

YUKIO MISHIMA AND THE AESTHETICIZATION OF POLITICS FROM A DELEUZIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH AND SACRIFICE

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Abstract Mishima Yukio is not the only Japanese writer to commit suicide. In culture like the Japanese one, in which the act of suicide is not ostracised by religious taboos, voluntary death has taken on different forms over time and has been expressed in strict codes and rituals. Osamu Dazai, Mishima's literary rival, committed *shinjū* (13 June 1948), a double suicide out of love, together with the woman he loved. Akutakawa Ryūnosuke, Mishima's idol, killed himself at the age of 35. However, the present paper's focus on Mishima's suicide is due to the political undertone the writer sought to impart to the ritual act of *seppuku* by which he ended his life. To understand the motives behind this act, in my view, it is not enough to merely present the political aspects and the historical context. A certain fascination with violent death, in general, and ritualistic death, in particular, also transpired from his work. In the present study, I will analyse Mishima's political view from a new perspective, by starting from Gilles Deleuze's view on *the becoming* of politics.

Keywords Modern Japanese literature, *seppuku* ritual suicide, Mishima Yukio.

Mishima Yukio (1925-1970, his real name Hiraoka Kimitake) was born in Tokyo. Shortly after birth, the child was taken into the care of his paternal grandmother, who lived on the ground floor of the family home. The pretext was to protect the child from the dangerous stairs that led to the upper floors, where his parents lived. In the volume *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku* 仮面の告白, 1949), Mishima writes about his childhood, dominated by the figure of his grandmother, a strong woman from an old aristocratic family, allied with the Tokugawa clan – the clan that ruled Japan during the Edo Period (1600-1868). The writer's grandmother had no admiration for the men the family (her husband and son), but she had a deep affection for her first grandson. Mishima's father graduated from Tokyo University, and his mother came

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from a family of Confucian intellectuals. Until the age of 11, Kimitake was raised by his grandmother, from whom he inherited a nostalgia for old feudal Japan. Deprived of his mother's presence and love, the child knew only solitude and the crises of his grandmother's disease. His only escape was the *kabuki* theatre that he and his grandmother often attended. Through the *kabuki* plays, Mishima first came into contact with the moral dilemmas portrayed in the historical plays (*jidaimono*), as well as the practice and ritual of *seppuku*, or the ritual death of the samurai. One episode from the *Confessions* that reveals another side of the writer's nature is the encounter with the sewage worker inside the family home. The physical features of this model of masculine beauty can later be found or identified in other characters from Mishima's literature. This model blends classical masculine beauty, eroticism, as well as the thrill of a drama that would later be understood as a representation of the impossible desire to possess or identify with the object of desire and its perfect masculinity. When the child is later taken in by his parents, a passionate, deep relationship will form between him and his mother, but also one of hostility in relation to his father.

As a student, Mishima began to publish short stories and poems in the school paper. Because of his fragile build, he was not drafted to the front, which was thus a rejection that deeply upset the teenager who had been fascinated by the military uniform. He expressed these feelings artistically in the confessions, but he also inserted them later more subtly in the novel *Kinkakuji (The Temple of the Golden Pavilion)*. He does, however, participate in the collective mobilisation by working in a factory that produced airplanes intended for *kamikaze* pilots. He debuted in the literary magazine *Bungei Bunka* (文藝文化) with the short story *Hanazakari no Mori/ Forest in Bloom* (花ざかりの森). At the recommendation of Kawabata Yasunari, he published the short story *Tabaco* (煙草 *Tabako*) in the magazine *Ningen* (人間), in November 1947. Kawabata would then write the preface for his short story volume. Nonetheless, his wide recognition would come with the novel *Kinkakuji (The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, 1956)*.

