

# Yukio Mishima, the Unambiguous, and Myself: Living through a Writer's Legacy\*

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The recent release by Criterion on DVD of Paul Schrader's film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985) and Mishima's own film *Patriotism* (1965) has caused the author of this essay to reconsider his relationship with the late Japanese writers' books and literary legacy. Believing that these fine films' presence on DVD will stimulate much renewed discussion of Mishima both in the US and Japan, the author recalls his first discovery of Mishima's existence shortly after his famous suicide in 1970, reading and responding to his literary output, and prodding famous authors such as Tennessee Williams and Cormac McCarthy for their thoughts on Mishima's influence. The author's two poems about Mishima are included to illustrate his changing inner perceptions of the internationally famous writer and the (now-fading) adverse reaction to his work in Japan caused by his politics and his virtually public suicide.

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Many readers probably remember that Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) was the most popular Japanese writer of his day, that he carried out extraliterary pranks which gave him constant media attention, directed his own art film and starred in commercial movies, wrote as his final work an important tetralogy of novels (*The Sea of Fertility*, *Hojo no umi*, 1965-1970), and, most famously, killed himself by committing *seppuku* (ritual suicide). These are perhaps the most memorable facts, but with the recent release of the Criterion Collection's DVD versions of Paul Schrader's *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985) and, more surprisingly, Mishima's own nearly lost film *Patriotism* (*Yukoku*, 1965), interest in this author, popular in America and Europe but until recently a rather taboo subject in Japan because of his virtually public suicide, should increase worldwide and spotlight other important aspects of his character and writings.

Indeed, my niece-in-law by marriage, a Japanese citizen, was recently impressed with my meager knowledge about Japan and its culture and about Mishima, gained mainly by reading his novels and criticism about them. After I showed her Schrader's beautiful film and Yasuzo Masumura's *A Man Blown by the Wind* (*Karakkaze Yaro*), in which Mishima starred in 1960, she commented that her generation (born after Mishima's death) and even younger Japanese were now content to accept Mishima for what he was and to fit him into Japan's ever more colorful contemporary mosaic. Certainly, in a culture now saturated with images from anime cartoons of "phallic-tentacled cephalopodal monsters raping adolescent helpless virginal

\*In 1968, Yasunari Kawabata titled his Nobel Prize address "Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself." Kenzaburo Oe, in 1994, titled his address "Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself." Mishima was several times thought to have been in contention for the Nobel Prize.

girls (Piven, 2004: p. 110)," Mishima's exploits seem much tamer, especially when most audiences don't remember the Pacific War. "He's not an actor, though," my niece said. "He's a writer." She had read none of his books but she could understand the film's dialogue, and whereas Mishima's acting looked halfway decent to me (lacking much of the melodramatic, womanish quality described by John Nathan in his biography), she agreed with critics of the time in thinking it "bland." Mishima's *Patriotism* is silent, so this is not a problem there. The surviving production members of that film, interviewing each other on the DVD, seem also to accept Mishima as once again an important figure, not one about whom to be culturally embarrassed.

As many have pointed out, if Mishima were a fictional character no one would believe in him, but as life is almost always stranger and less believable than fiction, and since Mishima was a real and amazing person, we are forced to remember that he lived in our own times and influenced them with his extraordinary and sometimes bizarre art and action.

I had never heard of Mishima until after his death, so what should make me become interested in his work and life to the point that I've read, studied, and taught his works, written two poems about him, and now seek to entertain or enlighten an audience concerning my personal relationship with the legacy of this dead author and cultural icon?

First of all, there is an interest I have always had in so-called "decadent" literature and its influence on society. Like Mishima before me, I read Petronius, Lucian, Huysmans, and Wilde (especially *Salome*) with glee, and I loved fiction alluding to or about ancient history, such as *Death in Venice* and *Memoirs of Hadrian*.

I'm also able to remember dates and personal events very

easily and clearly. Mishima's thoughts and motivations are ambiguous, perhaps, but not his words, actions, and the dates that he undertook them or foresaw them undertaken. Let's look at a few coincidental examples where his works and my life overlapped, as in Mishima's last novel, *The Decay of the Angel* (*Tennin gosui*, 1970), which begins on May 2, 1970, a day I remember very well: it was my twenty-fifth birthday.

The first time I ever heard of Mishima was one or two weeks after his death when I saw that event covered on the *NBC Nightly News*, David Brinkley's naturally deep voice even rising a pitch in reporting that one of Mishima's comrades had "sliced off his head." This certainly intrigued me, unambiguously, but I did nothing about it.

