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Thomas Garcin

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REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH AND TOPOI IN MISHIMA YUKIO'S *YŪKOKU* (*PATRIOTISM*)

THOMAS GARCIN

Abstract: *Given the centrality of death as a theme in cultural and literary practice, representations of death always contain specific cultural and literary codes. Authors can either free themselves from such representations or take comfort in them. Mishima Yukio's stance in his novella Yūkoku in 1960 appears to be representative of the latter strategy, by referring to a series of literary topoi associated with suicide and violent death in Japan. The purpose of this article is to show precisely what these topoi are, what image of death they convey, and how they interact with one another. I will show that the text is combining three different images of death (monumental death, ghostly death and death alive) associated with three different images of the body (heroic body, vaporous body and fragmented body) and referring to three different genres (epic from medieval times, 18th century "lovers' suicide" plays and 19th century "aesthetic of cruelty"). The confrontation between an abstract death, statuesque or vaporous, and a vivid and organic one results in a discrepancy that contributes to the literary relevance of this text whose epic framework seems to crumble under the violent representations it shelters. By creating this confrontation Mishima renews the literary conventions and stereotypical representations, thus challenging the reader.*
Keywords: *Mishima Disembowelment Death wish Cultural representations Stereotypes*

Introduction

The novella *Yūkoku* [*Patriotism*][1] was first published in January 1961 in the literary review *Shōsetsu chūō kōron* (*Fictions, Central Review*). It

[1] I refer to the English version by Geoffrey W. Sargent who first translated the novella in 1966 (Mishima 2010). I only translate directly from the Japanese text

depicts Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama and his wife Reiko's suicide following the attempted Coup of February 26th, 1936 (*Ni-niroku jiken*)[2]. Shinji, though he shared friendship ties as well as political convictions with the rebels, was not invited to partake in the coup. Returning home on a short leave, and in order to unite obedience towards his superiors with his personal ideals, he decides to accomplish ritual suicide by disembowelment (*seppuku*). His wife chooses to follow him. The couple engages in ritualistic solemn coitus before taking their own lives. Mishima based this story on a news item that happened just after the attempted coup. On February 28th, 1938, Lieutenant Aoshima Kenkichi of the Imperial Guards Division's Transport Corps, friend to the rebel officers who did not take part in the mutiny, disemboweled himself at his Setagaya home with his young wife (Shillony 1973, 191).

The ideological backdrop of this novella togheter and the *seppuku* motif have led most commentators of the text to focus on its thematic and/or biographical aspect. *Yūkoku* does in fact presage Mishima's growing commitment in favor of ultra-nationalism during the 1960s, and from a teleological point of view, it can also be seen as an omen of his own disembowelment ten years later. *Yūkoku* also reflects a series of recurring themes throughout Mishima's work: denial of the principle of reality, quest for transcendence, death wish, sadomasochism, narcissism, etc. The vivid presence of the author's political obsessions and fetishes is undeniable. Nevertheless, I argue that yet another focal point deserves attention: that of literary conventions regarding the representation of voluntary death in Japan. In *Yūkoku*, Mishima not only fulfills one of his personal fantasies by way of writing, through the lovers' disembowelment motif, but he also remodels "intertextual scenarios" (Eco 1985, 108) already very present within Japanese literature. Mishima in no way seeks to emancipate himself from topoi summoned by those scenarios, almost systematically associated with the representation of the crucial cultural

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when the gap between the translation and the original text is detrimental to my point. This, of course, in no way calls into question the quality of Sargent's translation. In Japanese I used the Kawade shobō version from 1966 (Mishima 2005). Although this version is different from the previous one translated by Sargent, the differences are insubstantial and of no consequence to the content of this article.

[2] A military rebellion in Tōkyō in which several political figures were killed and the center of the capital was seized in an attempted *coup d'état*. The rebellion was swiftly suppressed, and its leaders (young ultranationalist officers outraged by corrupted elites and western influences) were sentenced to death and executed. The military took advantage of the incident to increase its power and political influence. (Kōdansha 1993, 359-360; Shillony 1973)

object that is death; on the contrary, he evidently exploits them. But Mishima does not just settle for the simple reiteration of such stereotypes, he also renews them by combining them and adding to them his own personal touch. In this work, seemingly incompatible representations of death collide, and enlighten one another, thus creating new meaning and *literarity*. The object of this article is to showcase the topoi associated with violent death in *Yūkoku*, and analyze how they interact.

