

Nietzschean Dialectics in the Novels of Mishima Yukio

by

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Although Nietzsche's ideas have had the same kind of wide and often superficial appeal to Japanese creative writers as to their Western counterparts, among the leading writers Mishima Yukio (1925–1970) must be regarded as unique both for the extent and for the manner of his use of those ideas. Indeed, any interpretation of the dialectical arguments which structure his major philosophical novels and even his moral/political essays and manifestoes would seem inadequate if it ignored their Nietzschean context. Nevertheless, though Mishima was in this sense the most thoroughgoing as well as the most successful Japanese Nietzschean – the most successful in giving an original and compelling aesthetic expression to some of Nietzsche's central ideas – he was by no means the first. And it would be difficult to understand his reception of Nietzsche without some consideration first of historical precedents – of the progress of Japanese Nietzscheanism before him – since this obviously helped shape his understanding of Nietzsche, though not always, as we shall see, in a beneficial way.

In the history of intellectual relations between Japan and the West, Nietzsche occupies a unique and important position: he was the first major European philosopher whose ideas achieved a profound impact almost simultaneously in both cultures. Perhaps in part for that very reason, his influence in Japan, especially on Japanese creative writers, has been deeper, more widely felt and more long-lasting than that of probably any other Western thinker besides Marx.¹ Indeed, in literature his influence has been greater even than that of Marx – if not in the sense that it has affected more writers, at least in the sense that it has borne more attractive fruit. Whereas the Marxist „proletarian literature“ movement of the 1920's and early '30's, for instance, produced little that bears reading today – perhaps only a few works by Kobayashi Takiji – among the creative writers significantly influenced by Nietzsche one must name some of the major figures of modern Japanese literature, including Mori Ôgai, Hagiwara Sakutarô, Akutagawa Ryûnosuke, Satô Haruo, Nishiwaki Junzaburô and, of course, Mishima himself. This is not to say that Japanese writers have had an unusual penchant

1 It might well be asked: what about Freud? The fact is that Freud's ideas have had nothing like the impact in Japan that they have had in the West. Japanese on the whole, it seems, view his ideas as culture-bound and therefore inapplicable to the Japanese psyche.

for or affinity with Nietzsche. One could easily make a similar rollcall of major twentieth-century Western writers who have been likewise influenced – including Mishima's own favorite among Western novelists, Thomas Mann. Somehow or other, Nietzsche's ideas have had an irresistible appeal to the literary imagination. No doubt this is partly because of the high literary quality of his prose – a rarity among modern philosophers – but also it must have something to do with the nature of the ideas themselves: their dialectical tensions seem readily transferrable into the kind of dramatic tensions which structure a literary work.

By 1888, when Georg Brandes delivered the series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen which is credited, along with his 1890 essay, „Aristocratic Radicalism“, with gaining a wide audience for Nietzsche's ideas in Europe, Japan had already been embarked on its program of rapid Westernization for two decades. An important part of that program involved the sending of Japanese students and academics to Europe to absorb whatever they could of Western culture and civilization. They studied everything from French oil painting to Prussian battlefield tactics. Thus, by the time Nietzsche's influence began to spread across Europe, there was already a large contingent of educated Japanese „in place“ to observe and absorb this influence, and to report back to the home country on this latest fashion in European thought. In fact, the ground had already been prepared for Nietzsche's thought to have a maximum impact in the Japan of the 1890's by something which had occurred in the 1880's: along with a general shift of Japanese interest towards Bismarck's Germany as a social/political model,² there was also a shift of the focus of Japanese intellectual interest away from British and French and towards German philosophy – in other words, away from positivism, utilitarianism and social Darwinism, Comte, Mill and Herbert Spencer, and towards German Idealism, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Ironically, the fact that Japanese intellectuals had already been quite profoundly touched by the recently de-proscribed religion of Christianity also enabled them to respond more meaningfully to the anti-Christian side of Nietzsche's message.³

By the turn of the century, there was already a group of Japanese Nietzscheans causing much controversy and even scandal by their radical individualism and so-called „immoralism“. Because Nietzscheanism was polarized in a rather exaggerated way as the most extreme form of Western individualism, as literally a license to kill, it seemed to threaten the ideology of national unity promulgated by the oligarchic Meiji state: such Confucian-derived ideals as the „family state“ (*kazoku kokka*), „national morality“ (*kokumin dōtoku*) and the divine emperor as father of the nation-family.⁴ Thus a prominent writer of the

2 See Bernd MARTIN: „The German Role in the Modernization of Japan“, in: *Oriens Extremus*, Jahrgang 33, Heft 1, 1990, pp. 77–88.

3 See Graham PARKES: „The Early Reception of Nietzsche's Philosophy in Japan“, in the fascinating collection of essays edited by him, *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

4 See PARKES, *ibid.*, p. 180.

time, Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935), concerned for the moral discipline of youth, condemned Nietzschean thought as „pure immoralism, absolute egotism“ and as „a bacillus of the society“.⁵ The Meiji period was the time when Japan was busily, almost frantically, trying to establish itself for the first time as a major world power, equal to the West militarily, economically and even culturally, and by 1912, when the period ended, this goal was substantially achieved. Some perceptive Western thinkers soon acknowledged what had happened. Oswald Spengler, for instance, in his 1918 work, *The Decline of the West* („Der Untergang des Abendlandes“), declares quite categorically: „Modern Japan belongs to the Western Civilization no less than ‘modern’ Carthage of the third century to the Classical.“⁶ The concrete proof of this, ironically, had come in the form of Japan's defeat of a major Western power, Russia, in 1905.

At the same time, though, that much of this achievement seemed based on traditional Japanese strengths and values, which were very much the strengths and values of a group-oriented society, the nagging question remained, at least in the minds of intellectuals, as to whether Japan could really achieve equality with the West without embracing Western spiritual values such as individualism. Thus, quite naturally, the contradictory impulses in Japan's response to the West in general are also evident in the Japanese response to Nietzsche.

Of the two major Meiji writers, Sōseki and Ōgai, Ōgai, a long-time student of German, had a deeper acquaintance with Nietzsche's thought and was much more sympathetic towards it – and also made more use of it in his own writings. Sōseki, though, seems to have suffered more intensely from the contradictions inherent in his attempt to be a servant of two cultures: at first he embraced a modified form of Western individualism, but later he seemed to reach the conclusion that the psychological price of individualism, in terms of loneliness and alienation, was too high, and thus he began to seek salvation in his famous *so-kuten kyoshi*, a traditional Buddhistic self-transcendence. His scepticism about Nietzsche, then, is not surprising. After reading an English translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for instance, he dismissed the ideas of the *Übermensch* and of eternal recurrence as „nonsense“.⁷ Ōgai was much more sympathetic, but by no means uncritically so: in his first novel, „Youth“ (*Seinen*, 1911), he establishes a counterpoint between what he calls „altruist individualism“ and what he considers to be the „egotist individualism“ of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*. Nevertheless, Ōgai made frequent and fruitful use of Nietzsche's ideas. The idea of the Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic, for instance, was central to his thinking – though, unlike Nietzsche, Ōgai came down very much on the side of the Apollonian. His autobiographical novella, *Vita Sexualis* (1909), was meant to dem-

5 Quoted in K. OISHI: „Nietzsche als Philologe in Japan“, in: *Nietzsche Studien*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988, p.320.

6 Oswald SPENGLER: *The Decline of the West*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939, vol.2, p.421, n. 6.

7 OISHI, *ibid.*

onstrate that the controlled, rational, Apollonian side of human nature could dominate over the uncontrolled, instinctive (particularly sexual) Dionysian side. The narrator of *Vita Sexualis* says of its philosopher-hero: „He did not acknowledge only what Nietzsche called Dionysian as deserving the name of art. He also acknowledged the Apollonian as art.“⁸ Obviously this also applies to Ôgai himself. There is no more Apollonian figure in modern Japanese literature: the austerity and restraint of his literary style was matched by that of his life style – as one would expect from a man who came of old samurai stock and spent his life as a doctor in the Imperial Japanese Army.

