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The Ronin - Mishima's "Patriotism" and Perfection through Martyrdom in Literature

by Tom Serb

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Yukio Mishima's harrowing, romanticized vision of perfect death in "Patriotism" is a window to the author's own motivation behind suicide. Through his use of tone and character Mishima does everything he can to venerate the actions of Reiko and Shinji, categorizing their suicides as heroic, beautiful, exhilarating and necessary. The two central characters are exemplary in Mishima's mind, formed with fears, desires, temptations and doubts, but never straying from a life of perfect honor and dignity. Insofar as a character could embody an ideology, Reiko embodies Mishima's obstinately traditional view of women. Shinji's self-sacrifice makes him an analogue of a Christ-figure by evoking the forty-seven ronin, who within Mishima's worldview embody the tragic, perfect life a martyr the same way Christ has for Western authors. In five succinct passages Mishima describes the death of his perfect couple. He defends their suicides through increasingly vivid, emotional scenes which revere the couple's actions as dignified even through the most gruesome details of their demise. The tone of the story reveals the intent of the author more than that of a typical prose because the events conflict entirely with Mishima's reserved ecstasy in describing them. The most resounding evidence that Mishima venerates, admires, and even prescribes the actions of Reiko and Shinji is not the actions that they take, but the rapturous tone he takes in explaining them. The motivations of Mishima's own impending suicide are plainly evident in his story "Patriotism," which has less to do with honor to one's country than the beauty of seizing control of one's own fate and creating their own country.

Mishima's tone throughout "Patriotism" ranges from detached to impassioned as the story progresses. Within the first brief chapter it is shown how even plainly spoken passages depict the lovers' sacrifices as sublime. "The last moments of this heroic and dedicated couple were such as to make the gods themselves weep (Mishima 820). This line is inscribed in a paragraph that otherwise may have been clipped directly from a newspaper, detailing in purely objective, solemn terms the facts regarding their deaths. The second chapter takes more liberties, but again rarely deviates from pure objective details and background for the young couple. Hints are given that the author strongly reveres the couple and their suicide, but the tone remains solemn and elegiac. The full voice of the author does not evolve beyond pseudo-journalism until the third chapter, when vivid similes and metaphors dominate the description of events: "Everything was wrapped in blackness, and he was no longer a living, seeing creature" (Mishima 826). The beauty of Mishima's prose begins and deepens as the suicides become nearer. As the two lovers come to realize that every action is one of their last, these actions become venerated and glorified beyond any previous experience or any potential future:

These joys had been final, and their bodies would never know them again. Not that joy of this intensity-and the same thought occurred to them both-was ever likely to be re-experienced, even if they should live to old age. (Mishima 829)

Shinji's decision that they should both die has amplified the significance of both their lives, and Mishima makes it clear repeatedly that impending death is the catalyst of their most intense, meaningful pleasures:

Was it death he was now waiting for? Or a wild ecstasy of the senses? The two seemed to overlap, as if the object of bodily desire was death itself. (Mishima 826)

Mishima's attitude toward the two lovers is that in taking their own lives they are creating significance to themselves, a significance which would otherwise not exist. In controlling their own lives and deaths they are enabled in Mishima's eyes.

Mishima's inquisitive, emotive narration is centered on death and fertility, but, notably, is rarely focused on patriotism, honor, or religion. While brief explanations for each of these exist, they are little more than a background for the decisions Shinji and Reiko make. The importance of the seppuku, (never why it was committed) is that they were willing to commit it without hesitation when it was necessary: "They must have the courage to reach out to death themselves, and seize it." (Mishima 829)

Shinji's decision to sacrifice himself was the result of an inability to fight either his friends or his emperor, leaving him with no option other than suicide in order to retain his righteousness. Mishima implies, however, that Shinji is not only a martyr to spare his own honor, but a martyr for honor itself: "It would be difficult to imagine a more heroic sight than that of the lieutenant at this moment, as he mustered his strength and flung back his head" (Mishima 833). Shinji dies in observation of the moral structure in which he believed, and embodies the same literary niche as a Christ figure. Shinji's self-sacrifice, both in form and reasoning, also likens to the national legend of the 47 ronin, who committed seppuku after avenging their dead leader. By evoking the ancient traditional and unifying legend of the ronin Mishima's call to return to traditionalism is given the same cultural force as Christian allegory within Western literature. Shinji's character is not entirely rounded in that his actions are always pure, always out of necessity, with honor, dignity, and tradition in mind. The pains he endures during self-disembowelment are faced at their entirety, and every detail gore Mishima adds only contributes to the righteousness inherent in Shinji's fearless perseverance. Like a Christ-figure, Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama is purified through his suffering and ascends through his martyrdom to become Mishima's symbol for the perfect honorable human life. Mishima's sincerity is evident by his own suicide, leaving little room to doubt that the deaths of Shinji and the Ronin is what Mishima believed to be the greatest duty a man could have in time of unbearable circumstances.

Just as Shinji is a Japanese analogue of a Christ-figure, Reiko embodies Mishima's conceptualization of the perfect woman. His final product synchronizes perfectly with the Western idea of the cult of true womanhood, in that Reiko is emphatically defined by her domesticity, purity, piety, and submission. Reiko, eight years the junior of Shinji, has barely experienced life due to both her youth and her gender. She has never imbibed alcohol before the events preceding her death. Her husband has never helped in preparing his own bed. Most remarkably, she has never spoken outside the docile, constrained limits placed on women of the time. During the impassioned love scene of chapter 3 Reiko requests to see Shinji's body one last time: "Never before had (Shinji) heard from his wife's lips so strong and unequivocal a request" (Mishima 828). The fact that Reiko has never uttered a strange or unwelcome request shows that she, like Shinji, is perfected nearly to an inhuman level of constraint and etiquette, this adding a sever beauty.

Mishima's use of Reiko is purely didactic, which he emphasized through constant praise through his narration. In chapter two, Mishima describes the perfection of their last few hours on earth by stating that "Husband and wife should be harmonious" (Mishima 822), and that the young couple lived by this rule exactly. Through his tone and impossibly perfected characters Mishima has constructed a fantasy of the man he wishes he was and the woman he wishes he was with. The finality of death, and the fearlessness and gravity of a decision to welcome it made it the object of romantic fascination within Mishima's story and life. "Patriotism" tries deeply to reinvigorate the nationalist and traditionalist beliefs of Mishima's country, the most important of which is not his

country itself but a sense of honor and fearlessness. Mishima's perfect world, characters, and sacrifice, however, uses the same devices and beliefs as much of the rest of the traditional world, regardless of culture or location. The rigid domesticity of women and the use of legendary martyrs as the basis for heroic characters are consistent across Asian, European, and African writings by those who seek to preserve local traditions and beliefs. Mishima's style and character are universal, time-tested methods of conveying morality. In the end, despite all his attempts, his message was not as well received as he had hoped. Mishima's final act to prove his dedication to tradition is foreshadowed through "Patriotism," to go without fear "to a welcome death" (Mishima 823).

Work Cited

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