Epic narrative, monumental death and heroic body

Yūkoku opens with a disconcerting chapter that summarizes the plot of the story in classical Japanese, giving it a sober and empathic tone. From the start, the author eliminates any kind of narrative suspense, thus drawing the reader's attention to the text itself. The archaic forms he uses, reminiscent of the tales of old, passed down by word of mouth (bards, story-tellers, monks, etc.) give the text an antiquated hue. The evident discrepancy between this classical language and the expectations of modern readers suggest that the author deliberately chose to exploit stereotypical old-fashioned literary conventions, redolent of the epic genre:

> On the twenty-eighth of February 1936 (on the third day, that is, of the February 26 incident), Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama of the Konoe Transport Battalion – profoundly disturbed by the knowledge that his closest colleagues had been with the mutineers from the beginning, and indignant at the imminent prospect of Imperial troops attacking Imperial troops – took his officer's sword and ceremonially disemboweled himself in the eight-mat room of his private residence in the sixth block of Aoba-chō, in Yotsuya Ward. His wife, Reiko, followed him, stabbing herself to death. The lieutenant's farewell note consisted of one sentence "Long live the Imperial Forces". His wife's after apologies for her unfilial conduct in thus preceding her parents to the grave, concluded: "The day which, for a soldier's wife, had to come, has come…" The last moments of this heroic and dedicated couple were such as to make the gods themselves weep. The lieutenant's age, it should be noted, was thirty-one, his wife's twenty-three; and it was not half a year since the celebration of their marriage. (Mishima 2010, 3)

One of the main functions of the epic genre is to "recall [the] exploits" of heroes as they take part in battle and "laud their names" (Labarthe 2007, 321). The first chapter of *Yūkoku* takes the form of a textual mausoleum, raised in honor of Lieutenant Takeyama Shinji and his wife Reiko. The rest of the story seems to unravel from this inaugural narrative threshold,

in the form of a long hypotyposis. This stylistic device, often used in the epic genre, allows the narrator to "lay a scene before one's eyes" (Labarthe 2007, 339). He not only shows, but presents himself as he who shows. The narrator thus takes the opposite stance from a post-Flaubertian realist novel: He strongly advocates the couple's perfection, and compels the reader to follow the plot through his biased filter (Satō 2009, 295-302).

The theme of the story – the exemplary and praiseworthy death of a heroic young couple – is also reminiscent of the epic genre. In his introductory chapter, the narrator asserts that it is precisely the "couple's last moments" that are exemplary. The choice of the term *saigo* (written 最期), meaning "final moment", is a significant one, as it is often used in Japanese medieval epic literature (*gunkimono*) to describe warriors' exemplary demise. In *The Tale of the Heike*, it appears nine times in the titles of episodes recounting valorous warriors' heroic fall (Takaki et al. 1959). As Daniel Struve remarks, this motif is

> intricately linked with the representation of the life of the warriors for whom the moment of death was of crucial importance and came to symbolize a fulfilled or wasted life. (Struve 2011, 113)

The spectacular deaths punctuating the *gunkimono* hence appear as evident embodiments of the valor of the fallen. In this sense, the *seppuku*, an inherently violent act requiring immense courage, as well as complete self control, is one of the most frequent *saigo* in the *gunkimono* genre, particularly in the most recent texts, such as the *Taiheiki* (ca. 1370-71) and *Yoshitsune* (ca. 1400-1450). Andrew Rankin notes that it is "in these tales that the legend of seppuku takes root" (Rankin 2011, 42). Similarly to the heroes of the epic medieval tales, Lieutenant Takeyama considers his disembowelment as a means to attain absolution, to become one for all eternity with his role as a soldier, destined to die a glorious death on the battlefield:

