

## THE MASK AVATARS IN THE WORKS OF MISHIMA YUKIO AND ROLE PLAYED BY THE SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATION

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Mask Avatars in the Works of Mishima Yukio and Role Played by the Subject-Object Relation.* In understanding the autobiographical aspects present in the works of Mishima, addressing the Subject-Object relation is essential – a relation implicitly suggested and justified by the term *mask* used in the title *Confessions of a Mask*. The present paper shall try to analyse the variations of the functioning mechanism of this relation in *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku*/ 仮面の告白, 1949), *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkaku-ji*/ 金閣寺, 1956) and *The Sea of Fertility* (*Hōjō no Umi*/ 豊饒の海, 1965-1970). Moreover, with respect to the dialectics of the Subject-Object relation, we shall identify the mask avatars that, on an epic level, produce a real hallucinating effect, by hiding and, at the same time, revealing the intentions of the hero and/or of the author. *The face, the appearance and the make-up* as avatars of the hero's mask are also expressions of the narrator's identity, thus creating the illusion that, in *Confessions of a Mask*, we are not faced with the referentiality of language in the name of which the textual world is constructed, but the inner reality of the author himself. The narrator fades behind the mask in order to create the effect of reality: the illusion of the presence of the Author. A true master of the mask, Mishima Yukio gives the readers the illusion that they are facing the author himself, when, in fact, they are merely taking part in a cleverly staged game.

**Keywords:** *Autobiographical Fiction, Modern Japanese Literature, Narrative Perspective*

**REZUMAT.** *Avatarurile măștii în opera lui Mishima Yukio și rolul raportului Subiect-Obiect.* Pornind de la ideea că, în înțelegerea aspectelor autobiografice ale operei lui Mishima este esențială punerea în discuție a raportului dintre Subiect-Obiect, raport pe care, implicit, îl sugerează și îl justifică cuvântul *mască* din titlul *Confesiunilor unei măști*, vom încerca să analizăm variațiile

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mecanismului de funcționare a acestui raport în *Confesiunile unei măști* (*Kamen no kokuhaku*/ 仮面の告白, 1949), *Templul de aur* (*Kinkaku-ji* 金閣寺, 1956) și *Marea fertilității* (*Hōjō no Umi*/ 豊饒の海, 1965-1970). De asemenea, în raport cu dialectica relației Subiect-Obiect, vom identifica avatarurile măștii care produc în plan epic un efect halucinatoriu de real, ascunzând și, simultan, demascând intențiile eroului și/sau autorului. *Fața, chipul și machiajul* ca avataruri ale măștii eroului sunt totodată expresii ale identității naratorului, dându-ne iluzia că, în *Confesiunile unei măști*, nu ne confruntăm cu referențialitatea limbajului în virtutea căreia se construiește lumea textului, ci cu realitatea interioară a autorului însuși. Naratorul se estompează în spatele măștii pentru a crea efectul de real: iluzia prezenței Autorului. Adevărat maestru al măștii, Mishima Yukio dă cititorului iluzia că care are de-a face cu autorul însuși, când, de fapt, nu participă decât la un joc abil înscenat.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *ficțiune autobiografică, literatura japoneză modernă, narativitate*

In 1949, the publication of the volume *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku*/ 仮面の告白) represented the beginning of the ascension of Mishima Yukio's (三島 由紀夫) artistic career. The success of the book transformed the young Japanese writer into a true star, as his biographer John Nathan notes: "With a sale of twenty thousand copies in hardcover it was a best seller for 1949" (Nathan 2004, 100). *Confessions of a Mask*, however, was not Mishima's literary debut. At Kawabata Yasunari's recommendation, a story appeared in the publication *Ningen* 人間 (*Humanity*), beginning with November 1947, followed, in the same year, by a collection of short stories.

