

Peter Wolfe

YUKIO MISHIMA

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Reviewed by Daniel Wright

Not only is Japanese literature in the twentieth century extensively influenced, if not actually governed, by self-destructive themes, but many of Japan's most highly regarded literary works of suicidal theme in this century have been composed by writers who themselves eventually took their own lives. For example, one recalls the sensational suicides of Yasunari Kawabata, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, and Osamu Dazai. However, to most Westerners, Yukio Mishima is the principal representative of the Japanese literary suicide in the twentieth century. Indeed, rather more than his writings, the qualities of Yukio Mishima which continue most to fascinate and intrigue many Westerners are this Japanese Decadent's bizarre life and spectacular death by *seppuku*.

Apart from his neurotic attachment to the subject of violent suicide, Mishima's reputation for narcissistic preoccupation with physical beauty, his obsession with sadomasochistic homoeroticism, his militant jingoism mingled with an ironic reverence for the West, and his romantic devotion to a vanishing cult of ancient tradition have excited the interest of readers schooled for decades in Mishima's novels, plays, and essays. These eccentricities, in addition to his obsession with suicide, permeate Mishima's best-known works: *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), a paean to the ideals of innocent, uncorrupted youth, and homosexual love; *Forbidden Colors* (1951), a novel featuring a pathological voyeur and misogynist who ends his life in impotent despair; "Patriotism" (1960), a crypto-fascist salute to a bygone militaristic code which offered self-annihilation (*junshi*) as the only honorable response to personal defeat; and the *Sea of Fertility*, a tetralogy finished on the day of Mishima's own suicide (November 25, 1970) in which the protagonist, Honda, suffers a nonheroic journey into old age, filled with shame, disgrace, and regret.

Mishima's life and literary vision are inextricably united. One cannot fully appreciate the despair born of tortured contradictions within Mishima the man without recognizing them in Mishima the artist. As Wolfe observes, "Mishima writes from his darkest self. . . . His life and work both spring from the same set of impulses" (11). Wolfe adds, however, that Mishima sought to evade the guilt spawned by his inner contradictions by imputing to postwar Japan the irregularities which, in varying form, bedeviled his personal life and moral convictions. As he argues, "Mishima . . . sidestepped the guilt of the nonconformist by claiming that not he, but postwar Japan, by embracing the false American gods of materialism and equality, had lost touch with the nation's cultural identity. He saw in the ancient samurai tradition, with its emphasis upon male beauty, loyalty, and discipline, a wisdom that had almost disappeared" (15).

For Wolfe, Mishima is a literary curiosity: compelling but inconsistent, momentarily dazzling but ultimately insubstantial. He is, for example, a "smart,

sophisticated writer" (184), contends Wolfe, but "nostalgia clouds his whole ontology" (186). He is a "peddle[r] of psychosexual fantasies in military garb" (19) and a "neurotic misfit" who, nonetheless, "wrote brilliant novels" (49). He "gives his work the hard-focus intimacy of a nightmare" (36). His work is "limited"; "the ethic that inspired him also confused and twisted him"; his work "cannot teach humane action"; therefore, Wolfe concludes, Mishima's "literary corpus cannot qualify as a searching criticism of life" (186).

Wolfe's dismissive judgment of Mishima and his work is puritanically severe, and in no small measure moralistic. His criticism often is intelligent but, in considerable part, misguided, not the least cause of which is attributable to his choice of critical methodology. A close, New Historicist reading of the Mishima corpus, for example, would disclose more of a reciprocal relationship between Mishima's disturbed personality and the unsettled, transitional quality of postwar Japan than Wolfe, in this book, is willing to concede.

Despite the many apparently unrelated peculiarities of act and character in Mishima, one clear, unifying constant in his literature abides: the author's consistent provision to his readers of some of modernity's most compelling images of disfigurement in the displaced person upon whom a soulless society flings its frustration and discontent—the tragic quality of which is realized and magnified by this character's failed effort to articulate that discontent and invest his life with redemptive purpose in order to give existence meaning.

Mishima's characters are diseased, twisted failures only when evaluated by the suburban sensibilities of the bourgeois critical temperament which recoils at any mannered treatment of life, as though the perversity of mannerism were the art form itself rather than the subject to which the form gives but proper expression. Less a "neurotic misfit" than merely a man of marginalized existence, Mishima and his tragic heroes are actually icons of the more conventional hero: one who is the incarnate hope of his society, who yet, simultaneously, becomes the bearer of his community's ruin and shame. One recollects the antecedent example of this heroic Japanese character in the person of General Nogi, the Meiji warrior who, in order to atone for the loss of his banner during the Satsuma Rebellion, killed himself, in obedience to the code of *bushido*, following the Imperial Funeral in 1912.

Mishima's heroes, therefore, represent literary illustrations of persons for whom honor and duty are normative. Consequently, Mishima's fantastic art is much more representative of truth than we might suppose or care to acknowledge. It is always safer, after all, to behold horror through the transparency of a window than in the reflection of a mirror.