

On Mishima
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

Yukio Mishima—the three syllables of his last name are pronounced with equal stress--(1925-1970) was a Japanese author and playwright, who gained international recognition and acclaim, including being on a short list for the Nobel Prize in Literature. He is most remembered, however, for his ritual suicide at 45 by seppuku (disemboweling oneself with a knife and then being beheaded by a colleague).

Mishima wrote voluminously--novels, plays, and short stories. For an introduction to his writing and thinking, I recommend two of his novels, *Confessions of a Mask*, written in his mid-twenties, and *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, written in his thirties, and a philosophical essay and memoir written near the end of his life, *Sun & Steel*. Mishima is the subject of two excellent biographies: *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*, by Henry Scott Stokes; and *Mishima: A Biography*, by John Nathan. An analysis of Mishima's writings I have found useful is *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence, and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima* by Roy Starrs. A fine film is *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, directed by Paul Schrader, which weaves excerpts from Mishima's writings into an account of the last day of his life. Mishima dabbled in the movies as an actor: check out "Afraid to Die," a 1960 gangster film in which he plays the lead. He wasn't half bad as an actor and had a compelling, if somewhat over-the-top, presence. What struck me about Mishima from the film was his remarkable muscular physique and how tiny he was, almost miniature. Amazon sells both of these films, and you can check rental outlets.

I've read a good bit of Mishima's fiction, but I have been most drawn to his outlook as an artist and as a man and to his personal story. I've checked out the two biographies and *Sun & Steel* from the library every couple of years for the last fifteen years and I've seen the Schrader film several times. I will do the same thing with Mishima that I did with the Foucault thought, comment on excerpts from a book. With Foucault it was a book about him, and with Mishima it is his book *Sun & Steel*. My goal is not so much to explain either Foucault or Mishima but rather to use these writers to explain myself.

My comments in response to the *Sun & Steel* excerpts were written in July of 2007. They are different than they would have been in 1990 and the other times I have gone through this book because I have changed and my comments reflect the person I am now. I'll use an excerpt to briefly discuss the philosophical idea of nihilism, which is often applied to Mishima, although I have not found instances where he has used this term with reference to himself or his work and I'm not sure it applies to him as much as some say it does. The number at the end of each excerpt is its page in *Sun & Steel*. As I did with Foucault, to better distinguish Mishima's writings from my comments I'll set the excerpts in and put them in smaller type.

So, my comments on Mishima's own words in *Sun & Steel*:

Of late, I have come to sense within myself an accumulation of all kinds of things that cannot find adequate expression via an objective form such as a novel. . . . I have . . . come up with a kind of hybrid between confession and criticism, a subtly equivocal mode one might call "confidential criticism." 7

I have integrated my own story into my writing the last ten years. Mishima uses the term "confessional criticism," and that fits me well enough, or "confessional analysis." There have been a number of factors that has influenced me to move in this direction, but none more than *Sun & Steel*. Another writer whose example has given my inspiration along these lines is Martin Duberman. See, for example, his book, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. Another influence that comes to mind is the writer Jack Kerouac. Kerouac is best known for *On the Road*, but the book of his I found most engaging is a travel book he wrote just before he died, *Satori in Paris*. That writing was so free, so unaffected; Kerouac was so open, so unpretentious, so naked to the world.

I wouldn't describe Mishima as a free, unaffected, naked writer. He was self-referenced and self-revealing (including physically revealing—he posed for some scantily-clad and sexually suggestive, though artful, photos in the last ten decade of his life), but still, there was a hidden, persona-maintained quality that kept the world at bay. For that matter, Yukio Mishima was a pen name, his real name being Kimatake Hiraoke. I mentioned the idea of a "dandy" self-presentation in the Foucault thought, which I quoted

Foucault's biographer as "making of his body, his behavior, his feelings, his passions, his very existence, a work of art, 'struggling, in this way, to get free of himself—and then to "invent himself.'" That characterization fit Mishima—he was a dandy.

If my self was my dwelling, then my body resembled an orchard that surrounded it. I could either cultivate that orchard to its capacity or leave it to the weeds to run riot in.

. . . One day, it occurred to me to set about cultivating my orchard for all I was worth. For my purpose, I used sun and steel. Unceasing sunlight and implements fashioned of steel became the chief elements in my husbandry. Little by little, the orchard began to bear fruit, and thoughts of the body came to occupy a large part of my consciousness. 7-8

Mishima took up bodybuilding with a fervor, although he also practiced kendo, a Japanese form of fencing. That is not the route I have taken to physical development. I have gone in the direction of kundalini yoga as taught by the late Yogi Bhañan. My concern for the physical goes all the way back to my doctoral dissertation, which was grounded in the work of psychologist, Eugene Gendlin (see his book, *Focusing*, and check out his Wikipedia profile.) Gendlin emphasized the organic, physically felt, inner reality that, in interaction with language and images, gives meaning and direction to our lives. I am concerned, as was Mishima, in the difference physical health and a lean, toned body makes on one's thoughts, creations, and actions, and at this writing I have made a commitment to get myself into the best physical shape possible—nutrition, exercise, mental centering and relaxation--and live what life I have remaining from that base.