With the exception of Kawabata, who supported him and wrote the preface of this first volume, Mishima's debut was almost overlooked, so nothing would predict the success of *Confessions of a Mask* two years later. Both Donald Keene and John Nathan outline the writing of this volume in relation with the poetics of Osamu Dazai, considered to be one of the most prolific representatives of what came to be known as the "Japanese Nihilism". The moment Mishima allegedly met Osamu Dazai – their only meeting, for that matter – in January 1947, two years before the publication of *Confessions of a Mask*, was portrayed by John Nathan, considering the recounts of Mishima himself, which were also corroborated by the playwright Yashiro. In an attempt to explain what could have determined the freshly debuted young 22 year old to tell his more famous colleague "I don't like your writing" (Nathan 2004, 92), based on one of Mishima's statements, John Nathan proved that the

two authors shared a similar desire for self-destruction, but they manifested it differently: "Mishima declared he hated Dazai because he glorified his weakness, the destructive addictions he was helpless to resist." (Nathan 2004, 93). Donald Keene's approach is similar to the explanations for Mishima's *desire for self-destruction*, by calling into question the autobiographical writing in *Confessions of a Mask*, in which the term *mask* is essential in understanding the meanings present in the text. Thus, Donald Keene makes a distinction between the role played by the mask for Osamu Dazai, for whom wearing it represented an act of protecting oneself from others and the mask helped him defend his sensitivity, while Mishima, who does not wish to hide, prefers the contrary, transforming the mask into his own face: "He used the mask to subdue the sensitivity, timidity, and self-pity that Dazai carefully preserved behind his. Mishima was able to make the mask a living part of his flesh, and he died with it firmly in place. In the end, he may not even have been aware that he wore a mask, so much had its attitudes and his own coalesced" (Keene 2003, 49). The literary critics who analysed Mishima's works noticed, in more or less nuanced manners, that the writer's features can be identified in almost all of the characters who bore the author's weaknesses, the inability to accept a historical reality that, after Japan's defeat in World War II, was no longer in accordance with the old Samurai warrior tradition that the author admired.

If there were no decadence and negativism, only in relation with the world and the world as a reality were understood in its historical development, then Mishima Yukio's writing can truly be described in the terms of absolute negativism as a voice with a particular inflection among the other voices of decadence and negativism in general. Contemporary with the assertion of existentialism, in David Pollak's approach, Mishima offered his own response to the question raised by the dilemma on the meaning of existence:

"By personal example as well as in his writings, his response was that the existentially valid life meant, as it meant for the European existentialists, taking the responsibility of choice into one's own hands... Mishima's contempt for the random senselessness of the nihilist act was balanced by his scorn for any fashionable intellectual pose that denied the ultimate significance of existential choice in action itself.... In Japanese tradition the existential act of taking into one's own hands responsibility for one's own existence usually ends in suicide, the murder of oneself..." (Pollak 1985, 389).

However, this response, in accordance with Japanese tradition, was the response of the old warriors. It is known that Mishima Yukio took his own life through an act of voluntary death in the style imposed by the Samurai

tradition. Beyond the political message which, through this ultimate gesture, Mishima wished to transmit to the world, another message is revealed – one transmitted in the form of a confession of faith, namely that between the act of writing and the act of living the writer saw no significant difference, which, in order to outline the portrait of the artist, entitles us to seek, within his works, certain *traces* of an existentially and artistically assumed biography.

