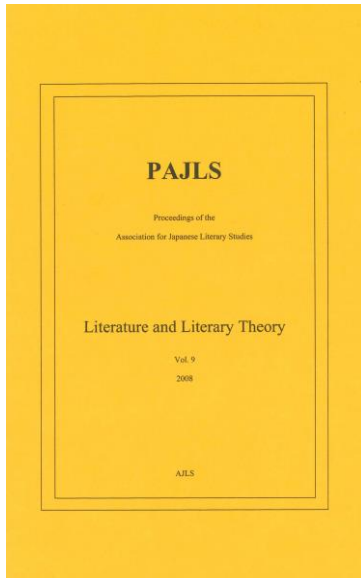


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On the “End”: Mishima Yukio and the Double Dislocation of Literature¹

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In February 1966, Mishima Yukio published a series of reflections collectively called “Lectures on the Aesthetics of the End” (*Owari no bigaku kōza*) in the women’s magazine *Josei jishin*. These short articulations, interrupting the distinction of literature/theory and fiction/non-fiction, problematize a large series of distinct endings. Couched among strikingly bizarre equations of, for instance, the “Western”-style meal order to “Western”-style love affairs, or arguing for the necessity of divorce ceremonies so as to create a parallel to the marriage ceremony and thus effectively celebrate endings, and so forth, Mishima writes incessantly of “the end” as a general principle.

The individual pieces are short, two- to three-page vignettes, sometimes verging on short stories, other times appearing as short theoretical texts interspersed with dialogue or portions of autobiography. The “end” as a concept is divergently mobilized: sometimes it is the ending of an event, the end of a particular style, sentiment, or affective circuit, sometimes it is the moment of parting—the “ending” of a phone call or meeting, or the moment at which a daily activity ceases, for example what one does at the “end” of work.

In most critical discussion of Mishima, his constant emphasis on the end or the ending of a series of hallmarks of modern life is understood as part and parcel of his high modernist conservative romanticism, but in fact it can be understood that the question of the end, its possibility for positing and its field of effects, is nothing more than a re-theorization of the question of the subject itself, the question of the possibility of grasping oneself as a subject. For Mishima “the end” becomes a question not through a “traditionalist” or “conservative” politics which privileges a ponderous self-narrated eschatology or lament for the tragic passing of an integralist nationalism, instead in Mishima “the end” poses itself as a general tension that emerges through the function and operation of the I.

Literary critics such as Karatani Kōjin or Wakamori Yoshiki among many others have argued that Mishima’s “end” was precisely that he fantasized about being after the end from the very outset—he and the emperor had survived seemingly the “final” war of human history, and by becoming survivors of it had rendered their lives meaningless, had become mere copies of themselves.² This is of course attested to in Mishima’s writings such as *Eirei no koe*, wherein the writing itself, its analytical objects, and the complex positing condition of the putatively authorial subject within his work are about “the end,” but in fact are written as laments for the tragedy of being “after the end.”

Consequently, it is necessary to closely dissect the nature of this general rhetoric of “the end” in order to effectively grasp the field of discursive effects and feedback loops that

¹ This presentation is an extension of the problematic dealt with in my “The Double Scission of Mishima Yukio: Limits and Anxieties in the Autofictional Machine,” in *positions: east asia cultures critique* (Duke University Press, forthcoming). All translations from languages other than English are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² See Karatani Kōjin and Iwai Katsuhito, *Owari naki sekai* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990), 212-215; Wakamori Yoshiki, *Uragiri no tetsugaku* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 1997), 71-90.

immediately emerge upon putting the object called "Mishima Yukio" into question. What guarantees and safeguards the economy of Mishima, the circulation and sustainability mechanisms of the mythology of Mishima, is precisely the sustaining function of the enigma, the secret, or the end *in the form of Mishima Yukio himself*.

Thus, how and in what ways does this end function? At the outset, the end is enabled by the mechanism of deferral and the operation of projected time—it is not possible to posit the ending of something without consequently historicizing it in relation to the temporal position wherein the "I" can emerge. As a result, contrary to Mishima's fantasy about surviving the putatively "final" war, to place oneself after the end serves only the ideological purpose of creating a fantasy image of the I that is outside history. This can also serve as a repression mechanism to elide the historical rupture of war itself by rendering survival impossible, and thus to have actually survived becomes an accomplishment that can only take place outside history.