However, in the summer of 1970, a colleague of mine at Alma College, Dr. Timothy Thomas, had voyaged to Japan with his wife. In 1971, he told me that on the same ship were Tennessee Williams and a handsome Japanese boy, a student at UCLA, obviously an object of homosexual desire, though he was not the dramatist's lover. Williams was going to Tokyo to revisit Mishima, among other things<sup>1</sup>. This meeting and Mishima's response to Williams and the uninhibited Japanese student were later recounted in *Esquire* magazine in 1972.

In January 1973, I noticed a new copy of *Runaway Horses* (*Honba*, 1968) in my local public library. Remembering how much Mishima's death had interested me I picked it up and read the dustjacket, thinking that I now needed to read some of this man's works, but in order. Over the next weeks I checked out and read *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no Kokuhoku*, 1949), *Thirst For Love* (*Ai no kawaki*, 1950), *Forbidden Colors* (*Kinjiki*, 1953), *Spring Snow* (*Haru no yuki*, 1966) and *Runaway Horses*. I loved the poetic and "decadent" aspects of these works, missing too many of Mishima's philosophical ideas then, but glorying in the fleshly formulations of *Confessions* and in the fever pitch pace of *Runaway Horses*, leading to the hero's suicide in that sublime last sentence, translated as "The instant that the blade tore open his flesh, the bright disk of the sun soared up and exploded behind his eyelids." It reminded me of the gorgeous synesthesia of Hart Crane's lines "...carbonic amulet/Sere of the sun exploded in the sea."

At Christmas 1973, my wife gave me hardcover copies (\$7.95 each!) of *Runaway Horses* and *The Temple of Dawn*. I did not reread the former but plunged into the lush, jungly, sexually exciting interior of *The Temple*, unbored by the arcane Buddhist ideas, and fascinated by the poetic, the sensual, the voyeuristic.

In January 1974, a group of Mishima's books appeared in inexpensive paperback form (\$1.25 each) from Berkley. On the tenth of that month, I bought several.

July 3, 1974, I acquired Henry Scott-Stokes' *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*. This was an inflammatory reading that inspired some ridiculous hero-worship as well as formal appreciation of Mishima's writing skills (could I compare him to Berlioz, whose biography I had just finished reading? Yes!). To me he was a romantic hero, like Berlioz or Byron, not a political figure I found possessing any credibility.

Then on May 18, 1975, I entered a bookstore and there sat the final novel of Mishima's tetralogy, *The Decay of the Angel* (not *Five Signs of a God's Decay*, as had been its earlier announced title). Had I known that various events at the novel's conclusion had not even taken place yet, Mishima having ex-

tended the action beyond his own death, I would have read it immediately and perhaps honored the day of its ending, July 22, 1975. But I was reluctant to see the tetralogy end, apparently, because I put off finishing it until November of that year and was disappointed, then, with the undramatic, religious-philosophical ending. Could Mishima's answer to all the phantasmagoric richness of his life and work really be "Nothing?" Mishima's life had been a constant effort to deny nothingness, it seemed, even the fantasy of *seppuku* being a supremely visceral, unambiguous act illustrating his "autoerotic desire for the rapture of violent [consummation] (Rayns, 2008)," a verification of his apparent "paralyzing inability to feel alive except when approaching death (Rayns, 2008)," this imagined or real death producing the "tragic beauty" which Mishima existed to create.

The year 1975 also saw the composition (before I finished reading *The Decay of the Angel*) of my first poem about Mishima.

For Yukio Mishima

Not that you died—  
not that the steel,  
sharpest that moment in all its 300 years,  
serrated your corded tendons so slowly;  
not that your entrails slimed out  
like answers to some question of life  
veiled in your meridian's indigo;  
not that Morita slashed your neck so clumsily,  
or even that the photograph of your head  
was published around the world,  
but that the guardsmen in the parking lot  
laughed, and cursed your self-knowledge—  
a porphyry-veined commitment to that penultimate  
quivering horizon before explosion of orange-blood sun.

But that laughter was too much a part of  
the concrete, Coke bottles, and gas masks  
to delay you. It was not  
what sent you arrowing above transistors and  
whale-slaughter,  
a thin steel of soul, invisible,  
we seeing only its contrail,  
rising to rake the sun's guts,  
plunging back to the fleshed garden—  
waterfalls, fruits, vines, purple wisteria death.

Overly romantic, atavistic, and idealistic, yes. But poetic, certainly. As with too many of my poems, a ridiculously long time passed before it was published. It finally appeared in *Nebo* (with two typos) in 1989 and was reprinted in *Hammers* 3 in 1995.