Any consideration of Mishima's Nietzscheanism must take Ôgai into account, because this earlier Japanese writer (1862–1922), who died three years before Mishima was born, provided an excellent model for the young Mishima of how Nietzsche's ideas might be applied in both a writer's life and work. Ôgai, we might say, was Mishima's principal native model of the Nietzschean writer, as Thomas Mann was his principal Western model. One can understand, then, why Mishima once proudly declared that the style of his most critically acclaimed novel, „The Temple of the Golden Pavilion“ (*Kinkakuji*, 1956) was „Ôgai plus Mann“.⁹ It was especially the „masculine“, Apollonian quality of both Ôgai's life and work which Mishima admired so much and tried to emulate. Like Ôgai, Mishima would try to write rationally argued philosophic novels; like Ôgai, too, he would try to live as a highly disciplined, military-style man of action, forever (and, in the end, fatally) dissatisfied with what he saw as his merely passive role as man of words. But the crucial difference between Mishima and his model, and the thing which makes him seem, at least to many Western readers, more interesting both as a man and as a writer, is that, whereas Ôgai was naturally and completely at home in the world of masculine action, Mishima had to struggle painfully to break into that world, and his lifetime efforts to do so always had something exaggerated, artificial and even absurd about them. Perhaps the most famous example: rejected for military service during the Second World War because of his poor health and frail physique, in later life he founded his own private army of a hundred young men, citing Byron as a precedent, and dressed them in *opéra bouffe* uniforms which incited the ridicule of the press. In fact, Mishima might be regarded as a classic case of what Alfred Adler called the „feminized male“, raised by overprotective women who forbade him the rough company of other boys, and who later overcompensates with a lifestyle of exaggerated machismo, or what Adler called „masculine protest“. In his first important novel, „Confessions of a Mask“ (*Kamen no koku-haku*, 1949), Mishima gives us the sorry details of his feminized childhood and of the sadomasochistic homosexuality which, in his view at least, resulted from

8 Ogai MORI: *Vita Sexualis*, translated by Kazuji Ninomiya and Sanford Goldstein, Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972, p.150.

9 Quoted in Donald KEENE: *Dawn to the West*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984, p.1197.

it. This is his own „vita sexualis“ and, like Ôgai's, it is structured as a philosophical argument based upon the Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic. But his conclusion is the opposite of Ôgai's: rather than demonstrate the triumph of Apollonian reason over Dionysian instinct, he demonstrates that, despite his best efforts, he was unable to escape from his dark, Dionysian urges. But Mishima never gave up trying – the later physical and military disciplines he subjected himself to may all be seen as part of his continuing, almost desperate, effort to attain an Ôgai-like Apollonian control. And his continual return, in his writings, to the problem of action – that is, to the problem of how to make oneself capable of action in a world in which all forces seem to conspire insidiously to destroy one's will to act – this obsession too had its roots in his „feminized“ childhood. (A similar argument, by the way, could, and has been, made about Nietzsche, who, because of his father's early death, was also raised in a household dominated by over-protective women. Although he never acted out his machismo fantasies in the same outrageous manner as Mishima, certainly there is a strange and ironic contrast between what Thomas Mann referred to as his „decadence“ – his frail physique, his headaches and depressions, his sexual failures and frustrations, his hermetic lifestyle – and his glorification of an extrovert and aggressive masculinity.)

From our brief review of the early reception of Nietzsche's philosophy in Japan, we may see, then, that by the time Mishima was born in 1925, there had already been more than a quarter century of Nietzschean influence on Japanese writers. Furthermore, during the thirties and early forties, the period of Mishima's childhood and education, and the period also of rampant Japanese militarism, Nietzsche became very much in vogue among right-wing nationalist intellectuals such as the Japan Romantic school (*Nippon roman-ha*), some of whose members were Mishima's first literary mentors and patrons (most significantly, Satô Haruo, who had studied directly at the feet of Nietzsche's first important Japanese translator, Ikuta Chôkô). The Japanese Romantics were so named because of their immersion in the German Romantic tradition – they were especially attracted by its mystical nationalism and idealization of the „national soul“. And, of course, they were also sympathetic to what they regarded as the most recent manifestation of that tradition: the ideology and culture of their Nazi allies. One of their most active members, the poet Jimbo Kôtarô, who declared that his ambition was to fuse German Romanticism with Japanese lyricism, even published in 1941 a collection of Nazi poetry. On his side, the young Mishima viewed the group through a distinctly Nietzschean lens: of the poet Itô Shizuo, for instance, whose verses most typically expressed the group's desire to die for their country, Mishima claimed that his death-wish expressed „a Nietzschean love of destiny“ [in other words, an *amor fati*].¹⁰

Because of the changed historical climate, then, Mishima's generation had a very different perspective on Nietzsche than the turn-of-the-century Nietzsche

10 Quoted in John NATHAN: *Mishima*. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1974, p.48.

enthusiasts. In short, Nietzsche no longer was seen as the champion of a heroic individualism which defied the values of mass man; now he was seen as the great justifier of the mass man's will to power, and thus of violent aggression and war. The ideal of the *Übermensch* became associated with the idea of the Japanese as a superior race destined to rule over Asia. In other words, their view of Nietzsche was distorted in much the same way as that of the European Nazis and fascists. As the pampered Wunderkind of the Japan Romantic School, the teenaged Mishima naturally absorbed not only their romantic nationalism but also their view of Nietzsche, and, unfortunately, he never seemed essentially to deviate from this view. In an essay on fascism written late in his life, for instance, he still presents it as one of the two twentieth-century fruits of Nietzsche's philosophy – the other one being, incongruously, Freudian psychology!¹¹ Of course, he did not intend this as a disparagement of Nietzsche; from Mishima's own extreme right-wing perspective, to be associated with the fascists was not an entirely bad thing. Although he condemned their „excesses“, he seems to have felt that basically they were on the right track – especially in their glorification of warrior virtues, and in his final work, the „Sea of Fertility“ (*Hôjô no umi*) tetralogy, he celebrates the alliance of militarist Japan with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as „an alliance of German mythology, Roman mythology and the *Kojiki* [in other words, Japanese or Shintô mythology], a friendship between the manly, beautiful, pagan gods of East and West“.¹²

Mishima's use of Nietzsche's ideas, then, while extensive, was also highly selective. And even those ideas which he used are often distorted by his own peculiar world view, which was not only more conventionally right-wing but also far more „nihilistic“ in the popular sense of the word – that is, cynical and anti-life – than Nietzsche's ever was.

Though Mishima, as we have seen, was certainly not the first Japanese writer to put Nietzsche's ideas to fruitful creative use, the fact that no other major Japanese writer has made such an in-depth or wide-ranging use of those ideas is due, in the first place, to the kind of writer Mishima was. Many novelists, of course, have their characters make casual references to the ideas of various philosophers. But Mishima's use of Nietzsche's ideas goes far beyond this: the very structure of some of his major novels is based upon those ideas – as with his favorite novelists, Ôgai and Mann, these novels are organized like philosophic arguments. Indeed, it seems to me that Mishima's main claim to originality among modern Japanese novelists, the claim upon which his lasting reputation must be based, is that he introduced this „Germanic“ strain of the philosophic novel into Japanese literature – following in Ôgai's footsteps, to be sure, but in a much more rigorous and thoroughgoing way. We might say that what Ôgai just started Mishima completely finished.

11 MISHIMA Yukio: “Shin fasshizumu ron”, in: *Shôsetsuka no kyôka*, Tôkyô: Shinchôsha, 1982, p.173.

12 *Mishima Yukio zenshû*. Tôkyô: Shinchôsha, 1973–76, vol.19, p.29. My translation.

