demonstrates the speciousness of language, and thus of the speculative intellect.

<sup>6</sup> Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, trans. John Nathan (1967. rpt. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1983). 9. Subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text.

ercise of complete freedom, as the individual must be totally unhindered by any convention. Ryuji's great crime is that he fails to understand the freedom his life as a sailor allowed him; moreover, he is out of touch with the true nature of reality that the sea expresses. The power, violence, and unpredictability of the sea signal the fundamental chaos of existence, which humankind either ignores by defining a safe haven or tries to control by imposing itself on the world. These two responses are what Noboru unconsciously touches upon when he asks, "Is there no way that I can remain in the room and at the same time be out in the hall locking the door? (143) The destruction of Ryuji signals that neither have any lasting or final value. The only true freedom is to invoke the chaos that, for Mishima, is the true nature of existence.

The repressive nature of society and the need to be free from it expressed in *Kinkakuji* and *Gogo no Eiko* is evident in Mishima's earlier works as well. Notable is his very first novel, *Kamen No Kokuhaku* (1949; *Confessions of a Mask*), which is often interpreted as a faintly veiled autobiography. Written in the first person, *Kamen No Kokuhaku* recounts an adolescent's growing awareness that he is a homosexual in a society which rejects anything other than conventional sexuality. Underpinning the protagonist's desperate attempts to direct his sexual feelings according to acceptable standards is the more fundamental issue of how society stultifies individual expression, whatever form it might take. There is a latent anger in the novel directed towards a society that forces the individual to look inwards to justify his actions, for in such inward turning there is anxiety, disappointment, and frustration at knowing who and what one is. As in other novels, Mishima provides justification for destroying a society that imposes such pain on people, and the firebombing of Tokyo has much the same purpose as the destruction of the temple in *Kinkakuji*.

Even beyond this, however, is the loneliness one experiences in one's alienation from society. It is this more than anything else that pervades the novel. During his adolescent years at school, the protagonist lives in constant fear that his attraction to male classmates will be revealed in a look or by a slip of the tongue. He cannot share in their adolescent fantasies about women, and is denied an outlet for his growing sexual awareness. Later on, he takes up with Sonoko, and struggles to love her without experiencing any kind of sexual attraction. This only exacerbates his anxiety and sense of alienation. When given the opportunity to marry Sonoko, he flees, only to later second-guess himself as to whether his decision was the right one. He is jealous that he cannot love her as she loves him, and tries to hide his pain by convincing himself that he is "a man who can entice a woman without even loving her."<sup>7</sup> In everything he does the protagonist is forced to hide behind the mask from which the novel takes its name. Especially devastating is that he never comes out from behind this mask, as his sexual alienation becomes an expression of his overwhelming human alienation from anything having permanent meaning.

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<sup>7</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, trans. Meredith Weatherby (Toronto: George J. McLeod, 1958), 212.

The theme of homosexuality as a socially alienating force also surfaces in Mishima's *Kinjiki* (1953; *Forbidden Colors*) and signals how human happiness is rooted in rejecting the causes of this alienation. A novel of extraordinary psychological depth, *Kinjiki* is the story of Yuichi, who marries to hide his homosexuality and who, as a consequence, is forced to live two lives. Like the protagonist of *Kamen No Kokuhaku*, Yuichi is plagued by guilt because he feels he is betraying both his wife and his mother; he must give them what society demands, including a child, but is in the process untrue to himself. That this veneer of respectability is a fiction is further revealed in a host of characters in the novel, who enjoy positions of immense social influence and wealth but who hide who they truly are as a consequence.

Among these characters, several loom large. Shunsuke is an old and famous writer, who is captivated by Yuichi's physical beauty. Seeing himself as the victim in several unsuccessful marriages, Shunsuke is a committed woman-hater, who sees in Yuichi a way of gaining his revenge against womankind in general. Yet Shunsuke's actions are a visible signal of the very values that society has praised in his books. The "beauty" of Shunsuke's writing is praised by those "poisoned by intellectual hedonism" who have "replaced concern for humanity with individualism . . . [and] violently torn beauty from the arms of ethics."<sup>8</sup> These "great intellects" represent a spiritually bankrupt culture and society for which truth is little more than immediate sensation devoid of understanding. Thus the promiscuity of the homosexual subculture signals the spiritual corruption of society generally.

