

Decay of Mishima's Japan: His Final Word

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Japan's Yukio Mishima gave a clue as to his reasons for his *seppuku* (samurai ritual suicide) five years before his death, when in 1965 he announced his plan for a tetralogy of novels tracing Japan's history in the twentieth century, after which he would have nothing left to say. That series of novels, *The Sea of Fertility*, indicts the West with its democratizing, commercializing influence for the erosion of traditional Japanese culture and morality. Mishima alerted Japan to his intent in his stage play *Madame de Sade*, appearing the year he started his tetralogy. Just as the democratizing French Revolution, the background of the stage play, hastens the erosion of traditional society and culture in the European West, so too the democratizing revolution in Japan, starting with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, erodes traditional society and culture in Japan, with what were, for Mishima, unacceptable results.

His tetralogy covers four crucial periods in twentieth-century Japan, during each of which there is a declension of social leadership. In the first novel, the leaders of society are still the Emperor, his court nobility, and the newly made aristocrats, who were promoted for fighting to establish the authority of the Emperor over the feudal *shogun* dictators, their *daimyo*, and their *samurai*. But the feudal aristocrats suffer from displacement, while the newly made aristocrats corrupt court morality. The second novel shows Japan's social leaders to have become the commercially successful, whether as aristocrats or crass provincials. The third novel, set during and following World War II, shows the leaders to be the United States Occupation personnel and their Japanese hangers-on, with traditional morality and culture subordinated to financial gain. The final novel, in the 1970s, shows Japan winning the economic war, becoming "Japan Inc.," and losing its soul in the process.

Mishima could not accept Western democracy in Japan. His biographer, Henry Scott-Stokes, asserts that his paternal grandmother, Natsu, had indoctrinated him in childhood with the myth that her mother's family, the Matsudairas, were, along with the Tokugawa *shoguns*, "pinnacles" surrounding and defending the Emperor, "the highest being."¹ Mishima's rejection of democracy appears in his writing as early as 1960 when he turned to a political theme in his short story "Patriotism." According to Masao Miyoshi, with this short story, "Mishima began to be deeply concerned with 'the essence' of Japanese culture." Miyoshi explains that "these were the years when Japan was shaken by a great number of social and political crises signaled by a nearly endless series of demonstrations and protests," which were much larger than those at the same time in the United States and centered on outrage about Japan's apparent subservience to the United States-

¹ Henry Scott-Stokes, *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 64.

Japan Security Pact against supposed communist aggression.² Kokusai Shinkokai concurs when he states, "Mishima represents a young generation disillusioned by World War II defeat, moral chaos, unfamiliar democracy."³ Democracy had not been taught in Japan until 1945, when the United States Occupation insisted that it be included in the curriculum. By that time Mishima had graduated from Tokyo University.

With his *Madame de Sade*, Mishima turned his energies toward an indictment of the corrupting influence of Western democracy then flooding the world. *Madame de Sade* covers the seventeen-year span from 1772 to 1789, showing the erosion of ethics and morality in France in the buildup to the French Revolution. Perhaps only one of the characters in this all-female piece is still admirable at the play's conclusion. Interestingly, as the morality of the women of France decays, the attractiveness of the Marquis de Sade himself decays during his imprisonment for his vices, allowing for a sharp reversal at the conclusion. The play opens with Madame de Sade and her mother discussing the Marquis's debauchery in Marseilles, where he and his manservant had fornicated with four prostitutes in a bloody orgy of reciprocal beating. Despite her mother's pleas to leave her husband because of his sadomasochism, Madame de Sade chooses to hear only of his beautiful appearance in Marseilles: "The Marquis de Sade wore a gray surcoat lined with blue, a waistcoat of orange silk, breeches of the same color, and on his golden hair, a hat with a feather. He carried a sword and a stick with a gold knob."⁴