In twentieth-century literature there have been various models of what a philosophical novel might be, from the implicitly philosophical allegories of Kafka to the explicitly philosophical discourses of Thomas Mann, from the earnest philosophical realism of a Jean-Paul Sartre to the mock-philosophical fantasy of a Jorge Luis Borges. For better or for worse, Mishima took as his own model of the „ideal“ philosophical novel the explicit mode of Thomas Mann – what we might call the novel as Platonic dialogue – as exemplified in such works as *The Magic Mountain* and the Biblical tetralogy, *Joseph and His Brothers*. Mishima was well aware that in writing novels of this sort he offended against traditional Japanese literary taste, which has generally favored, even in the modern novel, a more personal, lyrical and delicately allusive form of writing, the play of images rather than the play of ideas. But he too seemed to feel that his introduction of this „Germanic“ strain of explicit philosophical novel into the Japanese literary tradition was an important part of his own original contribution to that tradition. To those who objected that the conversations in a novel such as *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* read too much like philosophical dialogues and not enough like real conversations in a novel are supposed to read, Mishima retorted:

With respect to the conversations in my novels, I believe I have already freed myself to a considerable extent from Japanese fastidiousness. Japanese writers enjoy displaying their delicate skill at revealing in an indirect manner, by means of conversations, the personalities, temperaments and outlook on life of their characters; but conversations that are unrelated to the personalities and temperaments of the characters, conversations that are read for their content alone and, finally, long conversations that fuse into the same tempo with the descriptive passages, are the special quality of the novels of Goethe, and of the German novel in general.¹³

And he goes on to say that Thomas Mann in particular, his favorite among modern novelists, inherited from Goethe what Mishima calls the „epic flow of conversation“.

But Mishima took from the German tradition not only his paradigm of the philosophical novel but also the conceptual outlines of a philosophy which seemed amenable to himself and was coherent enough to base such a novel upon. Thus his novels resemble Mann's not only in their style of discourse but also in the actual philosophy which informs that discourse. In brief, that philosophy addresses the problem of nihilism, primarily as defined, elaborated and even tentatively „solved“ by Friedrich Nietzsche.

In his critical study of Thomas Mann's novels, R. J. Hollingdale writes:

Life as it appears in most of Mann's books is not life as it appears to most people: it is far more uncanny, far more questionable and uncertain, far more sick, far worse. Why is that so? ... My answer is: because his subject on examination turns out to be a detailed description of that European nihilism previously defined by Nietzsche.¹⁴

13 Quoted in Donald KEENE: *Appreciations of Japanese Culture*. Tôkyô: Kodansha, 1981, p.215.

14 R.J. HOLLINGDALE: *Thomas Mann*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971, p. 14.

Much the same may be said about Mishima – except, of course, that the nihilism he describes is Japanese rather than European. In Mishima's novels, as in Mann's, there is a continual, obsessive return to the themes of sickness, deformity, crime and decadence as obvious symptoms and symbols of the nihilism which pervades modern society. But Mishima goes one step further: he does not merely describe nihilism, he embraces it. In this he parts company with Mann – and ultimately also with Nietzsche. For in Mishima nihilism is not merely a problem of modern society; it is a tendency rooted deeply in his own psyche and in that of his alter egos, the protagonists of his novels. Mishima's nihilism begins on the level of instinct and only later is it articulated into a rationally ordered philosophy.

In other words, Mishima did not suddenly become a nihilist when, as a teenager, he first read Nietzsche, and thereupon artificially transplant Nietzsche's philosophy into his own writings. One thing that his autobiographical novel, *Confessions of a Mask*, makes clear is that, if he was not quite born a nihilist, he at least acquired nihilistic tendencies, what he called „my heart's leaning toward Death and Night and Blood“,¹⁵ at a very early age.

It seems reasonable to claim, then, that Mishima was predisposed towards nihilism by the very structure of his psyche. At the same time, though, it is equally evident that his early reading of Nietzsche, the great definer of modern nihilism, helped him to define his own nihilism and to articulate those inchoate psychic forces which so troubled him as a young man. More importantly for our purposes, in doing so it also provided him with the intellectual superstructure of his philosophic novels.

In an interview he gave about twenty years after the Pacific War, Mishima still recalled fondly how he had read „with heroically intense absorption in the midst of the war“ Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, and how very well the work suited his own apocalyptic mood at that time.¹⁶ In a sense, the rest of Mishima's life was an attempt to recapture that apocalyptic wartime mood – that time when, as an impressionable adolescent, he discovered the exhilaration of being in constant proximity to violence and death. And, just as he remained true to the nationalistic ideals of that era, so also he remained true to the philosopher who seemed most in consonance with his nostalgia for the apocalypse.

I have already mentioned Mishima's use of the Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic in his first important novel, *Confessions of a Mask*. But there is another Nietzschean dialectic which proved to be of even greater service to him in structuring his later novels: that of the two forms of nihilism, active and passive.

15 Yukio MISHIMA: *Confessions of a Mask*. Translated by Meredith Weatherby, New York: New Directions, 1958, p.21.

16 Quoted in SAITÔ Junji: *Mishima Yukio to sono shûhen*. Tôkyô: Kyôiku shuppan sentâ, 1981, p.31.

Mishima's lifelong obsession with the problem of action was a major consequence of the attempt at self-therapy documented in *Confessions of a Mask*. There was much in his psychological makeup which militated against his becoming a man of action. He had been raised by his grandmother to fear the outside world and to eschew all contact with it. With his overdeveloped intellect and underdeveloped feelings, he was ideally suited to play the writer's role of passive observer, man of words rather than man of action. And his introversion and passivity were reinforced by his philosophical outlook: the central philosophical argument of *Confessions of a Mask* is one of determinism – the narrator argues that his sado-masochistic homosexuality was predetermined and therefore inescapable, and the events of the novel only confirm this judgement. This classic nihilist view of the human being as puppet, as automaton moved only by instinct, hardly seems an appropriate basis for a philosophy of action. Nor is the larger nihilist sense of the meaninglessness of all action: if all actions are meaningless, then why act? Yet the obvious fact remains that action is necessary for survival, not to mention the need of getting a little pleasure out of being alive. Even nihilists must act. And, of course, they do. They escape from this particular *cul-de-sac* – what has been called the „nihilist problematic“¹⁷ – by a kind of leap of faith – though not exactly in the same direction as Kierkegaard's. Nietzsche confronted this problem head-on, and the main philosophical result of his struggle with it was his idea of „active“ as opposed to „passive“ nihilism. These polarities are clearly defined in the notation-form of his posthumous work, *The Will to Power*:

Nihilism. It is ambiguous:

A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as active Nihilism.

B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as passive Nihilism. [original emphasis]¹⁸

Nihilism, he continues, „reaches its maximum of relative strength as a violent force of destruction – as active nihilism“.¹⁹ On the other hand:

Its opposite: the weary nihilism that no longer attacks; its most famous form, Buddhism; a passive nihilism, a sign of weakness.²⁰

And, in another passage, Nietzsche emphasizes further the aggressive, destructive – and illogical – character of active nihilism:

Nihilism does not only contemplate the „in vain!“ nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy. – This is, if you will, illogical; but the nihilist does not believe that one needs to be logical. – It is the condition of strong spirits and wills, and these do not

17 See Johan GOUDSBLOM: *Nihilism and Culture*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p.36.

18 Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House, 1967, p.17. To consult the original, see: *Nietzsche Werke VIII 2: Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Herbst 1887 bis März 1888, edited by Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970, pp.14–15.

19 *ibid.*, p.18.