The same kind of moral bankruptcy is evident in the lives of Count and Mrs. Kaburagi. Count Kaburagi presents himself as a philanthropist and supporter of good causes, yet his vast fortune is the result of "gentlemanly villainy" (69). That Mrs. Kaburagi shares her husband's moral values is confirmed in how, despite her sexual loathing of him, she remains in the marriage because it expresses "the love of partners in crime" (69). She is as promiscuous as Yuichi, having the "reputation of becoming sexually intimate with any man within a week's time" (71). Her fascination with Yuichi indicates her inability to appreciate his complexities, and suggests how society's superficial demands mitigate true human understanding. She cannot read Yuichi; "I love something I do not understand in the slightest," she says, "something dark . . . clear, limpid darkness" (206).

The industrialist Kawada is not much different. Physically attracted to Yuichi, Kawada studiously adheres to a code of politeness. If he wishes Yuichi's body, he must ask Shunsuke for it. Thus Yuichi becomes a chattel to be passed from one sexual partner to another, a source of physical gratification and little more. This hedonistic preoccupation with self typifies virtually all the characters in the novel, and signals the fundamental flaw in a society where decorum has little to do with understanding and everything to do with maintaining one's personal status. The woman Kyoko, for example, likes to be with Yuichi, not be-

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<sup>8</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Forbidden Colours*, trans. Alfred H. Marks (1969; rpt. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1981)  
5. Subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text.

cause he makes her happy, but because in his beauty she confirms her own beauty.

While Yuichi is consumed with his own physical needs, he is not incapable of personal reflection on his life. Moreover, he does relate at more than the sexual level. Thus when his child is born, he insists on being with his wife as she goes through a Caesarian section. Consumed by his own beauty, and having always existed to be seen, Yuichi, in experiencing his wife's suffering, comes to see how his pursuit of pleasure anesthetizes him from the corruption of his own life. Significant, however, is that Yuichi, while recognizing his wife's sacrifice, is still drawn back to the homosexual world he knows to be corrupt. Wanting both the security of marriage and the excitement of his homosexual life, yet feeling comfortable with neither of these alternatives, Yuichi is trapped in the same world Mizoguchi destroys in burning down Kinkakuji.

While the image evoked in *Kinjiki* is one of a society totally corrupt, in *Ai ni Kawaki* (1950; *Thirst for Love*), Mishima portrays a world that is banal and meaningless. Widowed as a young woman from a husband who had proved unfaithful to her, Etsuko goes to live in the household of her father-in-law, Yachichi Sugimoto. The former manager of Kansai Merchant Ships, Sugimoto rules his household with the "grimy arrogance of the country demagogue";<sup>9</sup> completely devoid of social graces, he holds Etsuko in a nonsexual relationship that leaves her totally alone. Etsuko is overwhelmed by an insatiable passion for the young farm boy Saburo but is trapped as much as Sugimoto by a "pitiful, niggling, country respectability" (57). She experiences an immense passion for Saburo, but her attitude towards him remains a condescending one, as she quite clearly sees herself superior to him both in intelligence and in station.

There is no questioning Etsuko's passion for Saburo. When she sees the half-naked Saburo at the Autumn Festival of Hachiman Shrine, Etsuko is overcome in "a fierce clash of torpor and frenzy" (113). She feels she must remain in control, yet she wants to experience the power of her own sexuality. When her passion turns into rage and she kills Saburo, there is signaled that the society in which she lives is insensitive to her individual needs, and does not effectively direct, or even allow for, those human passions that are as much destructive as they are creative. As in other of Mishima's novels, freedom from prescription seems the ideal in *Ai no Kawaki*; with the death of Saburo, Etsuko seems free, both from the passion that had dominated her and from the ordinariness that otherwise characterized her life. After Sugimoto buries Saburo's body, he lies "sleepless and shivering" (199), unable to understand Etsuko's "innocent sleep" (199). What he does not understand is that Etsuko awakens in "darkness" seeing nothing; she is unable to "speak" (199). Etsuko's passion has left her with nothing; indeed it has destroyed the very thing she wanted. Similarly, her

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<sup>9</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Thirst for Love*, trans. Alfred H. Marks (1970; rpt. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1987), 120. Subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text.

provincial values leave her trapped in a socially repressive environment from which there is no escape.

