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The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and The West

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Introduction

We are often tempted to think our place in history is unique and somehow culturally isolated. I think this is false. In the Live Ideas Journal, I wrote a short story titled “Mishima in Love” as a tribute and examination of his work and philosophy. Now, I do not endorse everything Mishima advocated. I want to focus on Mishima’s life, his philosophy, and its relevance to the West. My main argument is that the current struggles and anxieties of the Western world parallel the state of Post-World War II Japan. I shall use Yukio Mishima as my object of inquiry.

Mishima & Post-World War II Japan

Yukio Mishima was originally born as “Kimitake Hiraoka” on January 14, 1925 and died on November 25, 1970 at the age of 45. Mishima was born into a family with aristocratic connections but not at the top tier of Japanese society. His grandmother, Natsue, stole him from his mother when he was a child. She was controlling, imposing, and dying of illness. She forbade him from playing outside with other boys and made him play with dolls with other girls. Her most important contribution to Mishima, however, was a love of art. She took him to Kabuki plays, a traditional form of Japanese theater, and allowed him to access books from the Western world. Before her death, she let him return to his mother, Shizue, who noticed he was not a normal boy. Mishima loved writing, and this unsettled his father, Azusa, who considered literature the pastime of homosexuals. He would shred and burn his son’s writings, and, according to Mishima’s biographer, John Nathan, Azusa once held Mishima’s face against a passing train and demanded he show emotion.ⁱ The young Mishima, however, remained emotionless.

Mishima began as a mediocre student in his aristocratic Peers School in Tokyo, but when he harnessed his writing skills, his intellectual and aesthetic awakening began. When he was 12, he was already crafting beautiful short stories. At age 16, he wrote what many consider a Tour de Force of 120 pages, which impressed far right-wing Japanese writers, because he had flawlessly written his story in 11th century court Japanese. He graduated top of his class and was recognized by the Emperor for his work.

Japan then entered World War II and began drafting all able-bodied men. Mishima was found to be physically unfit and denied admittance into the Imperial Army. Mishima felt humiliated by that rejection. His first major breakthrough as a writer, however, was the publication of *Confessions of a Mask* in 1949. The story concerns a young homosexual who must deal with ostracization from his surrounding society, an autobiographical tale.

After his book’s success, Mishima dedicated his life to writing and body building, hoping to become a work of art and beauty. This intellectual and physical refinement was a response to what he considered the westernization and diminishment of Japanese culture after the Second World War. The new Japanese constitution, under the watchful eye of General Douglas MacArthur, reads in Article 9:

*Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.*ⁱⁱ

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West – Suan Sonna

This article disturbed Mishima, because he believed there are two core elements of Japan – Chrysanthemum and what he called “The Sword.”ⁱⁱⁱ The former deals with art, beauty, and traditions like tea ceremonies. The latter captures Japan’s militaristic, aggressive, and more disciplined side – such as the Samurai Code of Ethics, Bushido. The West brought to the shores of Japan modernity, capitalism, materialism, and a more systematized, bureaucratic state – or at least at a pace faster than ever before.

Thus, Mishima formed a small army called “The Shield Society”, which was allowed to train at a military base in Ichigaya located in the eastern portion of Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan. On November 25, 1970, he committed ritual suicide after holding the base’s general hostage with a group of his Shield Society soldiers. This stunning display of seppuku affected Japan and the rest of the world.

Five Themes & Western Civilization

It may seem odd to premise my examination of Western civilization on a character as flamboyant and – in all honesty – unusual as Mishima. However, I think Yukio and his literary work illuminate our condition.

So, let me examine five core themes in Mishima’s work.

“Contradiction” as Truth

Mishima often told the actors in his plays that they should not portray human emotion as dualities. Tenderness and wrath are compatible. He was getting at a fundamental truth about human beings – we are contradictions. Mishima, for example, had many alter egos and was a psychologically complex individual.

Mishima believed that in order to survive the downfall of modernity and save the “magic” of the past, we would have to affirm something about the human spirit. Seeing that human nature is contradictory, multi-layered, and complex, Mishima sought out some unifying principle. He first went to art but saw that art is meaningless without action, without some correspondence to reality. He looked to eroticism and violence as higher modes of artistic expression. But, I think he found something even higher.

In Mishima’s eyes, the only solution is the tragic one – we cannot avoid living with our contradictions, adjusting our most precious beliefs with ones deemed more rational or acceptable. The solution for Mishima was glorious death in the pursuit of some higher vision.

The West is still suffering from the collapse of modernity and skepticism towards rationalism. It seemed as if our attempt to exemplify reason and order had only divorced us of the most intimate elements of our humanity. Even with advancements in science and medicine, as someone like Stephen Pinker would emphasize as progress and enlightenment, we are still anxious and uncertain about the future. Some have hoped that with the decline of religion and the “rise” of science & reason fanaticism would disappear. Instead, fanaticism seems like an ever-present threat.

Indeed, Mishima’s martyrdom has inspired other right-wing terrorists in the West,^{iv} and a writer in the Europe Now Journal compared Steve Bannon to Mishima: “Mishima and his comrades

were, in essence, the alt-right of the day, and were expressing many of the same fears: the fear of change, the fear of difference, the fear of being replaced, the fear of being forgotten along with all they represent. The fear that their conjured myth or mythos of their respective nations, and who can rightfully belong to them, will be shattered in the realities of an ever-evolving, globalizing society.”^v

The Virtue of Authenticity

In *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima deals with this idea of pretending to agree with “civilized” norms and the conflict those norms produce in terms of identity. On its own, a mask cannot confess anything. However, when it is worn, its bearer reveals something about himself depending on how he acts, on how he publicly presents himself to you. Masks are often used in the Japanese tradition to connect to or represent deity. Mishima considers confession a way of aligning oneself with the divine, as he cites Augustine and the practice of confession in the Catholic Church. Confession purifies us, and it is through the contradictory practice of being ourselves and viewing ourselves from the outside that we learn who we are.