20 *ibid.*

find it possible to stop with the No of „judgement“: their nature demands the No of the deed. The reduction to nothing by judgement is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand.²¹

Though Nietzsche here seems to prefer active over passive nihilism – as at least a manifestation of strength and thus, in its own distorted way, life-affirmative – this does not mean, of course, that he endorsed active nihilism as a life program or a way of salvation! Mishima, on the other hand, seems to do exactly that – judging from the evidence not only of his novels but also of his non-fiction writings. In those strange moral/political manifestoes he produced in the last decade of his life, for instance, he praises samurai moralists such as Yamamoto Jôchô and neo-Confucian revolutionaries such as Ôshio Heihachirô as „manly active nihilists“. Of Jôchô he writes: „At the very core of his personality is a deep, penetrating, and yet manly ‘nihilism’.“²² Of the neo-Confucian revolutionaries: „In my opinion, the way to the Meiji Restoration was prepared by National Learning as mysticism and Yang-Ming thought as active nihilism. The Apollonian National Learning of Motoori Norinaga was distilled by the passage of time into the mystically oriented action philosophy of such men as Hirata Atsutane and Hayashi Ôen, and Atsutane's Shintô studies then fostered the passionate activism of the Meiji Restoration *shishi*²³ [samurai activists].“ Perhaps there could be no more startling example than this of Nietzsche's influence on Mishima's world view: he views even his own Japanese cultural heroes through a Nietzschean lens.

On the other hand, people he held in contempt he would often describe as „petty“ or passive nihilists – for instance, Prime Minister Kishi after the 1960 treaty riots. In speculating on the reason why the crowds which besieged the Prime Minister's residence hated him so, Mishima concluded that: „They hate him because he is a little, little nihilist... He believes in nothing, and though he may think he has convictions, the mob knows intuitively that he is unable to believe in his political principles.“²⁴ And, at the same time, Mishima had confessed: „I am also a nihilist.“²⁵ Mishima's biographer, John Nathan, concludes:

These are not the words of a man with political convictions. Yet by 1968 Mishima was promising his friends that he would „die with sword in hand“ in the battle with the Left at the next renewal of the security treaty in 1970. By 1968, that is, he had become (or at least was sounding very much like) an ultranationalist. What enabled (or drove) the confessed nihilist in this short space of years to acquire faith?²⁶

21 *ibid*, pp.301–302.

22 MISHIMA Yukio: *On Hagakure*. Translated by Kathryn Sparling, Tôkyô: Charles E. Tuttle, 1978, p.52.

23 MISHIMA Yukio: *Introduction to the Study of Action*. Translated by Harris Martin in *The Japan Interpreter*, vol.vii, no.1, Winter 1971, p.81.

24 Quoted in NATHAN, *ibid*, p.174.

25 *ibid*.

26 *ibid*, p.175.

As Nathan sees it, then, during the last decade of his life Mishima suddenly underwent some sort of miraculous „conversion“, or, for some mysterious reason, took a political „leap of faith“ – and this freed him forever from his erstwhile nihilism. In other words, his extreme-right politics were not a „natural outgrowth“ of his nihilism but a reaction against nihilism in the direction of „faith“.

One might object to the psychological improbability of this view: is it likely that a man whose psyche had been so deeply permeated with nihilism since his childhood – as his writings show – would suddenly „acquire faith“ and free himself of that nihilism in the last few years of his life – indeed, just before he committed suicide? But, actually, one need not pursue the issue even that far. Nathan's „interpretation“ is based not only on a misunderstanding of Mishima's nihilism but also on a misreading of what Mishima himself said. What he said was that Prime Minister Kishi was a „little, little nihilist“ – in other words, a passive nihilist, a nihilist who cowered in his official residence, afraid to take action against the crowds who were protesting against the 1960 security treaty with the United States. If Kishi had taken strong action – if, for instance, he had called on the Self Defense Forces to attack the leftist protesters – then events might have turned out more to Mishima's liking: perhaps a full-scale revolution which would have left the military in charge. But Kishi was a petty, passive nihilist, and so incapable of such ruthlessness. Mishima, in fact, drives this point home by comparing him to a more „active“ nihilist – Hitler – in a continuation of the above remarks which Nathan neglects to quote: „While one hates a tiny nihilist, one may accept a nihilist on the grand scale such as Hitler.“²⁷ In espousing right-wing activism during the last few years of his life, then, Mishima was not taking a „leap of faith“ beyond his nihilism; he was simply „graduating“ from one form of nihilism to another. In doing so, he was following in the footsteps of many Western nihilists before him – as he himself was well aware.

Mishima's first important – and probably most successful – fictional embodiment of the active/passive nihilist dialectic is in „The Temple of the Golden Pavilion“ (*Kinkakuji*, 1956). This novel is a kind of nihilist *Bildungsroman* in which the narrator/protagonist, Mizoguchi, must struggle hard to outgrow his own passivity. As the novel opens he is shown as a chronic passive nihilist, rendered incapable of action by his own sense of meaninglessness and nothingness. This is made very clear by the scene in which he tries to make contact with Uiko, a local girl he has taken a fancy to, but finds himself unable to act or to speak. He is overcome by a wave of passive nihilism:

At that moment I felt myself turn to stone. Will, desire – everything became stone. The outer world again took on a concrete existence all around me, without any connection with my inner world. The „I“ who had stolen out of his uncle's house, put on his white sneakers, and ran

27 Quoted in Henry Scott STOKES: *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*. New York: Ballantine, 1974, p.206.

along a road still shrouded in dawn darkness up to this Zelkova tree – that „I“ had only made its inner self run here at such a furious speed. In the roofs of the village houses, whose outlines were faintly visible in the dawn light, in the black grove of trees, in the black peak of Aobayama, even in Uiko who stood before me, there was, to a terrible degree, a complete lack of meaning. Without my participation, reality had been bestowed upon this world, and, with a weight I had never experienced until now, this great, meaningless, pitch-dark reality was given to me, was pressed down upon me.²⁸

Standing helplessly in front of Uiko, unable even to utter a word, he is humiliated by her scorn: „She cycled round me, as if dodging a stone.“²⁹

Later in the novel this scene is repeated in another form when Mizoguchi finds himself unable to act out his lustful fantasies on a girl provided by his nihilist Mephistopheles, Kashiwagi. This time, though, the agent of passive nihilism is not an experience of general meaninglessness but the beautiful Golden Pavilion itself, a vision of which renders him even sexually impotent. And again the girl reacts with scorn. The scene thus not only echoes his earlier experience with Uiko but also prefigures his later experience, in the novel's final scene, of the life-negating power of the pavilion itself.

The fact that Mizoguchi perceives his own passive nihilism as a grave affliction accounts for the strange pride he feels after being forced by an American soldier to trample on his girlfriend's stomach, thus inducing an abortion. Though he cannot take the full „credit“, so to speak, for this action, since it was forced on him, nevertheless the incident does prove that he, a man of the inner world, is at least capable of action. And it is action which has considerable repercussions in the outer world – not only the murder of an unborn child but also the placing of his Superior, the Zen Buddhist Abbot, into a compromising position. In the topsy-turvy world of his nihilist values, the action thus represents his first important triumph as a fledgling man of action. And the very evil of it only amplifies his unaccustomed sense of power:

That action which, at the time it was committed, had not felt like a crime, that action of trampling on the woman, had gradually begun to shine in my memory. This was not only because I knew that the woman had suffered a miscarriage because of it. The action had sifted into my memory like a shower of gold dust, and had begun to emit a brilliant glitter that continually pierced the eyes. The glitter of evil. Yes. Even if it was only a trivial evil, still I was now endowed with the clear awareness that I had committed evil. That awareness was hung like a medal on the inside of my chest.³⁰

What this ongoing dialectic between active and passive nihilism makes clear, then, is that Mizoguchi's final act of destruction of the Golden Pavilion is sim-

28 MISHIMA Yukio: „Mishima Yukio shû“, in: *Nihon bungaku zenshû*, no.82, Tôkyô: Shûeisha, 1966, p.228. My translation.

29 *ibid.*, p.229.