However, from 1960 onward, a predictable ideological turn occurs and the writer dedicates himself to the idea of revitalising the myth of the Emperor and of the warrior way, namely that of the old samurai – the only ones, in Mishima's view, capable of maintaining and preserving the national purity in the face of the increasingly taller wave of capitalism and consumerism. In 1966, Mishima establishes the Shield Society (*Tate no kai*), which organised activities for maintaining physical fitness, strengthening muscles, as well as military and sports games, and training in traditional sword fighting (*kendo*). The Society initially had 50 members (from among the Waseda University students), which later increased to 100. Mishima's young disciple, Morita Masakatsu, was the last to join the group. Between 1966 and 1970, Mishima wrote the *Tetralogy of the Sea of Fertility*, which can be summarised by several major themes: the theme of pure love, the theme of death at a young age, nationalist fanaticism, heroic idealism, the decay of contemporary society, and the loss of hope. Honda, the protagonist who experiences all the events in the tetralogy, serves as the observer, appearing in all four volumes of the tetralogy at different ages.

Mishima committed *seppuku* at the Self-Defence Forces' headquarters on 25 November 1970. He was followed in death by his disciple, Morita Masakatsu. This death and spectacular end overshadowed the writer's talent for a long time, casting a shadow over his work with suspicions of theatrical staging and a pursuit of spectacle. However, Mishima's case raises questions regarding the extent to which the two fields, literature and politics, differ in the writer's mind and whether the aesthetic view can be separated from his political stances.

Roy Starrs, who analysed the traits of the complicated Japanese modernity, considers that, in Mishima's case, a separation between literature and politics is impossible. Beyond its artistic expression, Mishima's modernism also has a reactionary character. This would place him on the far right, in opposition to Ōe Kenzaburō's far left. Roy Starrs admits that the two writers do, in fact, share an idea. Each would reject the American-type forms of modernism and would seek to establish an alternative and original type of modernism. On the one hand, Mishima opposes the modernist view and desires a restoration of the imperial power and of the idea of a family state (*kokutai*). On the other hand, Ōe Kenzaburō considers that the American occupation failed to dismantle the centrist imperialist state, which ultimately led to the restoration of the pre-war reactionary right-wing regime and thus proposes an alternative to recovering the Japanese identity by returning to a pre-historic age.

In the volume *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (1991), Deleuze and Guattari identify three directions of thought: logical science, art and philosophy.¹ Science establishes the functions, art establishes the perceptions and affects, and philosophy creates the concepts. At first, it would appear that politics has no place in this structure that is coherently built to define philosophy.

Sartre, as well as Derrida and Lyotard at times, suggest that philosophy could also serve political purposes, but Deleuze does not venture in such a direction. However, he does admit, in *Pourparlers* (1972-1990), that he had also somewhat traversed towards politics, and the volume *Anti-Oedipus* can be considered a book on political philosophy: "I, for my own part, made a sort of move into politics around May 68, as I came into contact with specific problems, through Guattari, through Foucault, through Elie Sambar. *Anti-Oedipus* was from beginning to end a book of political philosophy."²

According to this account, it is believed that Deleuze began taking an interest in politics particularly after May 1968. But *what kind of politics*³ is Deleuze speaking of? This is also a question raised by Alain Badiou in a well-known interview. In order to explain Gilles Deleuze's political view, Badiou begins from the volume *Pourparlers*. In the fifth part of the volume, the philosopher makes a crucial distinction between *histoire* and *devenir*: "The thing is, I became more and more aware of the possibility of distinguishing between becoming and

¹ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, Collection Critique, 1991), 111.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, transl. by Martin Joughin (Columbia University Press, 1997), 170.