In understanding the autobiographical aspects of Mishima's work, the Subject-Object relation is essential, since within it lie the narrator's hypostases which, through a double assumption of both the narrative act and the author's *mask* role confers the poetic and subjective, testimonial value to the autobiography, by sublimating historicity. Thus, Mishima's work is contrapuntal around the Subject-Object relation, understood as a source of knowledge and, by illustrating the complex mechanism of the dialectics of this relation, the author reintroduces reality, history and society in the structures of the work as possible stages for the mask game of the knowing Self. We shall identify two different junctures within this relation between the Subject and the Object. The first is the moment in which the Subject desires the Object through an act of taking possession in which the Eros plays an essential role. In the novel *Kinkakuji*, the inability to carry out this possession will lead to the need to destroy the Object that evades the Subject's desire. The second moment occurs when, in spite of the idea of rejection, the Subject's relations with the Object (the world) know moment of ease and, in the respite, the premise of a new repositioning of the Self in relation with the world is created, namely a new perspective, of the Other. By way of the dialectics in which the Self, in its desire for knowledge, doubles, projecting itself onto the Other, after which, when the Self-Other gains an existence independent from its double, the Self intervenes, followed by the act of destroying its own avatar, in a terrible clash that led Mishima himself to suicide. The writer's biography offers an interesting parallel in relation with the evolution of his work. From this viewpoint, the desire for knowledge, which the writer implicitly also feels, transverses from *Confessions of a Mask* to *The Decay of the Angel* (*Tennin Gosui*/ 天人五衰 (1970), Mishima's final novel, and the fourth volume of the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* - a sinuous journey in which fiction intertwines with elements from the author's biography or, in other words, the fictional work feeds on the writer's aspirations to surpass the human condition, in an existential sense, and on the desire to face the challenges of the respective ethical limitations.

*Confessions of a Mask* is an autobiographical fiction in which the lack of narrativity experience and the lack of an understanding of literature's powers of dissimulation make this volume the Japanese writer's most authentic work.

However, the homodiegetic nature, in Genette's interpretation, is neutralised and transcended through the mask metaphor and the tension of the relation between the Self/Subject and the Other/Object. Here, the Subject-Object relation is essential and the focus is naturally placed on a stance of the gaze and, implicitly, on the metaphor of the light as a form of unveiling and understanding; the spacial couple *inside/uchi-outside/soto*, once the Eros' experience is discovered, plays an essential role in coding the Subject-Object relation through sensual love. From the first few pages of the text, from the description of the first scene in which the new-born is bathed, the writer confers a privileged position to the *gaze* and the *light*, in relation with the other senses: "No matter how they explained, no matter how they laughed me away, I could not but believe I remembered my own birth ... I received my first bath. It was a brand-new basin, its wooden surface planed to a fresh and silken smoothness; and when I looked from inside, a ray of light was striking one spot on its brim". (Mishima 1958, 2-3)

At a discursive level, the mask already makes its presence known, since behind the desire to persuade the reader to believe that someone can "visualise" their own birth, lies a different intention, dissimulated by mimicking the distrust of the adults surrounding the baby – the intention to convince the reader, the only audience whom the narrator truly wishes to convince and which, by virtue of the poetic pact, could much more easily accept the idea of remembering the first moments after one's birth, so precisely described by the narrator. Built as a *Bildungsroman*, *Confessions of a Mask* is not a traditionalist, formation novel; on the contrary, in a modern style, it deconstructs its strategy, devouring its elements, apparently while following the classic schema. The novel begins fairly traditionally through the sucking presentation of the environment in which the hero was born, offering the reader information about his family, particularly about his grandmother, clues which, due to the similarity with Mishima's biography, entitle us to place a somewhat strong equal sign between the author, the narrator and the hero.

However, *Confessions of a Mask* was also written in the form of a confession, in a true sense of the word, as a testimonial given by the one who discovers himself *to be different* from the others. Thus, by way of the discourse that unravels as the story progresses and which the narrator cannot completely evade, the author seeks to *penetrate* towards what is beyond language and discourse and to give a deeper meaning the *difference* of the Self, a difference that he refuses to reduce to the inability to conform to world's social norms and to the triviality of the homosexual orientation discovered by the hero relatively early. The mind's efforts to give aesthetic value to the sexual impulses and, through the Subject-Object relation, to offer the Eros an