In fact, the end always functions as a deferral—one can posit the end as imminent, on the verge of exploding, but one cannot articulate being *in* the end or being *after* it. Deferral, that is the possibility of projecting the future as telos from within the present, or through a mechanism of delay such as denial, refusal, and so on, is essential to the end, because without such technologies governing how to speak of the end, it would be strictly unrepresentable in articulation. What operates through and is at the center of deferral is the secret—the substance or matrix of flows in which is crystallized that which is hidden, concealed, insulated.

But the system of speaking about the end, that is, the technique of mobilization of the ideology of "the end" fundamentally stems from the secret's constitutive relation to confession. Confession in this sense does not function to reveal the essence of the secret, but rather to insulate and conceal it precisely through disclosure. This insulation is never a unitary static process—it is always an insulation from something into something, that is to say, it is always an integration or at least a demand for integration.

For Mishima, the systematic nature of confession used in his critical texts constantly seeks and relies on the acknowledgement of the reader to cede to the text the agreement that Mishima the social-historical figure who lived and died at specific historical points is self-identical with the "I" present in the body of his work. This integration into a stable "I" is typically marshalled in Mishima's work in the specific textual form of integration into a people: the parodic and ludicrous nature of this identitarianism can be seen when Mishima discusses the "end of the animal," a short series of speculations on "traditional" Japanese aesthetics, and declares "young men and women of the world, graduate as soon as possible from animal life and return to the essence of Japanese culture!"³ Mishima has of course often been understood as a fascist, and specifically as a figure whose political engagement stemmed from a particularly Japanese fascism rooted in ethnic nationalism. But if there is a fascism in Mishima's fantasies of the end, it is of a different type—recently theorists such as Franco Berardi have argued that precisely in the deterritorialization and cultural contamination of the twentieth century, "fascism in its furthest conceptual extension can be re-equated to a fundamental obsession: the obsession of identity, the obsession of belonging, of origin, of recognizability."⁴ It is this recognizability more than anything, the emphasis on belonging to a specular field, a certain regime of visibility, to which Mishima's discourse on the end belongs.

³ Mishima Yukio, "Owari no bigaku kōza," in *Kōdōgaku nyūmon* (Tokyo: Bunshun bunko, 1974), 182.

⁴ Franco Berardi (Bifo), *Il sapiente, il mercante, il guerriero: Dal rifiuto del lavoro all'emergere del cognitaro* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2004), 99-102.

In the last segment of the lectures, entitled "The End of the World," Mishima argues for the end as an essential element of the narrative of the self:

Well, before these "Lectures on the Aesthetics of the End" themselves come to an end, the end of the world sadly hasn't happened. A US-China war hasn't started, and nobody pushed the button to launch the nukes. You're all happily enjoying your summer leisure time. But the "end of the world" is an eternally attractive dream. The greatest dream of the patient who announces their imminent death is that the moment of their death and the moment of the end of the world should by chance coincide. Humans are creatures who are all fated to die, and thus all wish that one's death should occur simultaneously with the end of the world.⁵

The end, as a dissolution of the integralism that preceded it, is in fact never anything more than a projection from a fantasy of the past towards the future, an act which in turn constructs a unified present. In this sense the function of the end is precisely to elide the always-already fragmented nature of the present, to deflect the split of the place where the "I" can come to be. In this sense, the end of the "I" in the form of death is not designed to protest a fragmented future; rather it is a mechanism for the retrospective creation of a holistic "I" that can be grasped as a subject. But it is always doomed to failure, because literature itself comes to operate precisely by tending to mobilize the conflation of the epistemological subject and the subject of practice.

