

The Ocean Libidized: Yukio Mishima and the Cold War

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Abstract

The titles of the major works of novelist Yukio Mishima clearly illustrate his preoccupation with sea imageries, while his language urges us to examine them psychoanalytically. In other words, these images function as an aesthetic and psychic screen onto which his radically divided subjectivity is projected. Mishima's divided self is a product of logical complication and semantic opacity worthy of psychoanalytic interpretation. The images in Mishima's work are evidence of his divided mindset, in limbo between denial and acceptance of post-war Japan, and the historical consequence of Japan's complete military defeat in WWII.

In terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, his conflicting thoughts can be viewed as the simultaneous acceptance and denial of Japan's castration, which, as Freud famously argues, is the psychic structure of fetishism. Taking this perspective, we can regard his fascination with the post-war 'Symbolic Emperor' as Mishima the fetishist's fascination with the 'sublime object' of his phantasy. The political and cultural icon of the 'Symbolic Emperor' enables him to deny and accept the historical fact of Japan's unconditional surrender to America as a psychical compromise.

A set of sea imageries in Mishima's works also contribute to this kind of psychoanalytic compromise, as they are sublimated and libidized in a similar way while manifesting themselves as allegorical references to the Cold War. In this context, his 'sublime' serves as a metaphor for 'nuclear weapon'—the absent and lethal cause of the Cold War. It is the ontological absence of a 'nuclear weapon' that brings about the Cold War. Once this absence is cancelled, the semantic and actual system of the Cold War disappears instantaneously. Yet, the existence of nuclear weapons is also the ontological assumption of the Cold War. This structural dilemma—the simultaneous existence of semantic and ontological maximum and zero degrees—is precisely the same double-bind plight in which we find Mishima's representation of the 'sublime'. This simultaneity can also be seen in Mishima's representational omnipotence and impotence, or the acceptance and denial of castration.

Yukio Mishima's preoccupation with the sea or with oceans is clearly apparent in a number of the titles of his novels: *The Sound of Waves* (1954), *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (1963), and *The Sea of Fertility* (1969-71), the last of which is a compound work made up of a tetralogy of his final novels. A series of interpretations have indeed been attempted concerning his oceanic imagery. However, in my view, this sort of his thematic obsession on his part particularly demands a psychoanalytic reading. My argument is that the sea or ocean can be read as a libidized screen onto which his

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psychic and political conflicts are projected in such a way as implies this writer's divided subjectivity in the historical context of the Cold War. Mishima's aesthetic representations of the sea serve to disguise the politics and historicity of these sea-imageries and thereby transform them into psychoanalytic symptoms of his texts, which induce us to decipher their latent meaning.

Given that Mishima is known to be a far-right nationalist, it may be somewhat surprising to learn that he is a strong supporter of the "Symbolic Emperor," as defined by the postwar Japanese pacifist constitution. In his opinion expressed in "The Defense of Culture" and "Manifesto of Anti-revolution" (1968), this postwar system contributes to Japan's defense of its own culture against the threat of the communist revolution. Based on this anti-communist ideology, in the latter text, he contends that the pacifist Japanese Emperor serves as a more "democratic" representation of the essence of the postwar Japanese culture as compared with the prewar one (11-2). This seems to be a glaring contradiction, given his indignant denial of the postwar "Americanization" of Japan. It goes without saying that the postwar Emperor system is a product of the very Americanization which he condemns.

In comparison with the postwar Americanized Emperor system, Mishima critiques the prewar system of Monarchy, which—he stresses—suppressed the military uprising by young officers in Tokyo in 1936. This action was intended to eradicate, in the name of the Emperor, the alleged corruption of the Japanese Army and government; however, the Emperor himself regarded this *coup d'état* as a destabilization of the status quo. Surprisingly, in "The Defense of Culture," Mishima sharply criticizes this as "totalitarianism" and the suppression of the freedom of speech! In contrast, he maintains, the postwar Emperor would have allowed and accepted this form of military actions, where a number of politicians were assassinated, as a free expression or activation of political thoughts (75).

Another astonishing fact is Mishima's positive reference to Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a work which is known to have helped facilitate the postwar occupation of Japan by the US Army in terms of their anthropological knowledge of Japanese culture and history. In reference to this book's metaphors, Mishima claims that the postwar Monarchy is an ideal political and cultural system, which symbolizes the aesthetic elegance of the imperial court as "chrysanthemum" and the military violence as "sword." Paradoxically, Mishima simultaneously deplores the fact that both—the "chrysanthemum" and "sword" in these metaphorical senses—are made impossible in the postwar Americanized Japan (74-5). Thus, his reasoning is an impossible endeavour, as he attempts to reconsider the values and aesthetics of prewar military Japan, while depending upon the political vocabulary of postwar democracy.

