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Yukio Mishima in Death

Javier Marías

THE DEATH of Yukio Mishima was so spectacular that it has almost succeeded in obliterating the many other stupid things he did in his life, as if his previous non-stop exhibitionism had been merely a way of getting people's attention for the culminating moment, doubtless the only one that really interested him. That, at least, is how we must see it, as coming from his deep-rooted fascination with violent death, which—if the victim was young and had a good body—he considered to be the height of beauty. It is true that this idea was not entirely original to him, still less in his country, Japan, where, as we know, there has always been a highly respected tradition of ceremonial self-disembowelment followed immediately by decapitation with a single blow delivered by a friend or subordinate. Not so very long ago, at the end of the Second World War, no fewer than five hundred officers (as well as a fair number of civilians) committed suicide as a way of "taking responsibility" for the defeat and "presenting their apologies to the Emperor." Amongst them was a friend of Mishima's, Zenmei Hasuda, who, before honoring "the culture of my country, which, I am sure, approves of those who die young" and blowing his brains out, still had time to murder his immediate superior for having criticized the divine Emperor. Perhaps it is understandable that twenty-five years later, the Japanese army should, as Mishima put it, still be depressed, vulnerable and incapable of hitting back.

His desire for death, born at an early age, was not, however, indiscriminate, and while one can understand his terror of being poisoned, since death by such means could hardly be called "beautiful," it is not so easy to explain why, in 1945, when he was called up at the age of twenty, he took advantage of a temporary fever brought on by a bout of flu to lie to the army doctor examining him and to present him with a list of fictitious symptoms that prompted the doctor to make an erroneous diagnosis of incipient tuberculosis and to exempt him from military service. Not that Mishima was unaware of the implications this had for the veracity of his ideals: on the contrary, in his famous autobiographical novel, *Confessions of a Mask*, he pondered this matter very pompously and at great length. As one would expect from a man of considerable cunning, he finally came up with an aesthetic justification for having avoided what he, in principle, desired so much (namely: "What I wanted was to die amongst strangers, untroubled, beneath a cloudless sky...") and he concluded that "I much preferred to think of myself instead as a person who had been forsaken even by Death...I delighted in picturing the curious agonies of a person who wanted to die but had been refused by Death. The degree of mental pleasure I thus obtained

seemed almost immoral." Whatever the truth, the fact is that Mishima did not undergo any great or strange sufferings until the day of his real death, and that, when the time came, he had, thanks to pure ignorance, all his strength and determination intact. Prior to this, though, his fear of being poisoned was so obsessive that, whenever he went to a restaurant, he would only order dishes that did not lend themselves to poisoning and, after eating, would frantically brush his teeth with soda water.

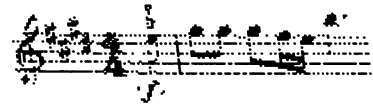
None of this prevented him from fantasizing as much as he wanted, not only about his own erotic (i.e., violent) extinction, but about that of many other fictional beings, all of them extremely good-looking: "The weapon of my imagination slaughtered many a Grecian soldier, many white slaves of Arabia, princes of savage tribes, hotel elevator boys, waiters, young toughs, army officers, circus roustabouts...I would kiss the lips of those who had fallen to the ground and were still moving spasmodically." Needless to say, he also enjoyed his share of cannibalistic daydreams, whose favorite object was a rather athletic schoolfriend: "I thrust the fork upright into the heart. A fountain of blood struck me full in the face. Holding the knife in my right hand, I began carving the flesh of his breast, gently, thinly at first..." One assumes that in these alimentary imaginings he must, fortunately, have lost his fear of being poisoned.

This erotic fascination with manly bodies tortured, dismembered, flayed, butchered, or impaled had marked Mishima since adolescence. He was immodest enough as a writer to ensure that posterity was kept *au fait* with his ejaculations, from which one must deduce that he lay great store by them; and so we are obliged to know that he had his first ejaculation whilst contemplating a reproduction of the torso of Saint Sebastian, whom Guido Reni had painted pierced with arrows. It is therefore not surprising that, as an adult, he was given to having artistic-cum-muscleman photographs taken of himself, and that he appeared in one of them in the same garb, that is, with a coarse white cloth knotted loosely about his loins and with a couple of arrows stuck in his sides, his arms aloft and his wrists bound with rope. This last detail is not without importance, given that his favorite masturbatory image (which he was also kind enough to record) were armpits, very hairy and, one fears, very smelly. This famous photograph must, therefore, have served his narcissism well.

Other photographs which he bequeathed to the more infantile enthusiasts of calendar sex were no less comic: Mishima standing before a large mirror, gazing at his own rather puny chest; Mishima with a pyromaniac glint in his eye and a white rose in his mouth; Mishima doing weight-training

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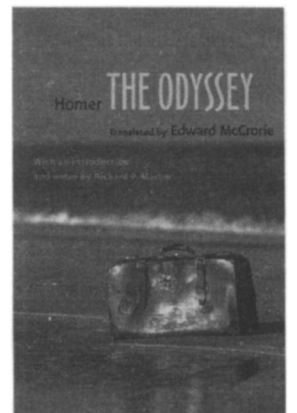
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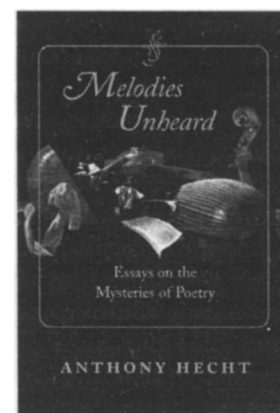
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in order to develop some decent biceps; Mishima half-naked and pulling in his stomach, with a bandanna around his head, a samurai sword in his hands, and an expression on his face that verges on the apoplectic; Mishima wearing a paramilitary uniform, which is surprisingly restrained given that he himself dreamed up the design for his own private army, the Tatenokai. He also acted in his own films or in B-movies about *yakuza*, or Japanese gangsters; he recorded songs, and made a record on which he played all forty characters in one of his own plays. He was so concerned about his image that he always made sure that in any photo in which he appeared alongside much taller men, he was the one who looked like a giant.