Naoki Sakai has often pointed out the split of the determination of the subject in the articulation of cultural difference: in brief, it can be said that "the epistemic subject emerges in the spatiality of synchronicity," while the subject of practice, which "always flees such spatiality and can never be present to itself," "can never be talked about as the self in its specularly."⁶ Such a spatiality of synchronicity can be read as the identificatory space of the I, in which "Mishima Yukio" as "I" in the text, that is, the epistemic formation of "I" in the text, comes to be conflated with Mishima Yukio the living (or rather, once-living) person. It is in fact precisely the function of the ideology of the end, its structures of projection away from the fragmented present in Mishima's work, which drives the impossible desire to produce Mishima as a practical subject self-identical to the object called Mishima, which is discoverable in his texts under the nom de guerre "I."

Mishima texts his body, being, and death into his work in a way which renders the separation of the social-historical Mishima from its textual representation a difficult and problematic critical endeavor. Watanabe Naomi, in his recent *Kakumo sensai naru ōbō: Nihon '68-nen' shōsetsuron*, states in the preface:

Whether it is the figure of a person in a work, the separation-connection of time and space, or grammatical person (*ninshō*) and the management of its focalization, sometimes even in the selection of only one word, one phrase,

⁵ Mishima, "Owari no bigaku kōza," 183.

⁶ See in particular his "Subject and/or *Shutai* and the Inscription of Cultural Difference," in *Translation and Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 117-152.

writing, “freely” betraying a romantic, blind belief in representation, always “has suspicious characteristics.”⁷

The one word that raises an entire field of critical issues in relation to both the work of Mishima and its critique is singular—“I.” In the long putatively autobiographical text from 1968, *Taiyō to tetsu*, the reader is alerted to the fundamental foundational pivot of the text (and, indeed of much of Mishima’s body of work): “When I say ‘I,’ I do not mean an ‘I’ that relates strictly back to me (*genmitsu ni watashi ni kizoku suru yō na ‘watashi’*), nor is it the case that all the words that have left me flow back into my interior—When I say ‘I,’ I refer to a remnant (*zanshi*) that neither relates back nor flows back.”⁸ It is precisely this remnant, this remainder that is operationalized as the coherent “I” of the work as a whole in keeping with its program: on the one hand, explanations of Mishima’s historical engagement are nearly always explained through recourse to his fictional works, allowing Mishima himself to frame the terms of critique of his own legacy. On the other hand, the chief factor propelling and sustaining the continuing fascination with Mishima is without question the historical fact of his thought and politics. This double bind creates a force that both privileges his thought, and simultaneously serves to obfuscate its actual content. Concretely investigating the trajectories, influences, and set of assumptions guiding Mishima’s theoretical interventions can provide us a glimpse into the enduring phenomenon of the “Mishima myth” (the ensemble of rhetorical and institutional gestures that keep Mishima “relevant”) and its ideological program (the central concept that Mishima the social-historical figure is self-identical with the “I” present in the body of his work).

The systemic rhetoric of self-referentiality in Mishima’s critical work functions ideologically as a mechanism of concealment, not merely as an autofictional aesthetic tool, but more importantly as an insulation from critique *avant la lettre*. By creating a literary corpus that effects a series of continual rising determinations in relation to an “I” and to a performed series of “non-literary” (but nevertheless textual) political and social interventions, the author can ensure that any non-contextual or aesthetic reading of the work will be employed as a biographical lever, and vice versa.

This effectively maintains an autofictional program long after the author as a living figure has ceased to exist by figuring a textual perpetual motion machine: history is displaced into fiction, and as soon as this movement is nearly complete, fiction is displaced into history, forming a sealed unity. By ensuring that the self-referentiality of the work is rhetorically bound to the social history of the self as public figure, creating a framework with no outside, Mishima instaurates a situation that disables the critic from the outset. One must proceed within the Mishima text in an asymptomatic reading: disruption, reconstitution, collage, and dissolution of the pre-programmed structures present in the text. Mishima’s autofictionally constructed circle of continuity can only be approached critically by bisecting its assumptions. Slicing across this circular field renders it into two parallel lines of inquiry, mirroring the doubling effect of Mishima’s anti-critical operation of foreclosure: I refer elsewhere to both this critical operation and the anti-critical shield it attacks as the “double scission” of Mishima Yukio.⁹

⁷ Watanabe Naomi, *Kakumo sensai naru ōbō: Nihon '68-nen' shōsetsuron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2003), 15. The quotation within Watanabe’s text is from Furui Yoshikichi’s essay “Hyōgen to iu koto,” in *Furui Yoshikichi sakuhin*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 1983), 27.