Such logical complication and semantic opacity deserve a psychoanalytic interpretation. Evidently, Mishima is divided between denial and acceptance with regard to postwar Japan, a historical consequence of Japan's complete military defeat by America. Psychoanalytically speaking, his conflicting thoughts can be viewed as the simultaneous acceptance and denial of castration, which—as Freud famously argues—

is the psychic structure of fetishism (156). It can be assumed that the postwar “Symbolic Emperor” is a “sublime object” in the phantasy of Mishima the fetishist. This political and cultural icon enables him to deny and accept the historical fact of Japan’s unconditional surrender to America as a psychical compromise.

My argument is that his literary output as a whole is symptomatic of this paradoxical dilemma: his language itself is driven by this fetishist repression and acceptance of the perceived castration. From this perspective, his self-confidence as a novelist is noteworthy. In his book entitled *A Holiday of a Novelist*, Mishima declares that no novelist can avoid an existential confrontation between him/herself and the world, where the only possible “weapon” is the universality of the writer’s own style (194). The military metaphor of a “weapon” connotes Mishima’s aggressive conviction of his victory in this battlefield of literature. This reminds us of what Roland Barthes in his *Writing Degree Zero* terms the “writing or *écriture* of the Bourgeoisie” in the 19th century, which reflects the universalist self-confidence in their representational powers (33). In psychoanalytic terms, this self-assurance can be construed as a sign of “infantile omnipotence” or self-important narcissism, which, by definition, is a psychic product of an unconscious repression of castration.

In *A Holiday of a Novelist*, Mishima also displays a similar confidence in his writing ability to contain and conquer—by using the power of his style—any “visual image,” no matter how excessive its meaning may be. As far as visual images are concerned, Mishima is thus “almighty” in his perfect representation of the world. In striking contrast, however, he becomes quite powerless to deal with “the formlessness of sound.” In fact, he confesses: “I can hardly enjoy any music because I cannot endure my anxiety when I have to listen to what is totally lacking in meaning.” Referring to Beethoven, Mishima’s reaction is more excessive: “music must be a rigid and strict control of the formlessness of sound but this gives me the unbearably uncanny and eerie impression of a ghost captured and imprisoned by a human being.” Moreover, he is disdainful of the optimistic belief that “any composer can have a victorious spirit to conquer such a formless darkness of sound” (203). While obsessed with “visual images” and “sound” as artistic objects, Mishima is thus divided: he can be narcissistically optimistic about his “victory” over the former, which is visual imagery, while being totally powerless and even intimidated in the face of the latter, which is the formlessness and lack of meaning in “sound.” His reaction, while discussing “sound” as a novelistic material, is excessive; this excessiveness and anxiety is no doubt indicative of a certain peculiar ontology of “sound” and “music” in Mishima’s language. Of course, his powerlessness or helplessness as a writer has a great deal to do with his castration anxiety.

What makes his attitude towards “sound” or “music” particularly significant is his characteristic double-bind plight in representing something acoustic and musical. Of especial significance in our context is the fact that sound images are often connected with his representations of “the sea”—arguably the most privileged imagery in Mishima’s literature. One typical example is to be found in *The Sailor Who Fell from the Grace with the Sea*, which was published in 1963. In this novel, the sea is often depicted as

a Conradian sublime, where a romantic “beyondness” is almost within the grasp of the sailor as the central character. This means his philosophical, aesthetic, and linguistic victory over something “sublime” or “beyond.” Thus, the sea becomes a special place to witness the linguistic and existential omnipotence of an artist. At the very same time, this sublime moment is nullified by the sheer banality of a popular song about a heroic sailor in a contemporary Japanese film. Hence, in the imagination of the sailor, a clear distinction is disappeared, a distinction between the most sublime emotion and the most vulgar:

The secret yearning for death. The glory beyond and the death beyond. Everything was “beyond,” wrong or right, had always been “beyond.” Are you going to give that up? His heart in spasm because he was always in contact with the ocean’s dark swell and the lofty light from the edge of the clouds, twisting, withering until it clogged and then swelling up again, and he unable to distinguish the most exalted feelings from the meanest and that not mattering really since he could hold the sea responsible—are you going to give up that luminous freedom? (111)

In this manner, the sea can be perceived as a sort of short-circuit of the semantic and aesthetic maximum and zero degrees in the representation of something sublime or “beyond.” From the viewpoint of a novelist’s style as a “weapon,” this “sea” is a battlefield where he prevails *and* surrenders at the same time. This allows us to say that, in Yukio Mishima’s *oeuvre*, “the sea” is an icon of the simultaneous denial and acceptance of the castration. This also has to do with Mishima’s attachment to the “Symbolic Emperor” as well as the sea, both of which are crucial to Mishima’s fetishist imagination. In this sense, Nibuya Takashi’s comment about Mishima’s paradox, “an intense craving for the absolute meaning and the absolute non-meaning,” (10) is extremely suggestive. In our context, this paradox can be understood as the concurrence of linguistic omnipotence and impotence.