> What he was about to perform was an act in his public capacity as a soldier, something he had never previously shown his wife. It called for a resolution equal to the courage to enter battle; it was a death of no less degree and quality than death in the front line. It was his conduct on the battlefield that he was now to display. (Mishima 2010, 42)

Another aspect of the epic genre is the voluntary exhibition of a character's death. The *saigo* motif implies the highest consistency of the warrior with his code of honor, his displaying a flawless and profound ethical conduct, and his acute preoccupation with the image he will leave behind. It inserts itself within a logic of narcissistic self-celebration. In this

sense, such a death requires an audience. The heroes of medieval epic warfare hail friends and foe during battle and herald the exemplary death they will stage (Tyler 2012, 468; MacCullough 1966, 205; MacCullough 2004, 310). It goes without saying that such a sumptuous death remains a manly privilege. Nevertheless, women have their own part to play. The most virtuous among them follow their lord and husband into death (Tyler 2012, 513; MacCullough 1966, 291). The role assignment in *Yūkoku* reflects the exemplary couples of the *gunkimono*: to the warrior befalls the splendors of sumptuary demise (self-sacrifice for his master, his honor, his country, etc.), to the spouse befalls self-effacement, as she dedicates her discreet fall and sacrifice to her husband.

The presentation and description of the characters underpin the epic dimension of the novella. To depict his characters the narrator always uses recurring adjectives ("beautiful", "white", "pure", "masculine"), sometimes associated with recurring nouns, creating Homeric-like epithets – "white-robed wife" for Reiko (Mishima 2005, 98-107)[3]; "severe brows" for Shinji (Mishima 2010, 32 and 43). Genuine embodiments of perfection, Shinji and Reiko Takeyama are described in a hyperbolic way. The text is laden with expressions that ceaselessly reiterate the physical and moral beauty of both characters: "flawless and beautiful couple" (6), "magnificent face" (30), "masculine beauty at its most superb" (43), etc. The representation of the heroes thereby comes under what Barthes calls "the rhetorical portrait", which aims not to depict the characters, but to reify them as incarnations of perfection (Barthes 1989, 22):

> […] the rhetorical portrait, albeit oftentimes somewhat drawn out (for the author never loses interest), paints nothing, neither the thing nor its effect: it does not make visible (and certainly doesn't try); it characterizes very little (sometimes the color of the eyes, the hair); it is content with naming the anatomical elements, each of which is perfect; and since this perfection, in good theology, is the very essence of the thing, it suffices to say a body is perfect in order for it to be so: ugliness is describable, beauty is stated; these rhetorical portraits are therefore empty exactly insofar as they are portraits of being […] they can encounter only empty signs, can inspire always only the same portrait, which affirms them but does not embody them.

[3] In the Japanese text *shiromuku* (white-robed) appears no less than eight times to qualify Reiko's character. In his translation Geoffrey W. Sargent does not repeat this structure using synonyms instead ("white figure", "white-clad figure", "white kimono", etc.).

The heroic bodies of *Yūkoku*'s heroes indeed are reminiscent of a certain void, an "empty shell" that one might find, as Nao Sawada has pointed out, in all Mishima's heroic portraits (Sawada, 145-146). The narrator reduces the characters to a simple set of lines and curves. When depicting Reiko he mentions her "finely shaped nose", her "regular lips", "the natural hollow curving between the bosom and the stomach" (Mishima 2010, 30-31). The lieutenant's nose has a "splendid bridge" (32), his muscles show in "sharp relief", the stomach is "firm" (33). Characters are thus etched as mere outlines. They serve as incarnations of a geometrical golden ratio, "how the proper body should be" (Mishima 2005, 92), as the narrator depicts Reiko.