³ Alain Badiou, "Existe-t-il quelque chose comme une politique deleuzienne?" *Cités* 40, *Deleuze politique*, Presses Universitaires de France (2009): 15-20.

history.”⁴ Asked by his interlocutor, Toni Negri, what precisely this distinction is, Deleuze explains that, starting from the Nietzschean concept of *Untimely*, he tried to clarify the relation between *history* and *becoming* by appealing to the concept of the *event*: “Becoming isn't part of history; history amounts only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is, to create something new.”⁵ Thus, according to Deleuze, if politics can be understood as a form of managing state and government affairs, then politics is part of history and determines it. However, the philosopher adds that becoming is not history, and man’s only chance resides in their *revolutionary becoming*: “Men's only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is intolerable.”⁶ Therefore, in the philosopher’s view, what does creating an *event* mean? What precisely can this creation be? Deleuze answers unhesitatingly: “*création de mort.*” There are two such forms of death, as Deleuze points out: one death occurs on the line of history, while the other takes place on the line of becoming. However, the two forms of death differ. Death on the line of history, on the one hand, is the very death of becoming. It is a death of the impossibility of becoming. On the other hand, death on the line of becoming is the immanent death of life, a death of life, but in the sense in which it is part of life. However, this distinction is not easily explainable. Deleuze suggests that pure becoming occurs in the form of *intempestive*, as a rupture of history, a short-circuit that opens the present towards the future and that thus changes the institutions that had often been solidified in eternalised forms. The best example for the irruption of pure becoming is the *event* generated by the revolutionary moment of May 1968: “May 68 was a demonstration, an irruption, of a becoming in its pure state.”⁷ A thinker critical of capitalism from Marxist positions, Deleuze has rather flexible view on history, given that what he is interested in is *creation*: “Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control,”⁸ or, in other words, creating a short-circuit that would interrupt a *closed* state of things. However, the creation of an event also finds its source in the lines of flight, perceptible at the societal level, for example, whether through the pressure of minorities or the crises present in societies of control. According to Deleuze, the new types of control societies no longer function using mechanisms of enclosure: “We're moving toward control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication.”⁹

The Japanese student revolts of 1968, animated by ideals similar to those of the French students during the same period, did not go unnoticed by Mishima. He engaged with the young protesters in a series of meetings. The discontent of the younger generation with

⁴ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

the entire political system (both right-wing and left-wing ideologies) emerged, as they perceived it as anti-Japanese. The country's evolution towards capitalism had brought forth dissatisfactions that had no direct connection to the standard of living, but rather with the issues regarding an awareness of losing their national identity and a spiritual re-evaluation of the country. These issues came to light the moment a new treaty with the United States had been negotiated. After sealing the treaty of the US in October 1969, the government expected public demonstrations, but they never took place. Disappointed in the lack of response, Mishima's disciple, Morita Masakatsu, proposes the occupation of the Diet, but the writer rejects this idea. Mishima was not yet convinced of the efficiency of such action and preferred to await a new opportunity. Thus, the presence of the writer within the paramilitary organisation Tatenokai – which he led –, as well as his public stances on the events that marked the period between 1968-1970, such as the student movements that began in 1968, or the public debates on the renegotiation of the terms of the security treaty between Japan and the US, must be reinterpreted and reassessed from the viewpoint of the relation between Mishima's artistic vision and his political ideologies. Yukio Mishima had developed an aesthetic view on politics, rather than a pragmatic one. He opposed the tensions and violent actions of 1968 through an artistic view and, along the lines of Derrida's idea, considered that "Art is resistance: it resists death, slavery, infamy, shame."¹⁰

To create an event and a short-circuit through death, thus forcing a new course of things, meant making death an art form (following the model of the old samurai). By creating a death on the line of becoming and not of history (i.e., death as an intempestive of becoming), Mishima hoped that a national reawakening would take place. He acted as if he were convinced that his own death by *seppuku* would become *anachronistic*, due to its unusual nature: an event that could determine or change something in the course of Japan's history. Death by self-sacrifice was the answer that the writer sought in order to create a shockwave throughout Japan and to shift the course of a society that was quickly adopting the social forms of aggressive capitalism and American consumerism. Moreover, obsessed with the idea of beauty, Mishima sought a solution for the issue of unifying the aesthetic view on death and the militant political ideology. This death by self-sacrifice had to be in accordance with the traditional ritual of the old samurai and had to be acknowledged as such, in relation with the codes of voluntary death. He was convinced that this act, in a Deleuzian sense, would lead to the creation of *an event in pure becoming* and would give history a new course.