Other scenes celebrating de Sade's philosophy of debauchery include his eloping with his wife's younger sister and his bloody beatings of fellow perverts in Venice. Moreover, a female acquaintance of the Marquis, the Contesse de Saint-Fond, attempts to equal de Sade's vice by permitting black masses to be performed with her stomach as altar. Finally, Madame de Sade exults in her husband's daring in his ambition to rewrite the moral codes of the West—"not sporadic acts of evil, but a code of evil, not deeds so much as principles"—so that the marquis's prison writings espouse an alternative to conventional religion, "a back stairway to heaven" (M.d.S. 102). Madame de Sade feels that her husband is above conventional morality because he is a close relative of the king and a man of wealth, beauty, and fame. It is not until de Sade has abandoned his aristocratic world to identify with the revolutionaries he met in prison that his wife rejects him. After his shift toward revolution, de Sade slides into poverty, obesity, and slovenliness. At this point his wife shows herself devoid of the wifely loyalty she had formerly claimed as her duty. When her maid comes to announce that the Marquis has been freed from prison and is now at the door, his wife at once asks the maid about the Marquis's appearance, only to hear, "He has changed so much I hardly recognized him. He is wearing a black woolen coat with patched elbows and a shirt without a collar, so dirty. . . . I took him at first for an old beggar." At this, his wife refuses him entry into her presence: "Please ask him to leave. And tell him this. 'The marquis will never see him again'" (M.d.S. 106). In the end, traditional French society

² Misao Miyoshi, *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) 175.

³ Kokusai Shinkokai, ed., *Synopses of Contemporary Japanese Literature: 1936-55* (Tokyo: Japan Cultural Society, 1970) 162.

⁴ Yukio Mishima, *Madame de Sade* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *M.d.S.*

has fallen into decay. Madame de Sade's mother has quit condemning her son-in-law's vices in hopes that he will defend her title and wealth to his new revolutionary friends. Saint-Fond had died in a revolutionary skirmish while dressed for debauchery. Madame de Sade and her sister has parted earlier over rival claims to de Sade. Only the Baroness de Dimiane finds a haven from the revolutionary chaos of France in 1789: she retreats into her traditional religion by entering a nunnery.

The Decay of the Angel, Mishima's final novel and the last of his tetralogy, is a novel of what was, to Mishima, the final decay of modern, Westernized Japan. Finished on the day of his suicide in 1970, it projects into the future to the years 1973-77. The title, referring as it does to the demise of a *deva* or good spirit in Buddhist theology, refers also to the corruption of the spirit of Japan in the twentieth century. The five signs of decay of a *deva* include bad odor, loss of luminosity, and loss of rightful dress, all now visible in Japan's smog, stench, and beaches littered with cola cans as a result of Western industrialization.

The protagonists of this final novel are a young orphan, Toru, age sixteen and already at work, and his adoptive father, Honda, the observer in the previous novels in the tetralogy. Honda is now in his seventies. The theme of the orphan and one's need for a father expresses the mood of many postwar Japanese, as Susan Napier shows in her *Escape from the Wasteland*: "The loss of World War II and the Emperor's renunciation of divinity" made the Japanese "feel orphaned, abandoned in history," so that writers portrayed the postwar world as one of "loss, betrayal, alienation," and thus Mishima's tone is one of "bitterness, loneliness, frustration."⁵ Napier further explains that "the generation of Mishima . . . grew up with . . . a schizophrenic world view, as a result of one hot August day in 1945 when the Emperor announced Japan's defeat," so that the former view of "pre-war orthodoxy of an emperor-centered communalist philosophy of obedience to certain absolute values that were presented as being uniquely Japanese" was after the war challenged by the "American-enforced, supposedly international perspective, based on a belief in individual rights and democracy."⁶