30 *ibid.*, p.276.

ply a necessary condition of his psychic health. To put it bluntly, he is faced with the choice of becoming either an arsonist or a suicide. Since, in the final scene, he chooses the former, he is also able, in this scene, to renounce the latter. Through his use of this dialectic, Mishima himself achieves a triumph in the kind of ethical paradox which appealed to both the trained lawyer and the rebel in him:

Nothing stimulates the novelist's imagination more, challenges his ability more, and inspires his creative urge more, than a crime that seems indefensible in the light of ordinary morality. In such a case, the novelist takes pride in his courage to render a different verdict, though the rest of the world may condemn him. Perhaps the criminal, in his unrepentant pride, is the harbinger of hitherto unknown values. In any case, a novel reveals its uniquely ethical nature at a crisis like this one.³¹

Mishima achieves his own version of a Nietzschean transvaluation of values in the final scene of the novel. By presenting the Golden Pavilion as the principal agent of passive nihilism in Mizoguchi's psyche, he „justifies“, so to speak, Mizoguchi's destruction of that great national treasure. The key formula here is Mizoguchi's identification of the pavilion's beauty with nothingness. After he has assembled all his flammable materials inside the pavilion, and needs only to set the match, he makes the mistake of pausing for a moment to admire its beauty for one last time. It is now that he has his vision of the nothingness of the pavilion's beauty and feels that „the problem of the incomprehensibility of the golden pavilion's beauty, which had troubled me so much in the past, was now halfway solved“. His „solution“ is as follows:

... if one examined the beauty of the [pavilion's] details, one found that this beauty certainly did not end with any detail, was not completed with any detail, because, whichever detail one looked at, it held within it a hint of the beauty of the next detail. The beauty of each detail in itself was filled with uneasiness. This was because, while it dreamt of completion, it never attained it, but was enticed on to the next beauty, an unknown beauty. Each hint of beauty was connected to another hint of beauty, and so all those hints of beauty which did not exist became, so to speak, the theme of the Golden Pavilion. Such hints were signs of nothingness. Nothingness was the structure of this beauty. Thus, the incompleteness of the details of the pavilion's beauty naturally hinted at nothingness, and this delicate structure, made of the thinnest lumber, shuddered in anticipation of nothingness, like a pendant trembling in the wind.³²

Mizoguchi's final experience of nothingness threatens to undermine him in the same way as similar experiences undermine the protagonists of other major Mishima works, such as Honda in *The Sea of Fertility* tetralogy and the narrator of *Confessions of a Mask*. He is overcome by „violent fatigue“ and a sense of the futility of the action he is about to take. He remembers what his passive nihilist friend Kashiwagi had told him: „What changed the world was not action

31 Quoted in Makoto UEDA: *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976, pp.258–259.

32 *Mishima Yukio shû*, pp.386–7.

but knowledge.“ To have imagined the deed was enough; there was no need to act it out physically. „Action for me now is no more than a kind of superfluity.“³³

Ironically, Mizoguchi is rescued from what is, in Mishima's as in Nietzsche's eyes, the heresy of passive nihilism, and transformed into a „manly“ active nihilist, by his memory of a Zen exhortation, which includes the famous line: „When you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!“ The effect of these stirring, but easily misconstrued, words on the unbalanced Mizoguchi is electrifying:

The words snapped me out of the powerlessness I had fallen into. Suddenly my whole body overflowed with power. Which is to say: one part of my mind stubbornly kept telling me that the action I soon had to perform was meaningless, but my new-found power had no fear of meaninglessness. Indeed, it was because the act was meaningless that I must do it.³⁴

Whereupon he dashes to the Golden Pavilion and, for the first time in his life, achieves a satisfying act of self-expression – or, at least, a satisfying expression of his will to power. Having turned the hammer of his nihilism outwards, he finds that, unlike other Mishima heroes, he now has no need to turn it against himself. This explains the great contrast in emotional tone between the final scene of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and the final scenes of such other major Mishima works as *Confessions of a Mask* and *The Sea of Fertility*: relief or catharsis rather than despair, life-affirmation rather than life-negation. Whereas the central characters of other Mishima works are overcome by nothingness, Mizoguchi overcomes nothingness, ironically, by an act of destruction. Thus he gives up his plan to commit suicide, escapes to a nearby mountain, and relaxes over a smoke, as if after a job well done. Life now has new savour for him, and, indeed, as he tells us rather complacently in the last words of the novel, he is now determined to live: „... *ikiyou to watakushi wa omotta*“. This does not mean, though, that Mizoguchi ceases to be a nihilist. His act of destruction may hardly be regarded as a „positive“ act. Rather he becomes an „active“ instead of a „passive“ nihilist, and this frees him from the forces, both psychological and ontological, which have been oppressing him – the principal among which is the strangely enervating power of beauty.

Mishima's most ambitious use of the active/passive nihilist dialectic came in his final work, the *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy. It seems to me, though, that he is less successful here in using the dialectic in a dynamic way, perhaps because, rather than embody it within the psyche of a single character, as in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, he divides it up between two contrasting groups of characters, one active and the other passive. This scheme works rather well in the first two novels, in which the „active“ characters, Kiyooki and Isao, though too flat to be of much interest psychologically, at least are „active“ enough, the first as a lover and the second as a terrorist, to counterbalance the passivity of

33 *ibid.*, p.387.

34 *ibid.*, p. 388-9.

the principal observer-character, Honda. In the final two novels, though, the scheme breaks down: the Thai princess who is meant to be the heroine of the third novel is an insubstantial figure whose only distinction seems to be her sexual promiscuity – and she makes an unheroic exit after being bitten by a snake. Similarly Tōru, the protagonist of the final novel, is too much like Honda himself to function as the „active“ term of the novel's dialectical equation. Thus it cannot be said that the scheme of dividing the active/passive dialectic between two opposing groups of characters succeeds for the tetralogy as a whole. On the one hand, a character who is either all active or all passive tends to be „flat“, psychologically uninteresting. On the other hand, Mishima was unable to maintain even this kind of antithesis over the course of four novels. Perhaps he felt obliged to introduce some variety into the four reincarnated heroes, and the only way he could do that was to make them more passive. Thus, for instance, by turning the stalwart Isao, the epitome of active masculinity, into the decadent Thai princess, the epitome of passive femininity, he certainly introduces a startling reversal, but he also upsets the larger active/passive balance between Honda and the heroes.

Though not quite successful *in toto* as a work of fiction, then, the tetralogy nonetheless still has considerable interest as a philosophical and even historical argument. Whereas in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* Mishima plays out the drama of the active/passive nihilist dialectic on a personal, psychological level, in the tetralogy he brings it onto a wider historical, religious and philosophical stage. Ideologically, the conflict is between the Hindu-Buddhist world view as the principal force for passive nihilism and nationalist Shintō and Emperor worship as the principal force for active nihilism.

On the face of it, the tetralogy seems quite Buddhistic. Its plot structure makes use of the idea of reincarnation; its central philosophical argument seems closely involved with the Yuishiki or „mind-only“ Buddhist doctrine that the everyday world as we know it – even our own sense of self – is nothing but a transient illusion. Some Japanese critics, including even some scholars of Buddhism, have accordingly accepted the tetralogy, which they treat solemnly as Mishima's „last testament“, as a kind of sutra in modern dress. But it seems to me that this is a naive view based on only a superficial reading of the text. Furthermore, this interpretation clearly puts us in danger of the old heresy, from a Buddhist point of view, of confusing Buddhism with nihilism.

A closer reading of the tetralogy reveals that Mishima takes exactly this heretical view: he identifies Buddhism with passive nihilism, as Nietzsche did in the quote I have already given. Remember that Nietzsche, in defining active and passive nihilism, called Buddhism the „most famous form“ of passive nihilism, the „weary nihilism that no longer attacks“, and „a sign of weakness“. In other words, it is precisely the opposite of the kind of philosophy needed by a heroic man of action such as a samurai or a modern-day militarist – the Mishima hero. And Mishima's view of Buddhism is further jaundiced by his own brand of nationalist Shintō, according to which the highest destiny a man can aspire to is to

die – and to kill – for the emperor. Needless to say, Buddhism would not sanction either of these goals. Mishima's strangely amalgamated Nietzschean/nationalist Shintô view of Buddhism emerges clearly in the second novel of the tetralogy, *Runaway Horses*, in the teachings of Kaidô Masugi, who is the Shintô mentor of the young terrorist hero, Isao.