The four volumes of the *Tetralogy of the Sea of Fertility*, published at different intervals of time, 春の雪 *Haru no yuki* (*Spring Snow*, 1966), 奔馬 *Honba* (*Runaway Horses*, 1968), 暁の寺 *Akatsuki no tera* (*The Temple of Dawn*, 1970), and 天人五衰 *Tennin gosui* (*The Decay of the Angel*, 1971), represent the author's artistic and political testament. The *Tetralogy of the Sea of Fertility* is not only Mishima's testamentary work, but also, due to its length, a receptacle that gathers the previous works' main themes and ideas. By establishing the theme of metempsychosis – the transmigration of a soul from one existence to another –

¹⁰ Ibid., 174.

as the narrative backbone, the structure of the tetralogy, meticulously crafted from a compositional perspective, shows, in Mishima's view (who had created his final work as a poetic and political testament), one final attempt to make his protagonist into the artist of his own life, following the model Mishima himself adhered to throughout his existence, beginning with *Confessions of a Mask*.

In March 1965, Mishima told the press that he had begun writing a new work to which he would dedicate the following five or six years. At the end of the tetralogy, several months before his death, he had reached two thousand eight hundred pages: "five years later, when he completed the tetralogy several months before he died, it was twenty-eight hundred pages long."¹¹ He began work on the first volume, *Haru no yuki (Spring Snow)*, in June 1965 and finished it in November, that same year. He continued with the volume *Honba (Runaway Horses)* and finished it the following year, in May. The third volume, *Akatsuki no tera (The Temple of Dawn)*, required documentation for which he travelled to Bangkok and was finished in 1968. He began writing the final volume, *Tennin gosui (The Decay of the Angel)*, in 1968 and finished it shortly before his death. Mishima devoted his final years exclusively to writing this tetralogy and to an increasingly more active political and ideological engagement. As Rodica Frențiu demonstrates, this engagement transcends the bounds of a mere political choice and could be understood as a true affirmation of the *thymos* between two divergent poles: *aesthetic view* and *ideological fanaticism*.¹² Thus, Mishima's involvement in the paramilitary organisation he led, Tatenokai (*The Shield Society*), as well as his public stances on the 1968 student movements or the public debates around the renegotiation of the terms of the security treaty between Japan and the USA, must be interpreted and assessed, much like his literary works, from a dual perspective: aesthetic and ethical, ontological and metaphysical, objective-realistic and subjective-confessional.

According to his biographers, despite the fact that Mishima had finished the final volume of the tetralogy three months before his ritual suicide, the writer maintained his privilege of adding the final pages to the manuscript the very night before 25 November 1970, the day of his ritual suicide. This biographic detail is added to as the intention to offer the *Tetralogy of the Sea of Fertility* the prestige of a poetic testament, despite the appearance of a narration in which the dichotomies narrator-author, narrator-character seem resolved by the heterodigetic form of the text. However, the witness character Honda – who, throughout his life, periodically re-encounters the reincarnations of his childhood friend, Kiyooki –, who is in search for the meaning of life, sets the rhythm of the book to the rhythm of his own struggles and thoughts.

On the morning of 25 November 1970, together with four associates (Morita Masakatsu, Ogawa Masahiro, Koga Masayoshi and Koga Hiroyasu), members of the Shield Society, Mishima entered the headquarters of the Self-Defence Forces (the only military structure that existed at that time in Japan) in Ichigaya. After the end of World War II, through

¹¹ John Nathan, *Mishima. A Biography* (Boston, Rutlan, Vermont. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2004), 301-302.