The young protagonist, Toru, is an orphan as rootless as is Japan without its strong Emperor-as-Divine-Father. And although Toru, like Japan, is brilliant, with an IQ of 159, he feels futureless, purposeless, and ambiguous toward himself. Toru cynically allows Honda to adopt him and rescue him from his blue-collar job as a harbor-watcher in an international port, where he has cared only for material things like ships but could form no personal relationships; instead, he had malevolently scanned the people outside his glass observation post as if they were "zoo animals" in light of his own beauty and intelligence.⁷ He does not realize that Honda has chosen him because of a curious birthmark of moles under his left arm which has been a sign of reincarnation in a chain of Honda's friends who had, in previous novels of Mishima's tetralogy, all died young. But Toru makes no plans to channel his intelligence, even when Honda hires a tutor to prepare him for uni-

⁵ Susan Napier, *Escape from the Wasteland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 13.

⁶ Napier 145.

⁷ Yukio Mishima, *Decay of the Angel. The Sea of Fertility: A Cycle of Four Novels* (New York: Knopf, 1974) 32. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *D*.

versity. He prefers the sports car he demands from Honda and liaisons with girls. In his ambiguity toward himself, he vacillates from feeling invincible, "too perfect," and at the next moment "not human," and later "a monster" (D 142-46).

Toru brings about his own destruction at age nineteen. He has read a "dream journal" bequeathed to Honda by his boyhood friend, Kiyooki. Learning about the early death of the elegant Kiyooki, Toru decides to suicide immediately to prove that he too is a member of a special group of Honda's friends (Kiyooki, Isao, Chan) who had died by age twenty, in their peak of youth and beauty. But Toru, in attempting suicide with poison, succeeds only in blinding himself. Toru now must vegetate in the care of a slavish, lunatic girlfriend. He plans to marry her so as to bring forth flawed descendants for Honda, while he himself continues to lose his cleanliness, his beauty, and his self-determination. Japan's spirit as represented in the Kiyooki-Isao-Chan trilogy of reincarnation has decayed progressively throughout the twentieth century.

Sadly, the aged Honda, having known something of a better Japan earlier in the century, now exhibits some of the corruption Japan has suffered as the century has continued. For example, he turns voyeur, either observing his woman friend Kieko with a female prostitute or strangers at night in a Tokyo park, for which he and a host of other watchers are arrested. Nevertheless, Honda's life undergoes a reversal near the end of this novel, as had the lives of the Marquis de Sade and his wife in *Madame de Sade*. Ill and facing impending surgery, Honda suddenly yearns to see someone from his youth, from the time of a better Japan. His only remaining tie from the early twentieth century is his deceased boyhood friend Kiyooki's sweetheart, Satoko, who had entered a Buddhist nunnery at the end of World War I. As Honda ascends the steep mountain to the Gesshu Buddhist nunnery, his weakened condition makes the hard climb an ascent of faith. When Satoko, now the honored abbess, agrees to see Honda, he finds her at eighty-three a "pale figure in a white Kimono and a cloak of deep purple" whom "age had sped in the direction not of decay but of purification," transforming her into "a perfect jewel" (D 232).

Satoko has something to give to Honda as a reward for his climb of faith. "Mr. Honda has been kind enough to come all this way. I think he should see the south garden. I will take him there," (D 234). The garden is "without striking features"; it is empty, with "no memories, nothing" (D 235-36). And there in the Zen garden of emptiness, in the noonday sunlight and quiet, Honda releases his grasp on the tumultuous century which has almost destroyed him. The reality of his life or that of his past friends fades into insignificance in the timelessness of this garden where, as Satoko has explained, consciousness is "as it is in each heart" (D 234). And so, Honda retreats into the tradition of Japanese Buddhism.

For Mishima himself, the conclusion of his final book in the tetralogy which he had called his last word to the world is a gesture of return to the "old Japan," the one in which his grandmother's family had claimed aristocratic status, the status his grandmother had indoctrinated him to reclaim as his birthright. With his *seppuku* suicide the day he finished this last novel, Mishima, a writer of such acclaim that he was reputedly a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature, nihilistically rejected the Westernized Japan which no longer had anything to offer him.