ontological dimension, represent only one of the themes of Mishima's literature. However, this theme is incomplete, as we overlook the significance given by the writer to the idea of a beautiful death and of the forms of aestheticizing death. By the use of the techniques of psychoanalysis, the narrator of the *Confessions* tries to inventory all the constitutive elements that compose the network of the complex significances of the connections identified by the hero-narrator since childhood between *beauty* and *death*, thus offering beauty a metaphysical dimension. Even if the idea of beauty seems to rather be an abstraction, the way in which Mishima creates the relation between the beauty of the world of ideas and what comes from the immediate reality through the senses represents a possible solution for surpassing the limitations of the Platonic Eros. For Plato, the theory of beauty developed in *Hippias* and completed with that of love, in *Phaedrus* and *The Banquet*, merges with reaching the absolute Good; Mishima, less constrained by the grammar and logic of the philosophical argumentation, gives a freer, more modern and implicitly a more subjective interpretation to the idea of beauty, relieving it of its ethical value. Mishima appears to confirm that beauty, in a Platonic sense, is not something that can be observed in the material world or in everyday activities, even if we could sometimes notice certain clues in this sense – it comes down to the ability of the mind to disengage from this world and to ascend to the sensible world of ideas. The ideal of beauty, to which Mishima devotes himself, does not sink into a metaphysical-nihilist view, but through his writing's ability to animate even the most abstract ideas by way of the senses that had been awakened from lethargy through a lively contact with the real world, through the truth of the confession, it gains a poetic and, implicitly, an ethical value. *Confessions of a Mask*, by favouring the narrator's viewpoint, creates this double assumption of both the narrative act and of the act of living, the leap of significance thus opening the way of the metaphysics of an ethics that, in the end, evaded history and the historicity of time. The discovery of the beauty within the heart, as well as the desire to turn this beauty into an ideal accepted by reason, for whose definition the author dedicates his entire art of expression, represents one of the keys to understanding and interpreting Mishima's aesthetic vision.

Nonetheless, if regarding the idea of beauty, Mishima combines several western and Asian philosophical sources, regarding the Subject-Object relation and understanding otherness, in *Confessions*, the Japanese writer favours the stances of existentialism and of the otherness of the Subject. Conveniently, from the viewpoint of the poetic subjectivity, the Subject-Object relation develops unidirectional, from the Self towards the Other, and the gaze that ignores who the Other is also ignores the fact that the Other also gazes back,

which facilitates its understanding as a passive Object of the act of knowledge. The Subject-Object relation cannot be revealed in a better way than in Mishima's demonstration in *Confessions of a Mask*, by experiencing the Eros, present in different approaches. Thus, the first Objects of the child's innocent adoration and desire are categorised by the author in two groups – one containing the garbage man on the street, the maiden from Orléans (as an image of androgyny) and the smell of the soldiers' sweat, and the second group category containing two feminine images, namely Shokyokusai Tenkatsu and Cleopatra. These categories of "objects", however, are not simple abstractions since, by discovering his ability to possess and, implicitly, to visually take possession, the child unconsciously discovers the synonyms of power. Nevertheless, he does not transform this discovery into an act of violence against the Other as an Object, but on the self. Here, Mishima detaches from violence in ontological terms and constructs a new perspective on violence as the knowing Subject's return to the self. Following the archetypal model of Saint Sebastian's death, the hero in *Confessions* imagines his death (Mishima later posed as Saint Sebastian), namely the death of the Self, of the Subject, which, in the terms of knowledge, means a triumph of the Subject over the Object, not by desire and possession, but by identifying in the Other a hypostasis of the Self, of a super-consciousness. By intuiting and philosophically knowing the source of power and its political dimensions, Mishima attempts to not completely repress the relation with the Other, in order to avoid falling into the trap of loneliness or of a closed solitude, deprived of knowing and understanding the world through the Other.

If, however, the connection between beauty/beautiful and death, identified in *Confessions*, remained at the level of an abstract game of the gaze, in the novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkaku-ji*/ 金閣寺, 1956), the desire for beauty gained an additional valence which led to a partial resolve of the Subject-Object relation through action – a violent action, a destruction through fire of the object of desire and, implicitly, of the Self hypostasised in the Other. Thus, in the Subject's attempt to lacerate the world of the Other, of the Object, with the purpose of knowledge and possession, the symbolic *destruction* of the temple gains, in the end, an ethical value, a value that blends into the *desire* for the self, for finding the Self in the Other. Written, for that matter, in the form of a third person narration, in the novel *Kinkakuji*, the Subject is almost sublimed in relation with the Object, the nature of the tense relation between the Subject and the Object having been favoured in this instance.