Like Nietzsche, Kaidô views Buddhism as the principal historical form of passive nihilism, an insidious anti-life philosophy which teaches men to pacify their aggressive instincts rather than to indulge them, and which thus „robbed the Japanese of their Yamato spirit, and their manly courage“:³⁵

Kaido Masugi's aversion to Buddhism was celebrated. Since he was an admirer of Atsutané, this was only to be expected, and it was his practise to make Atsutané's diatribes against Buddha and Buddhism his own and to deliver them unchanged to his students. He condemned Buddhism for denying life and, as a consequence, denying that one could die for the Emperor, for knowing nothing of the „abundant life of the spirit“ and, as a consequence, shutting itself off from the essential, life-giving source that was the object of true devotion. And as for Karma, that was a philosophy of evil that reduced everything to nihilism.³⁶

Kaidô's „karma“ plays the same role as Nietzsche's „bad conscience“: it inhibits men from acting out their aggressive instincts. In „Towards a Genealogy of Morals“ (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887), Nietzsche discusses what he considers to have been the origin of „bad conscience“:

I take bad conscience to be a deep-seated malady to which man succumbed under the pressure of the most profound transformation he ever underwent – the one that made him once and for all a sociable and pacific creature. Just as happened in the case of those sea creatures who were forced to become land animals in order to survive, these semi-animals, happily adapted to the wilderness, to war, free roaming, and adventure, were forced to change their nature. Of a sudden they found all their instincts devalued, unhinged... All instincts that are not allowed free play turn inward. This is what I call man's interiorization; it alone provides the soil for the growth of what is later called man's soul. Man's interior world, originally meager and tenuous, was expanding in every dimension, in proportion as the outward discharge of his feelings was curtailed. The formidable bulwarks by means of which the polity protected itself against the ancient instincts of freedom (punishment was one of the strongest of these bulwarks) caused those wild, extravagant instincts to turn in upon man. Hostility, cruelty, the delight in persecution, raids, excitement, destruction all turned against their begetter. Lacking external enemies and resistances, and confined within an oppressive narrowness and regularity, man began rending, persecuting, terrifying himself, like a wild beast hurling itself against the bars of its cage. This languisher, devoured by nostalgia for the desert, who had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture

35 Yukio MISHIMA: *Runaway Horses*. Translated by Michael Gallagher, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975, p.242.

36 *ibid*, pp.240–41.

chamber, an insecure and dangerous wilderness – this fool, this pining and desperate prisoner, became the inventor of „bad conscience“.³⁷

The gist of this magnificent piece of rhetoric, then, is that all psychological conflict is a result of the suppression of man's natural aggressive instincts by „civilization“; if the human being's instincts are not allowed a healthy outlet, they will turn inwards, with disastrous psychological consequences. This is an idea which, of course, was taken up again by many later psychologists. But, whereas a later psychologist such as Freud advocated the cultivation of a „superego“ to keep the instincts in check, or Adler the cultivation of a sense of „social interest“, Nietzsche himself seemed to feel a strong „nostalgia for the desert“, and, in „Beyond Good and Evil“ (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886) he advocates an „aristocratic“ or „master“ morality which would allow „self-glorification“ and free expression of the will to power.³⁸ And, against the „loathsome sight of perversion, dwarfishness, degeneracy“ presented by modern man, whose „savage instincts“ have been „domesticated“, he opposes an image of those fearsome but admirable „noble races“ who gave full vent to their aggressive instincts – and among whom he includes, no doubt to Mishima's satisfaction, the „Japanese nobility“:

Once abroad in the wilderness, they revel in the freedom from social constraint and compensate for their long confinement in the quietude of their own community. They revert to the innocence of wild animals: we can imagine them returning from an orgy of murder, arson, rape, and torture, jubilant and at peace with themselves as though they had committed a fraternity prank – convinced, moreover, that the poets for a long time to come will have something to sing about and to praise. Deep within all these noble races there lurks the beast of prey, bent on spoil and conquest. This hidden urge has to be satisfied from time to time, the beast let loose in the wilderness. This goes as well for the Roman, Arabian, German, Japanese nobility as for the Homeric heroes and the Scandinavian vikings.³⁹

Nietzsche's opposition to „bad conscience“, and his idealization of the „blond beast“, explains why he sometimes seemed to look favourably upon „active nihilism“, which he conceived of as at least life-affirmative, in contrast to the life-denial of Buddhist or Schopenhauerian „passive nihilism“. In brief, what Nietzsche seems to be saying is that psychological depth, the „soul“, or what he calls „man's interior world“, is almost entirely the fabrication of a „civilized“, „decadent“ society, and that the pure „man of action“ produced by stronger, freer peoples feels no need for this kind of subjectivity. Thus „psychology“ itself – both the science and the phenomena it studies – is a symptom of the disease of civilization, an evil by-product of peace and passivity; con-

37 Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Francis Golffing, New York: Doubleday, 1956, pp.217–8.

38 Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Marianne Cowan, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955, pp.202–3.

39 NIETZSCHE, *The Genealogy of Morals*, pp.174–75.

versely, the activity of waging war has the power to „cure“ us of psychology. Much of the gist of Mishima's final moral/political essays and manifestoes is contained in this one Nietzschean argument: that what he called „a languid age of peace“, together with the so-called „Peace Constitution“, had robbed the Japanese of their pure warrior spirit and reduced the whole nation to decadence and passive nihilism.

Similarly, in Mishima's final tetralogy, the Shintô teacher Kaidô claims: „with the extravagant fable of retribution that Buddhism brought with it, all traces of manliness were wiped away...“⁴⁰ The fact that Kaidô's view of Buddhism is ultimately validated by the tetralogy as a whole is confirmed by what happens to Honda over the course of the final two novels: Kaidô's contention that Buddhism is a „philosophy of evil“ which reduces „everything to nihilism“ exactly foretells what will become of Honda because of his experience of Buddhism and of the land of its origin, India. Having been thoroughly „corrupted“ by these experiences, he is unable to feel any enthusiasm for Japan's war effort, even after the excitement of the „victory“ of Pearl Harbor. As Mishima's narrator intones:

... all glamorous and heroic acts faded away against the hallucination of Benares. Was it perhaps because the mystery of transmigration had warped his mind, robbed him of his courage, made him recognize the futility of all brave actions, and in the end taught him to use all his knowledge of philosophy merely for the sake of self-love?⁴¹

And the full extent of his „corruption“ becomes evident in post-war Japan. Though always a passive observer rather than a participant in life, in his younger days the object of his observation was at least an admirable one, whether the romantic adventures of Kiyooki or the heroic adventures of Isao. But now he becomes a pitiful caricature of himself; he loses all his former dignity as an observer of noble or beautiful things and becomes a mere voyeur, spying on lovers through a peep-hole or from behind a bush in a public park. His final experience of Buddhism demoralizes him even further, and the tetralogy ends not, as some critics claim, with his Buddhist *satori* but with his mood of passive nihilist despair.

Given the position of this final scene as the climax not only of Mishima's most ambitious work but of his entire career as a creative writer, one may expect to find it imbued with a special significance – and even more so because Mishima always placed great weight on his final scenes. He once described the structure of his novels as „optical“, by which he meant that, just as light-rays converge through a lens, the various dialectical forces of his novels converge on their final scenes.⁴² A playwright as well as a novelist, he liked to ring down the

40 *Runaway Horses*, p.241.

41 MISHIMA Yukio: *The Temple of Dawn*. Translated by E. Dale Saunders and Cecilia Segawa Seigle, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975, p.94.