June 18, 1976, saw me finally delving into John Nathan's biography *Mishima*. I quickly saw that though Henry Scott-Stokes had done a better job of recounting the author's last day, Nathan's book was much more informative about most other aspects of Mishima's life.

Now the only person I had ever seen who had met Mishima was Tennessee Williams, whom I had observed eating lunch at Gallatoire's on December 21, 1974. I was never introduced to Mr. Williams, but on May 10, 1980, I was finally able to ask him about Mishima in a question and answer session at the University of Tennessee. "Can you tell us what Yukio Mishima was like?" I yelled from the floor. Disappointingly, what he

<sup>1</sup>They had met once before, in the 1950s.

answered was mostly a brief summary of elements related in the *Esquire* article, but at the end he at least enlightened us about something that happened after their dinner together. The next day, he recalled, Mishima telephoned him and said “Tennessee, you know I really like you, but you really shouldn’t drink so much,” an unsurprising comment from a novelist who is reputed to have gotten drunk only once in his adult life<sup>2</sup>.

Their meeting had come only three months before Mishima’s death on November 25, 1970. Why, many have asked, did he choose that date? It was probably not because he had started *Confessions of a Mask*, his first successful novel, on November 25, 1948, or because he had finished the first novel of his tetralogy, *Spring Snow*, on November 25, 1966, and would die after he finished the last on the same date in 1970. Nor was it because the next day was Thanksgiving (Mishima did enjoy celebrating some Western holidays). No, more likely, two other factors played into his selection of the date.

First, in his final letter to his parents, Mishima had said that he wanted “to die not as a literary man but entirely as a military man (Rayns, 2008).” While this seems fairly ridiculous and mere fantasy in spite of the fact that Mishima had organized his own private army, his last months were indeed devoted to military endeavors, such as training his group with the *Jieitai*, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. This would point to a historical significance for November 25, such as that November 25, 1941, was an important day for the Japanese military and national spirit because it was the day on which the Japanese fleet’s strike force received its orders to refuel and move into position to attack Pearl Harbor.

Second, Mishima’s ashes were placed in his family burial plot on January 14, 1971, forty-nine days after his death. The belief is that the spirit of the dead person departs for reincarnation at that time. This might be unremarkable except that January 14 is Mishima’s birthday. He would have been forty-six. Had Mishima planned this birth/death ceremony to coincide when arranging for his final day? Surely it makes sense.

In my first letter to Cormac McCarthy in January of 1987, I included my first Mishima poem and asked if he had any thoughts on the matter. He replied that though he had seen the famous photograph of Mishima’s severed head in *Life* magazine, he thought that time would quickly erase most of Mishima’s concerns as well as our concerns about him.

When I finally met Mr. McCarthy on May 23, 1989, I gave him a copy of Schrader’s film *Mishima*, which he thought would “never get to El Paso.” He highly approved of it.

In these same late 1980s the anti-Mishima sloganeering and propaganda were in full swing among Japan’s younger fiction writers. Professor Susan Napier recounts published discussions between Masahiko Shimada and Akira Asada in 1988. Here Shimada references Mishima as “an artificial [horror] that refuses to die” (Napier, 1995: p. xvi) and finally says “I think that Mishima might come back as a monster...like an AIDS virus (Napier, 1995: p. xvii).” Reading this I was annoyed and decided to let Mishima indeed come back, in a poem, only he would not be an AIDS virus but the most representative Japanese monster in modern history: Godzilla (*Gojira* in Japanese). It was time for Japanese intellectuals, I thought along with Napier, to stop ignoring or trashing Mishima because he represented aspects of Japanese society they would prefer to remain buried (Napier, 1995: p. xvii). Thus “Yukio Mishima Returns

<sup>2</sup>An assertion authoritatively debunked in *Persona: A Biography of Yukio Mishima* by Naoki Inose and Hiroaki Sato (2012).

as Godzilla” emerged from the abyss in slithery free verse to deconstruct Tokyo all over again.

Mishima Returns as Godzilla

“... I think that Mishima might come back as a monster...”