This lack of purpose, as well as the failure of traditional values, figures prominently in Mishima's tetralogy, *Hojo no Umil*<sup>10</sup> (*The Sea of Fertility*) which, with its reference to the lifelessness of the moon's sea, suggests the aridity and emptiness of human existence. The first novel of the tetralogy, *Haru no Yuki* (1968; *Spring Snow*) recounts the doomed love affair between Kiyooki and Satoko, which leads to Kiyooki's physical death and Satoko's death to the world when she joins a religious group. Kiyooki is from one of the rich provincial families that in the early twentieth century were beginning to challenge the power and influence of the Imperial Court. Satoko is from the waning aristocracy, and represents an elegant decadence that is an empty shell of its past glories. For Mishima, both the old and the new are equally destructive to individual growth and fulfillment. Kiyooki wants to love Satoko, as she loves him, but he is unwilling to sacrifice his independence. Only when Satoko becomes engaged to a royal prince is Kiyooki shocked out of his psychic paralysis to realize how much he loves her. By then, however, it is too late, as the edict of the Imperial Court demands that the marriage proceed.

A powerful message of the novel is how outmoded restrictions stand in the way of true human feelings. Indeed it is the faded values of the court, and the crass preoccupation of the new monied class with these values, that lead directly to Kiyooki's death. The expectations and restrictions imposed on the doomed lovers create a maze from which there is no escape. It is to escape these restrictions that Satoko is eventually driven to deny the world by entering a nunnery, and it is this final desperate act that forces Kiyooki to undertake, even though he is seriously ill, the long trip to make one final plea for her love. Kiyooki's attraction to Satoko is compromised by her family background, society's standards condemn the passion of the two young lovers, social decorum stands between Kiyooki and Satoko publically declaring their love, and religion, when Satoko enters the nunnery, denies the tangibility of love.

Thus one finds in *Haru no Yuki* a tearing down of what has human value by the traditional values of society which are, at best, a fiction that has no meaning. Life ends with death, and with death there is no memory of what has gone before; there is no imprint on things to say that Kiyooki and Satoko have made a difference. The intense sexual passion experienced between Kiyooki and Satoko are only brief interludes in a life of frustration and unhappiness, and, in the end, these too are prevented by the interference of their families. What identity they achieve together and what freedom they experience in their few moments of love have no significance beyond what they are at the time: a few moments of happiness. All that is left is the simple yet brutal announcement of Kiyooki's death.

Although Kiyooki and Satoko figure most prominently in *Haru no Yuki*, it is the character Honda, who is Kiyooki's boyhood friend, that connects the

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<sup>10</sup>The Works of Mishima's tetralogy are *Haru no Yuki* (*Spring Snow*, 1968); *Homba* (*Runaway*, 1969); *Akatsuko no Tera* (*The Temple of the Dawn*, 1970); and *Tennin Gosui* (*The Decay of the Angel*, 1970).

novels of the tetralogy. Drawing on the Buddhist teaching of reincarnation, Honda spends the remaining books searching for a reborn Kiyooki. In *Homba* (1969; *Runaway Horses*), Honda, now a judge, believes he finds Kiyooki in the figure of Isao, who coincidentally happens to be the son of Iinuma, who was the tutor of the young Kiyooki. Told against the background of "The League of the Divine Wind," which recounts an ill-fated attempt to overthrow a corrupt Meiji government, *Homba* is the story of Isao's efforts to organize a plot to destroy the new industrial magnates of modern Japan. The novel juxtaposes the old and the new, as Isao looks to reestablish Japanese custom and tradition. For Isao, the integrity of the emperor must be restored, as must the morality of the *saumurai*, who, as in "The League of the Divine Wind," accepts *seppuku*<sup>11</sup> rather than admit defeat. As Isao says at his trial, his purpose was to destroy the political corruption of the *zaibatsu*, which is the source of the evil "which shuts out the light of our most revered Emperor's benevolence."<sup>12</sup>