42 Quoted in Makoto UEDA: *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976, p. 250.

curtain with a last dramatic flourish, a traditional „grand finale“. His spectacular suicide on November 25th, 1970, appears to have been inspired, at least in part, by the same theatrical impulse – a unique case of life imitating art. By affixing this date to the end of the tetralogy, in fact, he seems to have wanted to link the two: his final testament as a man of action with his final testament as a writer. Thus the tetralogy's final scene obviously calls for close scrutiny by anyone who would understand Mishima's ultimate or essential message.

The scene transpires at the Gesshû Temple, a nunnery in the hills outside Nara. Honda Shigekuni, the only character who appears in all four novels of the tetralogy, has come to visit the Abbess of this nunnery, who is none other than Ayakura Satoko, the heroine of the first novel of the tetralogy, „Spring Snow“ (*Haru no yuki*, 1965). Honda has not seen her for sixty years, though he has thought of her often, and he has finally come to visit her because he knows he is dying and feels a need to see her before he dies. The reasons for this need seem various. As an old man, he naturally wants to reminisce pleasantly with someone who shared the most meaningful experiences of his youth. Then again, he seems to need to reassure himself that her love for his friend Kiyooki, who sacrificed his life for her, remains undiminished, despite her „enlightenment“. And, perhaps most urgently, he hopes that she, in her mature Buddhist enlightenment, might be able to help him understand some of the puzzling incidents of his own life – especially his encounters with reincarnation – which still perplex him. Lastly, he no doubt hopes not only for enlightenment but also for purification from his contact with her: he has, after all, sunk into a moral quagmire in his old age – he has even taken to spying on young lovers in public parks – and so he feels himself to be in urgent need of a spiritual cleansing before he dies. In short, Honda's expectations as he goes to visit the old nun could not be higher, and he is so moved when finally he finds himself in her presence that his eyes fill with tears and he is unable to look at her. But his expectations are soon cruelly dashed. Instead of the various kinds of comfort and consolation he has come for, he receives a great shock. The Abbess does not even remember his friend Kiyooki, a young man who died for love of her! Honda suspects that she is only pretending ignorance to avoid being tainted by the scandal which had surrounded her affair with Kiyooki. If so, if she still is guided by such worldly considerations, then obviously her „enlightenment“ is disappointingly shallow. But Honda is in for another kind of shock. The Abbess persuades him to doubt that Kiyooki had ever even existed, and not only Kiyooki but also Isao, the hero of the second novel, Ying Chan, the heroine of the third, and Honda himself – all now seem enveloped in a mist of unreality:

„But if, from the beginning, Kiyooki never existed“ – feeling as if he were wandering through a heavy mist, and beginning to think that his meeting here now with the Abbess was half a dream, Honda cried out as if trying to call back his self, which was disappearing as precipitously as breath does from a lacquer tray.⁴³

43 *Mishima Yukio zenshû*, vol.19, p.646.

The Abbess's „lesson“ is now reinforced, as it were, by the „lesson“ of the garden. Stunned into silence by what she has said to him, Honda is led like an automaton to view the temple's south garden, a vision of absolute stillness, emptiness and blazing sunshine. The only sound is a monotonous one: the shrilling of cicadas – a sound which only intensifies the silence. As the narrator tells us: „there was nothing in this garden“ (*kono niwa ni wa nanimo nai*). Gazing upon this dizzying apparition, Honda's final thought, which forms the penultimate sentence of the tetralogy, is that he has come „to a place of no memories, of nothing at all“ (*Kioku mo nakereba nanimo nai tokoro e, jibun wa kite shimatta to Honda wa omotta*).⁴⁴

At first sight, Honda's final ordeal might seem to have a strongly Buddhist tenor, and perhaps even suggest a Buddhist enlightenment experience. It takes place at a Buddhist temple, after all, and the primary agents involved are a Buddhist nun and a Buddhist temple garden. The experience these agents provoke in Honda might seem entirely consonant with the Buddhist philosophy of nothingness. Furthermore, it might easily be taken as the culmination of Honda's years of study of Buddhism, especially of the form of Yuishiki („Consciousness Only“) Buddhism represented by this very Abbess and temple. Honda was first introduced to this form of Buddhism as a young man, as recounted in the first novel of the tetralogy. His encounters with the reincarnations of Kiyooki led him, in middle-age, to an in-depth study of the Yuishiki teachings on reincarnation. His struggles to comprehend these abstruse doctrines are recounted in detail in the third volume of the tetralogy, „The Temple of Dawn“ (*Akatsuki no tera*, 1970). What puzzles him above all is the doctrine of *anatman*, „no self“. If man has no self, then what is reincarnated through lifetime after lifetime? The Yuishiki answer seems to be: an impersonal karmic force, the *alayavijnana* or „storehouse consciousness“. This *alaya* consciousness is a „stream of no-self“ (*muga no nagare*) which the Yuishiki scriptures compare to a torrent of water, never the same from minute to minute. Thus the image of a waterfall is one of the main motifs running through the tetralogy, always associated with the reincarnations of Kiyooki.

Honda's final experience at the Buddhist temple is certainly an experience of „no-self“ – of the unreality of his own self as well as of the selves of the incarnations of „Kiyooki“. It is also an experience of the unreality or nothingness of the external world, in keeping with the idealist Yuishiki philosophy of the reality of „mind-only“. Does this mean, then, that all his efforts have not been in vain? That his years of patient study and his final arduous climb up to the temple on the hill have been rewarded by a redeeming flash of *satori*? Against all our expectations, did Mishima finally write a novel with a happy ending?

One smiles at the thought. If Honda's experience is Buddhist, then Schopenhauer and so many other Western interpreters since him must be right: Buddhism is a darkly pessimistic faith indeed, if not the very prototype of nihilism.

44 *Mishima Yukio zenshū*, vol. 19, p. 647.

Of course, since Mishima gave the scene so many Buddhist trappings, he probably expected the reader to accept Honda's experience of nothingness as genuinely Buddhist. But this is only because Mishima, as we have seen, followed Nietzsche in identifying Buddhism with nihilism. And this is a view of Buddhism against which Buddhists themselves have often strenuously protested. To give an example: the eminent Meiji period Zen Buddhist Abbot, Shaku Soyen, in commenting on a famous poem or *gâthâ* by the sixth patriarch of Zen, Hui-Neng, warns against exactly such a misunderstanding. In the poem Hui-Neng expresses his insight into the essential purity of the mind:

No holy tree exists as Bodhi known,
 No mirror shining bright is standing here;
 Since there is nothing from the very first,
 Where can the dust itself accumulate?

Soyen's comments on this verse are worth quoting at length:

At the first blush the *gâthâ* seems to smack not a little of nihilism, as it apparently denies the existence of individuality. But those who stop short at this negative interpretation of it are not likely to grasp the deep significance of Buddhism. For Buddhism teaches in this *gâthâ* the existence of the highest reality that transcends the duality of body and mind as well as the limitations of time and space. Though this highest reality is the source of life, the ultimate reason of existence, and the norm of things multifarious and multitudinous, it has nothing particular in it; it cannot be designated by any determinative terms, it refuses to be expressed in the phraseology we use in our common parlance. Why? For it is an absolute unity, and there is nothing individual, particular, dualistic, and conditional.⁴⁵

The experience of *mu* or nothingness in Buddhism, then, is not to be confused with the nihilist experience of nothingness. In a very real sense, indeed, they are opposites. As Andô Shôei has said in his excellent study, *Zen and American Transcendentalism*:

The best way to overcome nihilism is to be awake to the Mind of „Mu“, whereby we come to be able to enjoy perfect liberty, because the Mind of „Mu“ is that which does not abide anywhere fixedly: which is one with, and at the same time free from, everything.⁴⁶

But how is the non-Buddhist to judge whether any particular experience of nothingness – say, Honda's – is Buddhistic or nihilistic? Surely there is only one safe way: to judge the tree by its fruit. One may judge the nature of what is experienced by the effect it has on the person experiencing it. The emotional tone of the nihilist experience of nothingness is invariably negative, whether in the mild form of a vague disquiet or in the more extreme form of despair or terror. As Charles Glicksberg points out in his comprehensive study of nihilism in modern Western literature, *The Literature of Nihilism*, the „nihilist denies him-