From this viewpoint, *Kinkakuji* represents a true stylistic tour de force in which the object of the adoration of the self, the Other, no longer holds any human quality and truly becomes a pure Object par excellence, even if, in the

Oriental and Animist tradition, it is not completely deprived of the attributes of sensibility. The gaze that is present in both the Subject-Object relation and in the metaphor of the light, of beauty and of the temple's shine – a metaphor through which the tragedy of the existence of the Self develops – are pushed in this novel to their extreme; the role assumed here by Mizoguchi, the main character, is that of the provocative *agent* of the Other. The intention to set fire to the temple can thus also be understood as the hero's attempt to liberate himself from the seduction that he secretes through the language created around the beauty of the temple in the form of a teleological discourse and, through dualization, by exiting the passive self, he assumes the role to act, by violating, in an ontological sense, the existence of the adored/gazed upon object. By setting fire to the temple, Mishima's hero hopes to destroy it epiphany, in metaphysical terms. However, by destroying the temple, Mizoguchi aims to denounce the illusion and annihilate the *mask* through which the hero *spoke*, without stuttering, about the unreal beauty of the temple and, through this destructive action, to cause the return to the immediate reality. Nonetheless, it is not always easy to eliminate the mask, since it intervenes the moment it is negated, as a condition of the possibility of this negation. Starting from the Buddhist saying "When you meet the Buddha, kill him", Thomas E. Swann concludes that Mishima's hero merely followed the Buddhist teachings to completion by reaching illumination, surviving the fire: "After starting the fire, Mizoguchi attempts to die in the tiny Kukyōchō. But Zen teaches that there is no escape from life, not even in death. Mizoguchi has 'known' true reality and cannot return to that old secret room within himself. Scarred and burned, he emerges like the phoenix to start a new life. He has no desire to die and just wants to live exactly what Zen wants one to do." (Swann 1972, 414).

Both Kochan, the protagonist of the *Confessions*, and Mizoguchi, the protagonist of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, intuit the force conferred to life by the proximity of death, through reaction and impulse. This seduction and attraction of beauty naturally has a connection to the game of masks, whose symbolic-mystic valence was discovered by Mishima through the *nō* theatre. He who wears the mask is not only the one who hides in the form of a neutral face, but also the one who, under the cover of the mask, does not wish to be seen by the Other. Therefore, the mask plays a dual role in Mishima's work – on the one hand, through a three-dimensional image, it represents an *appearance* of the internalness of the knowing soul, filled with desire, thus a *presence*, and, on the other hand, a two-dimensional image or a *face*, namely a refraction surface that deviates the gaze of the Other, an *absent presence*, in the order of the existing, as in the *nō* theatre. This game of masks, characteristic to the *nō* theatre, knows its fulfilment in the work of Mishima, who revisits, from