¹² Rodica Frențiu, "Yukio Mishima: Tmos Between Aesthetics and Ideological Fanaticism," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 9, no. 25 (Spring 2010): 69.

the peace treaty with the US, Japan agreed to no longer have an active army, which is why the organisation named the Self-Defence Forces (自衛隊) was established in July 1954, for strictly defensive purposes. For a country with such an influent warrior culture, with such a strong cult of heroic values and a long-standing military practice that elevated the martial arts to the level of an art form, the prohibition of having its own army was a true shock. Mishima could not come to terms with the situation either, which is why he established, together with friends and comrades, a paramilitary society (*The Shield Society*), which offered training in battle techniques and tactics. Through this society, as well as other forces under the banner of Japan's rebirth, Mishima hoped for a revitalisation of the old spirit of the samurai, whose lives were traditionally dedicated to the Emperor. The restoration, in the old spirit of the warriors, was to be accomplished following the model of the *Shinpūren Rebellion* (神風連の乱 *Shinpūren no ran*) of 1876. Its aim had been to remove the Government from the Meiji Period (considered to be anti-Japanese) and to ensure that the Emperor held absolute control over the country. The Emperor was to govern solely through the warriors, and not through the corrupt politicians. The mention of the *Shinpūren Rebellion* can also be found in the second volume of the tetralogy (*Honba*), in which the character named Isao is a follower of the far-right groups and is part of the group named the *League of Blood Incident* (血盟団 *Ketsumeidan*). This group, at the beginning of the 1930s, was tasked to remove the influent and rich leaders of the government through assassination, and to restore the Emperor to his rightful powers. The trial of the spiritual leader of the group, Inoue Shirō (1886-1960), who claimed to have acted in the name of the Emperor, caused a great stir at the time, dividing society. Despite having been sentenced to life in prison, he was released in 1940. Mishima Yukio was inspired by this incident for the plot of the second novel of the tetralogy, which centres around young Isao, considered to be a reincarnation of Kiyooki, the protagonist of the first novel and Honda's childhood friend.

The final scene in the novel, in which, after the assassination of the corrupt minister Kurahara, Isao fulfils the ritual of seppuku, seems to poetically anticipate the moment in which Mishima himself would commit the same ritual, on 25 November 1970:

勲は深く呼吸をして、左手で腹を撫でると、瞑目して、右手の小刀の刃先をそこへ押しあて、左手の指さきで位置を定め、右腕に力をこめて突っ込んだ。正に刀を腹へ突き立てた瞬間、日輪は臉の裏に赫奕と昇った。¹³

The most important detail of this final scene is, obviously, the sun appearing in the sky. The image of the *sun soaring up*, in this carefully elaborated context, bears political significance, given that the sun represents the Emperor – the image of the sun is, in fact, stylised on Japan's flag, as well (*hinomaru* 日の丸). Mishima himself, on the morning of 25 November 1970, wrote on the *hachimaki*, the white headband he tied to his forehead, the words of a young samurai from the 14th century who had died for the emperor: To be reborn seven times to serve the

¹³ Yukio Mishima, 奔馬 豊饒の海 (二) *Honba Hojo no umi* (2) (Tokyo: 新潮社 Shinchosha, 1990), 368.

Emperor (七生報國 *Shichishō hōkoku*). In addition to their imperial, political character, these words also bear a poetic significance, given that they justify the theme of reincarnation, the idea around which the *Tetralogy of the Sea of Fertility* (豊饒の海 *Hōjō no Umi*) is built. The day of the Mishima incident is the date on which Hirohito (Emperor Shōwa) becomes regent, but also the date on which the Emperor makes the Humanity Declaration, at the age of 45. In fact, it is also the date on which Mishima began writing *Confessions of a Mask / Kamen no kokuhaku*.