⁸ Mishima Yukio, *Taiyō to tetsu* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1968), 9.

⁹ On the structure and function of this operation, see my “The Double Scission of Mishima Yukio.”

Jacques Derrida has produced a well-known reading of a parallel critical space.¹⁰ His "double séance" understands itself as taking the aporetic problem of textual representation at its word—the necessity of double expression *and* double explication of what is at stake in reading Mishima's "non-fiction" is a question of what is at stake for critique and what is at stake for a critique of critique. The double scission of Mishima contains within it the double problem of representation. In Blanchot's reading of Hegel on the nature of the work, he reschematizes the question of negation:

The writer who writes a work eliminates himself as he writes that work and at the same time affirms himself in it. If he has written it to get rid of himself, it turns out that the work engages him and recalls him to himself, and if he writes it to reveal himself and live in it, he sees that what he has done is nothing, . . . that his work condemns him to an existence that is not his.¹¹

To accede to Mishima's machine is to valorize the identification of the social-historical Mishima with the textual figure "Mishima," but in doing so, one must set up an incoherent opposition that obtains only if one assumes that texts are not social-historical themselves, an argument which is of course false. Thus, the necessity of acknowledging the doubled effect that Mishima's machine sets up: it both acknowledges the falsity of its own motor-force, and at the same time revalorizes its existence by co-opting certain critiques into service on its behalf. I argue that the theoretical construction of this machine, and the effect of the duplication of representation and referentiality in critical receptions of Mishima can be readily seen in these texts. The double scission in Mishima's critique is present in its discourse of the secret. When Mishima calls *Taiyō to tetsu*, for instance, a "secret criticism" (*himerareta hihiyō*), we must read this at and against his word.

The end of the world in Mishima's sense is not in the least a kind of apocalypse, but rather a general anxiety about the ending of the schema "world": in other words, in the mid-1960s moment of this writing, precisely situated between the two Anpo demonstrations and emerging at the moment of the broader problems of Japanese economic growth, Mishima's "end of the world" is an identification of the emerging new temporality of circulation in capitalism founded on the microlevel shifts of gesture, image, fluidity, and so forth. In every sense, however, it is possible to discover in Mishima's articulation of the "end" precisely his prescience with respect to the shifts of culture then occurring: his argument can be imaged as an early grasp of the re-emergent identitarian structure of advertising, the productive capacity of the image, and the ever shrinking movement of the commodity into the unit of the brand. As a general consequence, Mishima's discussion of the "end" and its fundamental relation to the constitution of the subject can thus be a suggestive site from which to examine not only the simultaneous impossibility and necessity for literature to write its end. It can also be seen as a centripetal point around which we can detect the general contours of the emerging problematic of the new temporality implied by contemporary capitalism.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, "La double séance," in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 217-346. In English, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, Barbara Johnson trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173-286.

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire*, Charlotte Mandell trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 340.

In the section of *Owari no bigaku kōza* on the “End of Trends” he writes: “Why do trends end so quickly? Because they’re embraced. Why would you throw away something that you embrace? Because it doesn’t really hurt to do so.” In answering this paradox, Mishima writes, referencing the deaths of James Dean and Akagi Keiichirō (the young film director who died in 1961 at the age of 21), “Strangely, people like this no longer have to worry about being embraced. An endless trend is one that suddenly veers off to somewhere it can’t be reached by anyone.”¹² In this sense, after the inability to discover as the same integral subject both Mishima Yukio the social-historical figure and “Mishima” figured as “I” in the text, the spectral remnant of Mishima that is left over is nothing more than a depth of the surface, a raw visual trace that cannot flow back to any origin. But rather than create an effective posthumous, total, and lasting constellation called Mishima Yukio, these texts figure such an explosion of Mishima’s relation to representation that all that remains is neither copy nor original, but a kind of photographic negative or abstraction. To paraphrase his own theory of the emperor, put forward two years later in 1968 in *Bunka bōeiron*, Mishima has come to exist solely as cultural concept, without an origin or end to flow back towards.

¹² Mishima, “Owari no bigaku kōza,” 86.