one text to the next, certain themes and ideas, merely changing the characters or the perspective. An interesting example in this case is also the last scene from *Confessions*, in which Kochan has a final meeting with Sonoko, the only woman who stirred any feelings in the protagonist. This, in fact, is the scene with which *Confessions* ends. The scene is relevant to Kochan since, while admiring the body of a young man, on the beach, in the sun, seems absent in his dialogue with Sonoko, for whom he assumes that he bears a secret love. Through her presence, Sonoko fulfils the role of *waki* from the *nō* tragedies, namely the secondary character through whom the true identity of the *shite* is revealed – that of the main character who wears a mask. In an ironic, but also modern way, this revealed identity does not point to the metaphysical nature of a deity or of a spirit from another world, but it refers to sexual identity, namely to homosexuality. However, by preserving the romantic nature of this first love between Kochan and Sonoko, Mishima readdresses the theme of the *unfit* love, as well as of the betrayal that leads to the rupture in *Spring Snow* (*Haru no yuki*/春の雪), the first volume of the tetralogy, whose protagonists are Kiyooki and Satoko. Nonetheless, while Sonoko, betrayed by her feelings, mentions in passing her intention to become a nun, in *Spring Snow*, Satoko fulfils this plan by retreating, after parting from Kiyooki, to the Gesshū Temple, a temple led by a member of the imperial family. In this context, the relation between the Subject and the Object, or between the Self and the Other/the World, considering the fact that the dynamics of the gaze is also based on the mechanisms of the desire for knowledge and possession, gains a sexual tone in which the Object of desire becomes ambiguous and the physical/spiritual level overlaps with the masculine/feminine relation. The hero's primary attraction is, however, represented by the masculine body, *rough and barbaric, but unmatched in its beauty*, while the feminine form remains enclosed in a stereotypical image, a distant expression of a spiritual and cold beauty. Therefore, in Mishima's view, the motion of the otherness begins from the adored object, the seducer identifies with the adored subject, the-one-that-falls-for-seduction, thus conferring a unique, definite meaning to this motion. Here, the appearance shows its true face by removing the mask, and, through this game of masks that the writer played both in his own writings and in life, he demonstrates an extraordinary ability to confer authenticity to the mask and to his avatars in life. But the mask worn by the female characters loses its attribute of an intermediary object, in a transcendental sense, between the appearance and the world, and it is transformed into *makeup*, as in the kabuki plays, into a representative image that masks the convention and the arbitrary by naturalising the sign. In this sense, the *onnagata* role (the female role played by men) is illustrative, in which the makeup, for the sake of believability, must be similar and identical

to an ideal female face, constructed through a synthesis of the elements that recompile the revealing, ambiguous, complex female beauty.

The tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* is not only Mishima's testament work, but also, through its extent, a receptacle that cumulates the main themes and ideas from the previous works; thus, the Subject-Object relation grafted on the Self-Other relation, as well as the metaphor of the face and the mask and the theme of the metaphysical Beauty, for poetic unity, receives new interpretations that more profoundly and ethically intertwine with that of paternity and of waiting for death. The four volumes of the tetralogy, published at different intervals of time, *Spring Snow* (*Haru no yuki*/ 春の雪, 1966), *Runaway Horses* (*Honba*/ 奔馬, 1968), *The Temple of Dawn* (*Akatsuki no tera*/ 暁の寺, 1970) and *Decay of the Angel*, (*Tennin gosui*/ 天人五衰, 1970), in a way represent the writer's artistic testament. It is known that the latter volume of the tetralogy was completed on the eve of the writer's death, a death directed by the author himself, in the highly publicised day of 24 October 1970, when Mishima, together with his friend Morita, in an intensely publicised context, committed *seppuku*. John Nathan, Mishima's biographer (Nathan 2004, 269-281), made a detailed description of every moment of that day, as well as of the period before the spectacular staging; he suggested that the writer fulfilled a carefully thought out ritual and that nothing had been left to chance. After analysing several of the writer's confessions, published before his death, as well as several testimonies given by those who had met him, as was Hiroshi Niita or editor Shinoyama, John Nathan believed that Mishima's suicide, as the final scenes of the last volume of the tetralogy also show, reveals that "his entire life to the present moment, this side of death, has been an illusion merely, without substance" (Nathan 2004, 269).

Although Mishima, while suggesting that by ritualistically fulfilling the norms set out by the ceremony of the death of a warrior, publicly accuses the suffering of a deep crisis of conscience caused by the weakening of the national vigour in relation with the evolution of the country towards a society of prosperity; however, his end, beyond its intrinsic political significance, also bears an ethical value whose meaning can be identified in the tetralogy. The title *The Sea of Fertility*, taken from the *geography* of the Moon, must also be understood as a reverse metaphor for infertility or for solitude, for a sterile, lifeless knowledge. Constructed after the model of the Buddhist concept of the soul's metempsychosis, the narration follows the succession of three possible reincarnations of Kiyooki, who had died at age 18. Honda, Kiyooki's friend from his youth, became the protagonist of the four volumes by fulfilling the role of a witness to these successive reincarnations or, in the terms of the *nō*