—Masahiko Shimada

Slickly ascending, godlike, from Tokyo’s harbor,  
Mishima returns in a gray rubber Godzilla suit—  
his face, grinning, shines through the open mouth.  
Astride a titan leather rhinoceros, animate, he guides  
the creaking, bloated creature with his knees to crush  
Big Cedrics, Nissans, Coke cans, blue and orange-haired  
teens,  
and whipping his tail overhead stomps for the cemetery  
where  
he may avenge himself on Grandmother’s ashes.  
*Gojira! Gojira!* scream the crowds,  
some running away, blindly, others desperately grabbing  
the rhino’s legs, humping frantically as they stand  
on its toenails—humping away as it reaches the Ginza  
where gay bars empty: some denizens fall prostrate, some  
kneel,  
shrieking the bitter glory of their savior-avator; others  
recoil at such tackiness, yet the fronts of their pants jerk  
like creatures vomiting; a handful are raptured, ascending  
to Fuji’s tip—  
fensed of snow, it erupts, but no one sees this now.  
*Toriis* snap, powerlines stretch, dragging intestinelike,  
kicking,  
squelched humans by their headphones, their teeth show-  
ering sparks.  
Right wing morons emulate the homosexuals, throwing  
themselves  
forward in worship under the clublike feet; mashed to  
slubber  
they squirt out, splash in the eyes of *yakuza*,  
noose-bound politicians, into the mouths of skinny house-  
wives  
receiving the slime shamelessly, invigorated as they swal-  
low.  
The Self-Defense Forces (SDF) cannons fire again but  
Mishima  
is wounded no more than Godzilla, past or present.  
Literary critics, pixilated novelists attack from the rear,  
throwing  
silicon implants, *kasutori* dregs, computer mice and Bar-  
bie dolls, only  
to drown, squabbling, morcellized in a mild tsunami of  
*Bad-ah Taste-ah!*  
Mainland and Hong Kong businessmen, US Airmen en-  
gaged to  
lissome Japanese girls place gallons of liquor they’ve  
hand-carried in  
from China (the kind with the snake curled in the bottle’s  
bottom)  
before the creatures—“*Kong Long* spare us,” they cry.  
The rhino  
scarfs them all up, crunching bones and bottles together in  
its  
Triceratopsian beak. Mishima snorts, howls, inhales its  
ebriate breath.  
*Hentai* tentacles slurp from his back, ears, asshole—

grabbing thugs, waiters, and would-be ninjas alike, *zai-batsu* and rough trade together, he lifts them, impaled in all orifices, to his mouth where he lectures on Beauty and post mortem conversations with Marlon Brando, then eels out of them with resonant farts. They fall, damaged but enlightened. "I am now what you wanted me to be," the tongued tentacles shrill. They slither back, disappear.

Now the tyrannical two sweep around the Imperial Palace, carefully avoiding damage: twin salutatory flames rip from Mishima's nostrils, collide over the palace and fall like fireworks. Man and monster swag for the cemetery where the SDF will make a last stand. Their plans are known, or at least guessed—fountains of cyanide, arsenic, thallium and rat poison are prepared, ready to spew. Surely these will panic the thing that rides the rhino. Alas, Godzilla-fire vomits from his jaws this time, scorches the poisons to powder, harmless, slues onward over the mossed gravestones, splitting a certain urn atwain: the rubber suit spins around, gelatinous humid urine erupts from its vent, soaks and sears the ashes, which implode to void. Suddenly somebody notices Fuji, points—what first seems lava resolves to more tentacles: flaring from the mountain they rise, curl into a uroboros round the sun, and Mishima acknowledges, smiles: the leather rhino inflates like a sleek mushroom cloud—Mishima towers—then pops, utterly gone. Not falling, man and rubber suit soar, higher, aiming for the mountain's turbulence, which seeks them out, but

Godzilla's simulacrum falls away, fleers to the waves, vanishes. Mishima, embraced by Fuji's limbs, is drawn over and down to the writhing summit...is sucked inside, along with the apotheosized gay revelers...the tip glazes as before: Mishima, at long last, has returned to his country.

When the wreckage has settled and microphones proliferate like mould out of the growing dusk, and the spotlights shudder, the SDF commander says, "It could have been worse. It could have been Godzilla returning as Mishima."

Big Cedric: a model of Japanese car  
*Gojira*: the Japanese name for Godzilla  
*toriis*: ceremonial Japanese gates  
*yakuza*: Japanese gangsters  
*kasutori*: a cheap liquor, full of impurities, made from *saké* dregs  
*Kong Long*: the Chinese name for Godzilla  
*hentai*: tentacle sex, as in Japanese anime cartoons  
*zaibatsu*: Japanese industrialists

In the form of his newly re-released movie *Patriotism* Mishima has indeed returned, and his fans as well as his critics should see it, but I would prefer that audiences turn to his literary works rather than his final performances (both cinematic and actual) to realize that, as I have seen over 43 years of reading, observing, and living through my encounters with his legacy, Yukio Mishima is a poetic, persuasive writer, one steeped in ideas unambiguously vivified: thought and word made flesh.

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