Words are a medium that reduces reality to abstraction for transmission to our reason, and in their power to corrode reality inevitably lurks the danger that the words will be corroded too. 9

I have been a university academic for much of my adult life. I have seen first hand abstractions substituted for reality, and reality distorted by words, and words corroded. I have recognized the need to ground one's language and ideas and ideals in concrete reality, and to connect with here-and-now, physically experienced,

immediately felt, sensation. This is not to deny the value of an artist or visionary creating word pictures, as it were. But it is to say that we must not lose sight of the worth of dealing with the world as it actually is and ourselves as we actually are.

My prejudice concerning words was encouraged by this willfully created autonomy [of words from reality, the flesh, and action], and that my deep misunderstanding of the nature of reality, the flesh, and action was formed in this way.

10

The reference to action in this excerpt offers the opportunity to talk about nihilism, and particularly the contrast between active and passive nihilism. Mishima was often categorized, both in his work and in his personal life, as an active nihilist.

The word “nihilism” reminds me of the word “nil”—nothing—and that gives an indication of its meaning. I associate the concept with the writings of the late-nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (see, for example, his books *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Will to Power*). Nihilism is the realization, or conclusion, that there is nothing “out there”—no God, no inherent meaning to our lives, no purpose to guide us, no destiny other than the oblivion of death. We don’t matter for anything in some grand scheme, there’s nothing and no one to believe in, and there’s nothing we are obligated to do. We are a bubble on the water that will soon burst.

If that is the reality, the question becomes, what do we do with our lives? We could collapse in despair, become passive, defeatist, inactive, or cynical do-nothings; or, in contrast, we could take on the challenge of living well and achieving greatness despite, in the face of, the metaphysical void in which we exist. Nietzsche used the Apollonian and Dionisian principles (from the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysos) to represent, respectively, passive and active nihilism--the Apollonian being the rational, controlled, orderly, grounded, and the Dionisian being the physical, instinctive (especially sexual), action-oriented, soaring. Nietzsche took the side of active nihilism, applauding its “increased power of the spirit,” and disparaged the “decline,” “recession,” and “weariness” of passive nihilism. In Nietzsche’s eyes, active nihilism attacks life,

revels in it, masters it, while passive nihilism copes with it, endures it, succumbs to it.

In terms of this Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, it appears to me that in the last fifteen years of his life Mishima added Dionysos to Apollo. Mishima was very heady, organized, and disciplined from early on in his life, and he never lost those qualities. He read voluminously, including Western writers, among them Nietzsche and Thomas Mann. He wrote every day of his life to the end, in a neat hand, and so precisely that he needed very little editing. He had a large statue of Apollo on the front lawn of his immaculately kept home. What he took on himself in his later years, supported by his physical training and transformation, was the Dionysian principle.

I invite readers to continue this line of inquiry on their own. There is the Storrs book I mentioned above, *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence, and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima*. And especially for those interested in film and television, I recommend two books I read recently that deal with nihilism: *Nihilism in Film and Television*, by Kevin Stoehr, and *The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*, edited by Jerold Abrams. A contemporary novelist that reflects a nihilistic perspective is Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*).

The exercise of the muscles elucidated the mysteries that words had made. It was similar to the process of acquiring erotic knowledge. Little by little I began to understand the feeling behind existence and action. 15

Schools at all levels are about words, abstractions connected to other abstractions and, at best, referenced in external reality. The language of the body remains foreign. Even sport in schools isn't referenced in the organic, the bio-chemical, the inner flow of experience. It is about strategy and action but not about giving meaning to inner, immediately felt, physical sensation; nor is it about the enhancement of the physical dimension of our being and its harmonious integration with all that we are; and certainly, if they can help it, schools are not about the acquisition of erotic knowledge.

I had always felt that such signs of physical individuality as a bulging belly (sign of spiritual sloth) or a flat chest with protruding ribs (sign of unduly nervous sensibility) were excessively ugly, and I could not contain my surprise when I

discovered that there were people who loved such signs. To me, these could only seem acts of shameless indecency, as though the owner were exposing his spiritual pudenda [genitals] on the outside of his body. They represented one type of narcissism that I could never forgive. 17

I agree about the sloth part, and that there is an indecency and ugliness about a body not cared for. However, I don't know if it is a sign of individuality and narcissism so much as simple neglect, like a garden not tended to.