It is thus clear that this textual double-bind of omnipotence and impotence is related to “the sea” and “music.” Interestingly, this association between something oceanic and musical enables us to re-read another novel entitled *The Music*, published in 1964, from such a perspective. This novel is important in a double sense: as the title shows, sound and music play a major thematic role and so do they in the psychoanalytic context of castration. In addition, the family name of the Freudian analyst in this novel, *Shiomi*, is meaningful: *Shio* means “tide” and *mi* means “see” or “watch.” Thus, his name literally signifies that he is a man who watches the tide or the sea. Reminiscent of Freudian dream theory, this text is a “condensation” of what I consider here as the most crucial elements of Mishima’s literature: sound, sea, and castration. The narrative’s focus is on the “castration complex” of a female character, whose sexual impotence appears as an inability to hear any music. Of great significance is that her castration or impotence is a paradox in itself because it is diagnosed as her “burning impotence” (157). This implies the orgasm of impotence, the impotence of orgasm, or sexual ecstasy as a result of genital removal. We can say that “the music” in this novel serves as an acoustic metaphor

for the *jouissance* of castration or the genital pleasure of castration. Moreover, she is analyzed by the doctor whose name connotes “a man who watches the tide or the sea.” Evidently, the author’s castration anxiety is displaced or projected onto this female character, while once again being generative of a sea-imagery as its textual symptoms.

This is a betrayal of his thematic intention because Mishima is apparently critical and even cynical about Freudian psychoanalysis and meant to write this novel as a parody of its stereotypical pan-sexism and the very idea of “castration.” Our analysis also contends that this attempt to distance himself from Freud itself is symptomatic of the opposite. This denial of something Freudian produces something very Freudian: a textual ‘condensation’ of his unconscious conflicts. The constative and manifest content of this text is anti-Freudian; however, at a performative, rhetorical, and latent level, Mishima affirms his obsession with castration through the linguistic gesture of its denial. It is worth mentioning that psychoanalysis in this text is not exactly a Freudian one; it is “ego psychology,” which is an American version of Freud’s theory. As a matter of fact, the analyst, *Shiomi*, underwent his training analysis in America. This allows us to identify Mishima’s denial and acceptance of psychoanalysis along with his denial and acceptance of something American. Once again, this psychoanalytic conflict is constitutive of a network of textual imagery related to the sea and sound.

This viewpoint brings us back to the historicity of this double-bind structure in the context of the sea. One possible implication of Mishima’s paradox regarding the oceanic “sublime” is, I would maintain, an allegorical reference to the Cold War. In this vein, I argue that his “sublime” works as a metaphor for a “nuclear weapon”—the absent and lethal cause of this historical system of the Cold War. It is the ontological absence of “nuclear weapon” that enables the Cold War to take place. Once this absence or “beyondness” is cancelled and it reveals itself within or can be reached from the inside, the semantic and actual system of the Cold War instantaneously disappears. At the same time, the existence of nuclear weapon is the ontological assumption of the Cold War. This structural dilemma—the simultaneous semantic and ontological maximum and zero degrees—is precisely the same double-bind plight of Mishima’s representation of “sublime.” Of course, this is also the simultaneousness of the representational omnipotence and impotence.

We can thus conclude that Yukio Mishima is preoccupied with this sort of Cold War semantic system, while simultaneously denying and accepting the Americanized psychoanalysis as well as the postwar Emperor system. Writing a novel in the age of the Cold War thus becomes an allegory for the semantic space in which reaching “an absolute meaning” signifies the opposite: reaching, instead, “absolute meaninglessness”. Hence the perfect concurrence of a writer’s linguistic omnipotence and impotence. Moreover, this can be a phantasy space for a fetishist to deny and affirm his castration. Thus, Yukio Mishima enjoys and abhors the Cold War postwar Japan as a sublime object of fetishism, while at the very same time indulging himself in the *jouissance* of oceanic imagery. Geographically and psychoanalytically speaking, given his dividedness between something America and something Japan or non-American, the ocean—or the Pacific

Ocean in particular—should be regarded as a remarkably suitable psychic screen onto which this geopolitical conflict is projected. This oceanic space is a perfect metaphor for his political and aesthetic dividedness between America and non-America as Japan.

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