One should not infer, however, that Yukio Mishima spent his life worrying only about such folkloric nonsense. He must also have written non-stop, for at his death he left over one hundred volumes, and it is known that he wrote one of them, eighty pages long, while holed up in a hotel in Tokyo for just three days. To all this activity must be added his campaign of self-promotion, which took him on numerous trips to Europe and America and caused him to attempt a carefully planned but ill-fated bit of stage-management when, in 1967, it was rumored that the Nobel Prize was about to be given to a Japanese author for the first time. He organized his return from a tour to coincide with the date on which the decision would be announced, and reserved a VIP suite in a downtown hotel. However, when the plane landed and he was the first to emerge, laughing and smiling, he found the airport plunged in gloom because the prize had gone to some wretched Guatemalan. A year later, his depression only deepened: the Nobel prize did, at last, go to Japan, but to his friend and teacher Yasunari Kawabata. Mishima opted for a bit of reflected glory: he rushed to Kawabata's house so as to be the first to be seen congratulating him and at least appear in the photos. Needless to say, Mishima considered himself to be not only worthy of the Nobel Prize but—quite simply—a genius. “I want to identify my literary work with God,” he said once to an extreme right-wing fanatic, who was, perhaps, accustomed to such delusions of grandeur.

According to those who knew him, Mishima was an extremely likeable man with a lively sense of humor, although his laugh was wild and strident and he was rather too prodigal with it. He had few relationships with women, apart from his grandmother (who, to the despair of her daughter-in-law, practically kidnapped him at birth), his mother, his sister, his wife, and his daughter, the essential female elements not even a misogynist can dispense with. He married because of a false alarm: his mother was believed to be dying of cancer, and Mishima thought he would make a last gift to her by marrying; she would die more peacefully knowing that the family line would be continued. Her cancer turned out to be a mere phantom and she went on to survive her son, but by the time Mishima learned about the first of these facts, he was already married to Yoko Sugiyama, a young woman from a good family, who, one assumes, ful-

filled the six prerequisites that the bridegroom had stipulated to the matchmakers: the bride should be neither a blue-stocking nor a celebrity-hunter; she must wish to be married to Kimitake Hiraoka (his real name), the private citizen, not to Yukio Mishima, the writer; she should be no taller than her husband, even in high heels; she must be pretty and have a round face; she must be prepared to look after her parents-in-law and be capable of running the home efficiently; lastly, she must not disturb Mishima while he was working. The truth is that little more is known of her after the wedding,

expeditions, tactical exercises, pseudo-military maneuvers, and to cutting themselves in order to mingle and drink each other's blood. Their first and last real action took place on November 25, 1970, when Mishima and four of his acolytes presented themselves in their mustard-brown uniforms at the Ichigaya base in Toyko. They had an appointment there with General Mashita, to whom they were going to pay their respects and show a valuable antique Samurai sword, doubtless well worth seeing. Once in the general's office, the five fake soldiers tied his hands, barricaded themselves in, bran-

Mishima went back into the office and prepared to commit hara-kiri. He had asked his right-hand man and possible lover, Masakatsu Morita, to curtail his suffering by decapitating him with the precious sword as soon as he, Mishima, had disemboweled himself. But Morita (who was also going to commit hara-kiri afterwards) failed no fewer than three times, cutting, instead, deep into Mishima's shoulders, back, and neck, but failing to sever his head. Another of the acolytes, Furu-Koga, more skilled and less nervous, snatched the sword from him and carried out the decapitation himself. Then he did the same with



My Brothers (Budapest), 1919

although the writer's hagiographers (amongst them the gushing and later gushed-over Marguerite Yourcenar) described excitedly how Mishima often took Yoko with him on his trips abroad, which was not the custom amongst Japanese men of his day. With that, in the view of Yourcenar and others, he had apparently done his duty: after all, he could easily have left her at home.

It was in the latter period of his life that Mishima created the paramilitary organization Tatenokai, to which he liked to refer by its English initials, the SS (Shield Society). It was a small army of a hundred men, tolerated and encouraged by the Japanese Armed Forces. The one hundred men were mostly students and staunch admirers, devoted to the Emperor and to Japan's most ancient traditions. For a time, they restricted themselves to camping

dishing knives and swords, and demanded that the troops should gather underneath the balcony to listen to a speech by Mishima. Some unarmed officers (the Japanese army is not allowed to use arms against civilians) tried to overpower them and were badly cut (Mishima almost sliced off the hand of a sergeant). When he managed, at last, to address the troops, his words were not exactly well received: the soldiers kept interrupting him by hurling insults like “Kiss your arse!” or “*Bakayaro!*”, which is difficult to translate, although it seems the closest equivalent would be “Go screw your own mother!” (some people, however, say that it means nothing more than “dimwit”).

Things did not go entirely to plan.

Morita, who hadn't been up to the task in the first place and had only managed to make a shallow scratch across his own belly with his dagger. The two heads lay on the carpet. Mishima was forty-five and, theatrical to the last, had, it is said, delivered his latest novel to his publisher that very morning. On one occasion, he had said that hara-kiri was “the ultimate act of masturbation.” His father found out what had happened from the television. When he heard the news of the attack on Ichigaya, he thought: “Oh, no, now I'm going to have to go and apologize to the police and everyone else.” When he heard about the rest, the hara-kiri and the decapitation, he confessed later on: “I didn't feel particularly surprised: my brain just rejected the information.” □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)