45 Rev. SOYEN Shaku: *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971, p.98.

46 Shôei ANDÔ: *Zen and American Transcendentalism*. Tôkyô: Hokuseido, 1970, p.34.

self the religious promises that could rescue him from the bottomless pit of despair...⁴⁷ And, again:

The nihilist suffers excruciatingly from his obsession with the dialectic of nothingness. If he actually believes that nothingness is the ultimate end of existence, then he cannot be sustained, like the humanist, by the constructive role he plays in the historic process or rest his hopes on some radiant consummation in the future order of society. This encounter with nothingness forms the crux of nihilist literature...⁴⁸

And it is an encounter, concludes Glicksberg, which leaves the nihilist „trapped in a spiritual cul-de-sac“, suffering from a „life-negating dementia“.⁴⁹ Another authority on the subject, Helmut Thielicke, asserts that the „decisive point is not only that nihilism asserts the vacuum, the *nihil*, the nothing, but that the assertor himself is oppressed and afflicted by his own nothingness; in psychiatric terms, he is oppressed by the breakdown, the decay of his 'self-world', [*Ich-Zerfall*] his loss of the centre. And at this point we may anticipate and say that there is an essential connection between the breakdown of the 'objective world' and the breakdown of the 'self-world'“.⁵⁰

In absolute contrast to this, the Buddhist *satori* or experience of nothingness always produces a positive emotional and psychological state – or, as Suzuki Daisetsu has described it, a „feeling of exaltation“:

That this feeling inevitably accompanies *satori* is due to the fact that it is the breaking-up of the restriction imposed on one as an individual being, and this breaking-up is not a mere negative incident but quite a positive one fraught with signification because it means an infinite expansion of the individual. The general feeling, though we are not always conscious of it, which characterizes all our functions of consciousness, is that of restriction and dependence... To be released of this, therefore, must make one feel above all things intensely exalted.⁵¹

If we examine Honda's final experience while keeping in mind these descriptions of the Buddhist experience of nothingness on the one hand, and the nihilist experience of nothingness on the other, there can be no doubt as to which his type belongs. His experience is entirely negative; it has none of the positive emotional tenor or sense of self-transcendence described by Suzuki. On the contrary, he seems „trapped in a spiritual cul-de-sac“, to use Glicksberg's phrase, and there is a simultaneous breakdown of both his inner and his outer worlds, as described by Thielicke. As he stares blankly at the empty garden, as if mesmerized by the sight of the void itself, he seems more like a man in a state of catatonic shock than a man who has just achieved spiritual enlightenment and

47 Charles I. GLICKSBERG: *The Literature of Nihilism*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1975, p.40.

48 *ibid*, p.18.

49 *ibid*, p.19.

50 Helmut THIELICKE: *Nihilism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1961, p.54.

51 Daisetsu Teitaro SUZUKI: *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. 2nd. series, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971, p.38.

liberation. The penultimate sentence of the tetralogy drives this home. To quote it again: „It seemed to Honda that he had come to a place of no memories, of nothing at all.“⁵² There is a bitter irony in this sentence: the eighty-one-year-old man, after all, had come to the temple in the hope of revivifying and somehow authenticating his memories – certainly not expecting that they would all be taken away from him!

What is bestowed on Honda, in short, is not the soothing balm of Buddhism but a blow from the hammer of nihilism. At the same time, the mask of Buddhism, which has covered the true face of the work up to now, is shattered to pieces by the same hammer. Whereupon, for the first time, the work's true face stands revealed: the face of nihilism. Or, to use another simile: it is as if Mishima erects an elaborate house of cards, based mainly on the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, only to knock it down again the moment it reaches completion. In this also the novelist himself shows a destructive impulse typical of nihilism. If the tetralogy as a whole may be regarded as a *Bildungsroman* or „education novel“, then the education which Honda receives is not ultimately in Buddhism but in nihilism.

As for the historical dimension of the tetralogy, Mishima's ambition – and certainly one of the reasons why he felt impelled to crown his career in the manner of his two favorite German artists, Wagner and Mann, by writing a tetralogy, a work of extraordinary length – is to present a panoramic view of modern Japanese society from just after the turn of the century up to the early 'seventies. His main overall theme here is Japan's decline, a decline manifested by the increasing spiritual vacuity, materialism, Westernization and passive nihilism of the modern Japanese. Actually the course of this decline is not steady or uninterrupted; the revolt of the junior officers and young rightist fanatics against the „corrupt“ establishment in the 'thirties was, from Mishima's point of view, a momentary reversal of the downward trend – and this is well represented by the second novel of the tetralogy, „Runaway Horses“ (*Homba*). But whatever chance might have existed of a national renaissance was lost, of course, by Japan's defeat in the Pacific War. And, if we look at the tetralogy as a whole, the vision it presents of the spiritual decline of Japan over the modern period is clear and unmistakable. As the first novel opens, the country is still flush from its victory over Russia in 1905; morale is as high as could be, and military men are held in the greatest esteem by a grateful populace. (For Mishima, this was obviously an all-important gauge of the spiritual health of a nation, and his attempted „coup“ of 1970 was ostensibly for the purpose of restoring the postwar Self-Defense Force to its proper place of honor.) The vision of Japan presented in the final novel makes a sorry contrast to this: a country both physically and morally polluted, thoroughly demoralized by the recent foreign occupation, and still so completely dominated by the foreign culture that it is in imminent danger of losing the last shreds of its own identity.

52 *Mishima Yukio zenshū*, vol.19, p.647.

In his final political manifestoes, including the one he delivered to Japanese troops just before his suicide, Mishima argued that the only way to rescue Japan from the morass of passive nihilism and restore its true warrior spirit was to disavow the American-imposed „Peace Constitution“, which he regarded as an emasculating insult to the nation, and to restore the imperial army and the emperor himself to their proper position at the power centre of Japanese national life. Always eager to show that, unlike most intellectuals, he was not afraid to put his ideas into action, on the final day of his life Mishima signed the last page of the tetralogy, then set off with some members of his private army to the Japanese Self-Defense Force headquarters in Tôkyô. Once there, he kidnapped a general and demanded an assembly of the troops. He then exhorted the somewhat startled and bemused troops to show their *samurai* spirit by rising in rebellion against the Peace Constitution. When the troops scoffed at him, as Mishima no doubt knew they would, he retired to the general's office and, with the aid of his private soldiers, committed suicide in the traditional *samurai* manner: disembowelment by short sword followed by decapitation by long sword. It should be added, though, that in this final scene of his life Mishima proved himself capable of violence against others as well as against himself: when some officers tried to rescue the general, Mishima attacked and wounded them with his sword, forcing them to retreat. Thus he had finally himself become the kind of „active nihilist“ terrorist he had long idolized.

Despite its heroic aura, his suicide itself, though, must be regarded as an expression of passive nihilist despair – as must all suicides from a Nietzschean point of view. Mishima's long-expressed death-wish, his „heart's leaning toward Death and Night and Blood“, finally seems to have gained the upper hand. Or, if we accept the „official“, political explanation Mishima himself offered, we might say that, unable to arouse the military to restore its *samurai* tradition of „manly active nihilism“, he lapsed into passive nihilist despair and committed the ultimate act of self- and life-negation. But, as Mishima was also fond of pointing out, one of the things that distinguishes the Japanese tradition, especially from the Judeo-Christian Western tradition, is that in the Japanese tradition suicide is often regarded as a kind of moral victory. No doubt he preferred to take this traditional Japanese rather than a Nietzschean viewpoint towards the final act of his life. And one must admit that, although most Japanese initially regarded his suicide as the act of a madman or a vulgar exhibitionist, under the patina of time it has assumed more of a legendary status and, at least in right-wing circles, Mishima is now firmly established in the national pantheon of martyrs and heroes.