From the moment I set the wordless body, full of physical beauty, in opposition to beautiful words that imitated physical beauty, thereby equating them as two things springing from one and the same conceptual source, I had in effect, without realizing it, already released myself from the spell of words. 18

I would substitute "domination," or "tyranny," of words for "spell" of words. The ideal, it seems to me, is not to set beautiful words off against physical beauty, but rather to value both equally, and integrate both into one's life, and for each to complement and enhance the other.

[On a ship on his first trip abroad] The sun . . . was commanding me to construct a new and sturdy dwelling in which my mind, as it rose little by little to the surface, could live in security. That dwelling was a tanned, lustrous skin and powerful rippling muscles. 23

This quote raises for me the distinction between what is possible and what is natural. My own view is that it is best to seek the natural, to pursue the Platonic ideal, if you will, the bodily form that is the truest, most beautiful manifestation of a human being and this particular human being. The Greek statues didn't have "powerful, rippling muscles." The most beautiful leopard is not the one with bulging muscles but rather one that is sleek and lithe and graceful. In a quip an editor took out of my sports book, I offered the suggestion that, with body building contests, they put a Greek statue in the middle of the stage and whoever gets closest to it wins. Rippling muscles and tanned skin are distortions of the human

body, unhealthy rather than healthy, ugly rather than beautiful, and they aren't good foundations for living one's life truly well. I question whether, on balance, Mishima's "pumping iron" approach was the best he could have done for himself.

How many lazy men's truths have been admitted in the name of imagination! How often has the term imagination been used to prettify the unhealthy tendency of the soul to soar off in a boundless quest after truth, leaving the body where it always was! How often men escaped from the pains of their own bodies with the aid of that sentimental aspect of the imagination that feels the ills of others' flesh as its own! And how often has the imagination unquestioningly exalted spiritual sufferings whole relative value in fact excessively difficult to gauge! And when this type of arrogance of the imagination links together the artist's act of expression and its accomplices, there comes into existence a kind of fictional "thing"—the work of art—and it is this interference from a large number of such "things" that has steadily perverted and altered reality. As a result, men end up coming into contact only with shadows and lose the courage to make themselves at home with the tribulations of their own flesh. 35

This last time through *Sun & Steel*, I noticed a lot of either-or, always-and-never, thinking in Mishima. I think imagination can be good grounded in the body, and it can be good when it is not grounded in the body. I don't want to feel that I always need to be referenced in concrete reality. I want to be referenced there only when it is best and not otherwise.

The befuddling of the wits by means of drugs or alcohol was not, of course, my aim. My only interest lay in following consciousness through to its extreme limits, so as to discover at what point it was converted into unconscious power. 38

Mishima was influenced by Nietzsche and was concerned about power. Not just knowing or being—doing, making things happen.

However much the closeted philosopher mulls over the idea of death, so long as he remains divorced from physical courage that is a prerequisite for an awareness of it, he will remain unable even to begin to grasp it. I must make it clear that I

am talking of “physical” courage; the “conscience of the intellectual” and “intellectual courage” are no concern of mine here. 44

I value both physical courage and courage of the intellect. Mishima had physical courage, and he also had intellectual courage, and I admire him for both. He was a traditionalist at a time when that was very unpopular in Japan.

What, now, of my dealings with words through this same period? By now, I had made of my style something appropriate to my muscles: it had become flexible and free; all fatty embellishment had been stripped from it, while “muscular” ornament—ornament, that is, that though possibly without use of modern civilization was still as necessary as ever for purposes of prestige and presentability--had been assiduously maintained. I disliked a style that was merely functional as much as one that was merely sensuous. 46

Mishima’s transformation of himself physically allowed him to bring new elements into his art without making his feel compelled to discard everything he had done before.

Somewhere within me, I was beginning to plan a union of art and life, of style and the ethos of action. 47

This union of art and life (or, for me, scholarship and life, or analysis and life), and style, and action, has great appeal to me as an ideal—it is all of a piece.

I, however, had already lost the morning face that belongs to youth alone—the face that, however deep it has sunk into the stagnant depths of fatigue the previous night, rises fresh and alive to breathe at the surface in the morning. . . . Before one realizes it, the true face is ravaged by anxiety and emotion; one does not perceive that it drags last night’s fatigue like a heavy chain, nor does it realize the boorishness of exposing such a face to the sun. It is thus that men lose their manliness. 70

Mishima was obsessed with age and decay and associated youth with manliness. As I write this, Mishima could have been a vital and manly 82, but that is not how he saw things and he brought his life to an end at 45. I'm shooting for a vital, manly 82.