The most ideological volume of the tetralogy remains the second, *Honba (Runaway Horses)*. Published symptomatically in the revolutionary year 1968, the novel reflects the moments of tension and exaltation experienced by the author. Mishima's biographer, John Nathan, suggests that the coup attempt was nothing more than a pretext for a ritual suicide, with no further political meaning. The Japanese and international media have commented on this incident extensively, given the fact that the author was known both in Japan and abroad. The author's eccentricity, as well as his affinity for cinematography (Mishima also acted in film) led to the interpretation of his ritual suicide as a media *performance*, which is only partially true, in our opinion. Attached to the traditional values of the old samurai, Mishima did not hesitate to prove the authenticity of his patriotic sentiments, offering himself to death through the ritual of *seppuku*. Moreover, in the sense shown by Deleuze's philosophy, Mishima forced the creation of an *event* that would have a strong impact and that would generate a shockwave that would compel the Japanese society to react. By bringing into contemporaneity an old, feudal ritual, aware of its inadequacy to the modern, consumerist times, Mishima aimed to shake the collective consciousness and to cause a national spiritual rebirth that would reawaken the Japanese spirit. Through the act of suicide, Mishima hoped to obtain a strong effect of cathartic tremble, which is why he unwillingly turns into a tragic character. Thus, the distance that separates him from his ideal can only be overcome through death. An analysis of the photographs taken by the press on the day of the incident shows Mishima hesitating on the balcony of the headquarters in Ichigawa, while unsuccessfully addressing the soldiers of the self-defence forces, as well as the reaction of those who listened, not understanding what was taking place.

The Japanese and the international press discussed this highly mediated incident, but the impact of Mishima's death did not have the desired effect and its impact was incomparable to that of General Nogi's act of *junshi* (1912), carried out on the day of Emperor Meiji's funeral. Mishima Yukio was a well-known writer abroad and he was, in fact, also known for his eccentricity, which is why his ritual suicide (*seppuku*) was interpreted as a spectacle. The distance between the warrior ideal of the old samurai and the new material values of the society of his time seemed difficult to overcome. The new materialistic values of the society of his time (comfort, wellbeing and peace of mind) represented the only values for which most Japanese people strived to ensure for their families.

In the fourth volume of the tetralogy, *The Decay of the Angel (Tennin Gosui)*, the division between the spiritual and the material values is, in fact, the object of a subtle criticism of the contemporary Japanese people's preference for the material world and their abandonment of the traditional, spiritual values.

As Roy Starrs argues, Mishima's suicide must be understood in the terms of the Japanese tradition that values the ultimate sacrifice as a moral victory,¹⁴ rather than through the lens of the Western discourse, such as that of Nietzschean nihilism – a perspective the Japanese writer himself employed in his texts. Thus, it is no wonder that, despite Mishima's extremism of thought, he secured his place in the pantheon of martyrs and heroes in relation to traditional Japanese thought.¹⁵ Far from representing a moral victory, I would argue that it a victory over history, in the Deleuzian sense of the interpretation.

In the fourth volume of the tetralogy, *The Decay of the Angel (Tennin gosui)*, the central theme is, in fact, this very awareness of the distance between the spiritual (traditional) values and the material (capitalist) values. Here, the author also subtly criticises contemporary Japan for preferring the material wellbeing to the detriment of the spiritual values and of the revitalisation of the traditional Japanese thought and character. The curtain fall and his exit from the stage of life does not bring about the joy of triumph, given that the hero, embodying the author himself, does not survive the final representation. His art does survive. However, the author had anticipated the experience of death by living it imaginatively beforehand through the act of writing, by envisioning the scene in which his character Isao commits *seppuku*. In this sense, by building a mysticism of beauty, which is neither theological nor ethical, but rather belongs to the very nature of fiction, Mishima becomes aware of the limits of art within the realm of existence, as well as of its ability to *resist death*. The unification of the aesthetic view with the political action – despite the shared idea of beauty toward which they independently strive – is a utopia, in historical terms, but also *a becoming*, in the sense of the *creation* defined by Deleuze. Mishima did not achieve what he desired politically: an event that would rupture and interrupt the historical becoming, in a Deleuzian sense, but he did manage, through his art, to conserve ephemeral beauty.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

¹⁴ Roy Starrs, *Modernism and Japanese Culture* (UK, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 243.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*