playwriting, that of a *waki*. Taking place over the course of seventy years, the action in the tetralogy allows Mishima to traverse, in parallel with the evolution of his characters, a significant part of the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan. Thus, the first to catch Honda's attention as a possible reincarnation of Kiyooki is young Isao Inuma, the hero of volume *Runaway Horses*. The second reincarnation gives Honda the opportunity to travel to Thailand, where he meets Princess Ying Chan, the hero of the novel *The Temple of Dawn*, who, similar to Isao, seems to bear the birthmark of Kiyooki. Finally, the third reincarnation is young Torū, the hero of the final volume, *The Decay of the Angel*. Throughout the four volumes, Mishima builds and deconstructs the transcendence of the Subject-Object relation, or of the Self-Other relation, either in aesthetic terms, based on the idea of beauty, or in ethical and political terms, by using the complicated relation between knowledge and desire. In this sense, young Torū, with whom the metempsychosis cycle of reincarnation ends, seems to represent the perfect model of the new generation, whose primary *quality* is, ethically speaking, the lack of a conscience.

Unique in Japanese literature, *The Sea of Fertility* aims to be a totalising novel of the time and history of contemporaneity, as well as, from the viewpoint of modern philosophy, in Hegel and Nietzsche's approaches, an ironic response to the "incarnation" of the spirit "without a conscience" in history. Mishima, however, did not choose state figures or representatives of Japanese history as his characters – following the Buddhist tradition, he seems to suggest that by virtue of the qualities that one person can accumulate at one point, the role played in historical change can become decisive. The transformation of the Subject-Object relation into pure otherness, which favours the occurrence of a new, but authentic type of relation in which the roles are reversed, the Object itself becoming the Subject, opens a path towards a new ethics. The ideal of the salvation of the Japanese soul can only be fulfilled through this acknowledgement of the Other within the ethics of transcendence in which the Other is recognised as the Subject.

This is the case of Isao in the second volume of the tetralogy, which is probably one of the best and most complex avatars of young Kiyooki. Nonetheless, Mishima does not fall for the romantic temptation by abstracting the idea of an exemplary hero and he does not transform Isao into a character that lacks credibility. On the contrary, by emphasising the inflexible nature of the young man, he makes him into a modern tragic hero in the sense of Camus' existentialism. Rodica Frențiu, by referencing Mishima's case, defines the *thymos*, the Platonic concept of "courage" and of "the desire for recognition" in relation with the main psychological sources of the need for recognition, namely religion and nationalism, which determined the Japanese writer to suppress the

self-preservation instinct in the name of an ideal: “Due to a particularly strong thymos, Yukio Mishima managed to defeat one of the strongest natural instincts, self-preservation, in the name of an ideal: the salvation of the Japanese soul”. (Frențiu 2010, 82). If Isao is the hero whose historical conscience, affectively expressed, is strong, at the opposite pole, Torū is the representative of a world in which the “conscience” gives way to the nothingness of the existence in a world populated by the waste of modernity which, ironically, Mishima sees everywhere, as an expression of the *pure* macular Japanese landscape and of the contagion with objects that originated outside of Japan.

Isao, the hero of the novel *Runaway Horses*, fights against this export-oriented capitalism, represented by corrupt politicians by sacrificing his own life following the model of the Samurai. His sacrifice must also be understood as a Shinto type of cleansing and a purification of a society soiled by the impurity of a politics aimed against traditional Japan, as Mishima also believed. Undoubtedly, of all the characters of this tetralogy, Mishima lent Isao the most of his own convictions. Even Isao’s death by *seppuku* represented, for the writer, an ideal for his own death.

At the opposite pole of the view on purity conceived by Isao resides Torū, for whom the cleansing and the purification are selfishly reduced to himself and to repeatedly washing his hands. We could ask ourselves what would have happened to Torū if Honda, believing that he was the reincarnation of his friend Kiyooka, had not adopted him. In any case, the distance between the young 16 year old who guided the ships entering the Shimizu harbour and the author of a personal journal in which Torū described all of his hopes and feelings is great, which entitles us to consider that the one who played an important role in his development, by leading him towards the Evil with which Torū was obsessed, was Honda, his adoptive father. Once again, the relation between the two is full accord with the mechanics of the dramatic conflict in the *nō* theatre. Honda played the role of *waki* for Torū, namely that of the secondary character in whose presence the *shite* nature manifests in the main character, the demon, in Torū’s case.