What Isao does not count on is how he is controlled by forces which make the idealism of the past impossible to realize. He tells the judge at his trial that he espouses the philosophy of "congruity of thought and action" (p. 390); what he discovers is that his ambition is frustrated. For Isao, it is the ultimate insult that Honda should defend him and that, although he is found guilty of insurrection, his punishment should be remitted. It is, for Isao, tantamount to being disallowed the privilege of *seppuku*. Isao has no freedom; he is tied to an order that is either corrupt or has no meaning. Only when alone, without his former companions, who have abandoned him, can Isao act by murdering the industrialist Kurahara because he had desecrated a Shinto shrine. And only at the very end of the novel, when he finally plunges the dagger into his stomach, does Isao experience release from the forces that had so manipulated his life.

While *Homba* indeed seems a celebration of traditional values, there is implicit in the novel the question, at what cost? Isao is a young man, capable of loving and being loved. These basic human values seem eroded by a fanaticism that turns him away from recognizing what is basic and good in humankind. That Makiko wants him as her lover is unquestionable. But his preoccupation with the higher ideals of the past force him to forgo what life offers him in the present; the golden age can never be, and thus the novel concludes on the unsettling note that in the end there is nothing.

This vision is perhaps most noticeable in the final novel of the tetralogy, *Tennin Gosui* (1970; *The Decay of the Angel*). The aged Honda adopts Toru, a sixteen-year old boy, once again in the belief that he has rediscovered the Kiyooki of his youth. Honda educates Toru, waiting for his dream to be fulfilled. What he discovers, however, is that Toru is the ultimate pragmatist, whose sole motivation is self-interest. Beyond this, Toru's view of the world is

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<sup>11</sup>The *saumari* or warrior practiced *bushido* or the code of the warrior, which saw *seppuku* or ritual suicide by disemboweling as the most honorable form of death.

<sup>12</sup>Yukio Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, trans. M. Gallagher (1973; rpt. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1985) 390. Subsequent references are to this edition.

brutally frank: the individual, along with all his hopes and plans, has no significance. Toru likens human action to fragments of glass casting their light on the wall; they leave, Toru says, "no trace behind."<sup>13</sup>

The full meaning of the waste that characterizes human existence does not become fully clear, however, until the very end of *Tennin Gosui*. Honda goes back sixty years later to Gesshu to meet with Satoko, who is now the superior of the order. To his horror Satoko denies ever having known Kiyooki, and affirms for him the pointlessness of his search for another Kiyooki. Satoko's denial of Kiyooki is a final denial of the vision that began so intensely in *Haru no Yuki*. Honda's desire to keep Kiyooki alive expresses the futile belief of all human beings that somewhere there is something of lasting significance. At the very end of the novel, Satoko takes Honda around the garden; as he pauses to look, Honda reflects to himself, "The garden was empty. He had come . . . to a place that had no memories, nothing" (236).

This final statement in *Haru no Yuki* offers a powerful summary of Mishima's view of the world. Unable to accept the new order of a modern Japan, and yet not able to live in a traditional world that has outgrown its usefulness, Mishima's novels become a study of a man torn between two unacceptable alternatives. In this regard Mishima captures much of the tension pervading the modern Japanese consciousness. Mishima's understanding of his age is profound. Perhaps where he lets us down is his inability to offer solutions, although one might counter that Mishima saw no obvious answer in a world that offered nothing to him.

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<sup>13</sup>Yukio Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel*, trans. E.G. Seidensticker (1974; rpt. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1981) 146. Subsequent references are to this edition.