Authenticity, genuine self-expression, is paramount in this day and age. It has become, some would argue, a replacement for truth itself.

The British philosopher Sir Roger Scruton noted in his essay “The Great Swindle” a new kind of tactic in discourse. Instead of engaging with whether someone has said something true you “discover ‘where they are coming from’, and to reveal the emotional, moral and political attitudes that underlie a given choice of words. The habit of ‘going behind’ your opponent’s words stems from Karl Marx’s theory of ideology, which tells us that, in bourgeois conditions, concepts, habits of thought and ways of seeing the world are adopted because of their socio-economic function, not their truth.”^{vi} In short, you try to get at their character and unmask their advances – you are trying to see who they really are...

What compels us nowadays is personality, sincerity, and authenticity. Scruton thinks that this cult of personality, however, has resulted in making academia and high culture fake – they are filled with thinkers, artists, and students who espouse ideas they don’t really believe but are only held for some other motive. Thus, we are stuck in a contradiction, an insincere game with slogans and mantras, that has angered those who yearn for authenticity. My connection to Mishima is simple: we allegedly wear masks today pretending as if we were confessing, while Mishima utilized the mask as a way to confess and empty himself.

The Necessity of Myths

Before committing ritual suicide, Mishima saluted the Emperor. However, he was not saluting the actual Emperor at the time, Hirohito, who had denied his status as deity in the Humanity Declaration of 1946. Mishima was saluting the grand myth of the Emperor as a supernatural being. For Mishima, that myth was something worth dying for and preserving.

Psychologists from Carl Jung to Joseph Campbell and now, in more popular form, Jordan Peterson push forward this idea that myths and archetypes play a large role in understanding the human condition.

I think all of us know what central myth has grounded Western Civilization. My question is this – what will replace it? I think the new narrative must be of religious and cosmic proportions. It will be radical in one form or another.

Masculinity

Psychologist Ronald F. Levant wrote an excellent paper titled *Towards the Reconstruction of Masculinity*. Let me focus on one point I found fascinating. In order to save the concept of masculinity, Levant referred to Campbell and Augustus Napier's idea of the hero's journey.^{vii} Every man must confront his inner demons and triumph over them as the test of his might. Levant, Campbell, and Napier understand that identity, especially masculine identity, is connected to some grander narrative. For a long time, militaristic nationalism and masculinity went hand in hand. Religion, family, and nation were defining features. The weakening of all three of those institutions has increased confusion about the masculine mandate.

That same weakening occurred in post-World War II Japan. The religion of the Emperor was lost and strands of Anti-Japanese-ism formed. Capitalism and more materialistic modes of living allowed for a more egalitarian family structure, making the fatherly patriarch less relevant. Mishima is quite explicit about this concern in his book *The Sound of Waves*. However, due to time, I will save this for discussion.

The Power and Politics of Beauty

I want to emphasize a prophetic point of Mishima's. He predicted future political and cultural battles will not be primarily fought through force but through aesthetics. The conservative columnist Tim Stanley writes, "I've reached the conclusion that traditionalists should reject politics and focus on art. We should take back control of the cultural institutions—universities, academies, churches, periodicals—and use them to promote beauty... We mustn't turn our backs on the people we disagree with, but embrace and cherish them (please, do not conflate traditionalism with snobbery—Yukio wrote, 'The highest point at which human life and art meet is in the ordinary. To look down on the ordinary is to despise what you can't have.')

And we should not accept our fate as mere critics of civilisation (the figurative version of Mishima's suicide) but instead become the architects of a new one."^{viii}

We complain that free speech has become weaponized and everything from sports to TV shows have become politicized. I think we are at a point where the concept of beauty has become politicized, but I am unsure and worried about what the weaponization of beauty would entail.

Conclusion

Here we are now left with more questions than answers. I guess the art of it all is to figure out what we will construct for the future. I think that's how Mishima would've wanted it.

ⁱ See Nathan, John. *Mishima: a Biography*. Da Capo Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ "Article 9 and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty." *Asia for Educators*, Columbia University, afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1950_usjapan.htm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Verbovszky, Joseph. "Overcoming Modernity in Yukio Mishima." *Discussions* 9.2 (2013).
<<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=797>>

^{iv} Flanagan, Damian. "Yukio Mishima's Enduring, Unexpected Influence." *The Japan Times*, 21 Nov. 2015, www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/11/21/general/yukio-mishimas-enduring-unexpected-influence/.

^v Impiglia, Christopher. "The Essence of Our Era: Yukio Mishima, Steve Bannon, and the Alt-Right." *EuropeNow*, 1 Feb. 2018, www.europenowjournal.org/2018/01/31/the-essence-of-our-era-the-rise-of-the-alt-right/.

^{vi} Scruton, Roger. "A Cult of Fakery Has Taken over What's Left of High Culture – Roger Scruton | Aeon Essays." *Aeon*, Aeon, 12 Dec. 2012, aeon.co/essays/a-cult-of-fakery-has-taken-over-what-s-left-of-high-culture.

^{vii} Levant, Ronald F. "Toward the Reconstruction of Masculinity." *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 3-4, 1992, pp. 385., doi:10.1037//0893-3200.5.3-4.379.

^{viii} McCarthy, Daniel. "What Yukio Mishima Teaches Traditionalists." *The American Conservative*, www.theamericanconservative.com/mccarthy/what-yukio-mishima-teaches-traditionalists/. McCarthy cites an article from one of Stanley's works, but the original seems to have been lost.