The reference to the *nō* dramas is not coincidental, especially considering that this volume references the fact that Honda had allegedly visited the pine grove in Miho, where he had seen the precious garments of the Angel (*hagoromo*), which were said to have been worn by a sky being. *Hagoromo* is also the name of a famous *nō* play by Zeami. The myth of the precious garments worn by a celestial being and stolen or hidden by a mortal, without which that being could not return to its world is also a metaphor for Honda’s desire to not give up on his love for his friend Kiyooka, whose traces he seems to identify in the physical images of the three heroes whom he considered to be the

reincarnations of his friend. However, by identifying the signs of the decay of the angel (five signs, in Buddhist belief – *the withering of the flowers from the wreath, the wear of the garments, the sweat of the armpits, the withering of the light of the body and the lack of joy for the self*), Honda realises that those whom he had considered to be reincarnations of Kiyooki were, in fact, degraded versions of the image of perfection represented by his friend. Honda's old age also represents a degradation of the beauty that can only remain intact, as Mishima suggests, though the death that sublimates the degradation and ugliness of life. Another possible solution for the degradation of life is represented by ascension, as was the case of Mother Superior Satoko, who retreated to the Gensshū Temple. However, this ascension lacks memory and an in-fertile knowledge, depicted though the metaphor present in the title of the tetralogy. This ascension, in spite of its purity, begins with a *lie*, or with denial. Thus, the old nun, intriguing Honda, stated that she had never met Kiyooki Matsugae. The nun's *denial*, initially interpreted by Honda as a lie, determines him to logically deduce that Kiyooki never existed, and neither had Isao, Ying Chan or Torū, and therefore, neither did he himself.

In a Buddhist key, the interpretation of the ending poses no difficulty if we were to recall the older concept according to which the real world is merely the image of an illusion. By the Mother Superior's definition for the memories as *magical glasses* that brings distant things closer, the writer suggests a possible interpretation in this direction. If, however, we were to understand the final image in the novel *The Decay of the Angel* as the final image created by Mishima in the fictional world, this scene having been written on the eve of his death, then the deserted garden of the temple, silent and submerged in the summer sunlight, represents *one final gaze upon the world*, not by Honda, who refused to see it, but by the author himself. Through the *Decay of the Angel*, the final novel of the tetralogy, Mishima approaches the end of the sinuous journey towards knowledge, but in order to be authentic to himself and to his conscience, he understood that without the experience of death, knowledge could never be complete and absolute. From *Confessions of a Mask* to *The Decay of the Angel*, all of Mishima's texts contain an important autobiographical component, both with respect to the ability of coding his own views on the world into the text and to the reassessment, in different forms, of the discourse of subjectivity; the Japanese writer's work can be read in an evolution that parallels the writer's Self. Thus, Yukio Mishima, less interested in capturing reality or in depicting it, even if he later abandoned the syntactic plan of the narrative voice, did not ignore the subjectivity of the narrator which he considered to be an important fictional path towards self-knowledge so that, by diving into the revelation of the self, he would establish the necessary poetic dimension that

makes the junction between the inner world of the self and the real world, through an inverted motion.

The curtain fall and the exit from the stage of life do not, however, bring about the joy of triumph, since the hero/author does not survive his final representation. Nonetheless, he anticipated it, by living it through fiction and through his character, Isao. In this sense, by building a mysticism of beauty that is neither theology nor ethics, but is part of the nature of fiction itself, Mishima realises the limitations of art in the lines of the existent, a moment which coincides with the unmasking of the world that shows its true *face* – a modern, expressionless face, a face of ugliness and of decay. The author can only survive this unmasking through the ultimate act of self-violence, namely through death – not as a negation of life, but as its affirmation in spite of art. By choosing death, Mishima chose art.

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