Devoid of fault, reduced to a mere series of harmonious curves and lines, the characters of *Yūkoku* appear to us as human-like statues, rather than realist depictions of humans beings of flesh and bone. Their movements are perfectly ordered their bodies always upright and their eyes never flinch. Neither feelings nor passion cloud their portrait: their beauty seems set in stone. Even during coitus, they stay solemn and stern (Mishima 2010, 8). Later on, tears well out from Reiko's eyes "without the slightest distortion of the face" (26). The text clearly often expresses the idea that the characters' heroic bodies incarnate the immobility of the tomb, thus leaving the organic realm in order to become an immobile mineral or metallic matter. Both the lieutenant and his wife feel "encased in an impenetrable armor of Beauty and Justice"[4]. While shaving in front of the bathroom-mirror, the lieutenant comes under the illusion of seeing his face detached from his body and grafting itself on a soldier's memorial (24). The characters are already deceased, mummified within the solemn dirge that is Mishima's text. Heading the second chapter, the couple's wedding photograph conveys the narrator's first rhetorical portrait of the two characters, thus allegorizing the whole text (5):

> Those who saw the bride and the bridegroom in the commemorative photograph – perhaps no less than those actually present at the lieutenant's wedding – had exclaimed in wonder at the bearing of this handsome couple. The lieutenant, majestic in military uniform, stood protectively beside his bride, his right hand resting upon his sword, his officer's cap held at his left side. His expression was severe, and his dark brows and wide-gazing eyes well conveyed the clear integrity of youth. For the beauty of the bride in her white over-robe no comparisons were adequate. In the

[4] I here only altered the last two words of Geoffrey W. Sargent who oddly translated "armor of Reality and Truth" (Mishima 2010, 24) the words "armor of Beauty and Justice" (Mishima 2005, 87).

> eyes, round beneath soft brows, in the slender, finely shaped nose, and in the full lips, there was both sensuousness and refinement.

The ontological status of Shinji and Reiko is clearly stated: reified by their imminent demise and embodying absolutes – Beauty, Bravery, Purity, Integrity, etc. – *Yūkoku*'s characters are not three-dimensional holograms, but two-dimensional figures, set for eternity on commemorative support (a photograph), bearing the weight of death in its petrified form. Facing this perfection, the reader, like the anonymous spectators mentioned in the first sentence, is left little choice but to revel in admiration of the characters. The obvious discrepancy between this reading contract and the contemporary reader's "horizon of expectation" (Jauss 1982) however creates a distance suggesting, as did the first chapter, that the author is actually playing with stereotypes. As the reader proceeds through the text, he will indeed encounter other conventional representations of death in Japanese literature, suggesting that the monumental epic frame is in fact an exotic crucible in which different cultural representations of death are associated.

Love suicide, ghostly death and vaporous body

The theme and the enunciative structure of the novella indicate that Mishima is clearly remodeling on epic motifs associated with the representation of glorious and monumental death. However, the epic genre is not the only intertextual canvas that the author is using. As some critics, like Muramatsu Takeshi (1983, 164) and Tanaka Miyoko (1980, 162) have pointed out, by staging a lovers' suicide Mishima also reworks a classical theme of Japanese dramaturgy, that enjoys its own genre: *shinjūmono*, "love suicides play", whose most brilliant masterpieces were written for puppet theatre (*bunraku*) at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the famous playwright Chikamatsu Monzameon (1653-1725). Mishima notably borrows from *shinjūmono* the pathetic theme of "for the last time" (*saigo*, written 最後) – the last glance at one another, the last embrace, the last vows of love, etc. – , that can inspire a great number of *shūtanba*: "heartbreaking scenes" (Leiter 2006, 371). This expression – "the last time" – appears several times in the third chapter. The characters are in fact embodying the *saigo* motif:

> Neither spoke the thought, but their hearts, their bodies, and their pounding breasts blazed with the knowledge that this was the very last time. It was as if the words "The Last Time" were spelled out, in invisible brushstrokes, across every inch of their bodies. (Mishima 2010, 28-29)

Some of the "heartbreaking scenes" in *Yūkoku* seem to have been directly inspired by Chikamatsu. Reiko's tears falling on her husband's stomach (p 33) are redolent of the ones Tokubei sheds on his mistress in *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (1703) (Chikamatsu 1961, 50). The desire to gaze into each other's eyes, expressed by husband and wife alike (29-32), is also reminiscent of several final scenes of Chikamatsu's *shinjūmono*, such as *The Love Suicides at Imamiya* (1711) (Chikamatsu 1972, 113). Reiko's inability to restrain her tears as she sees her husband last preparations before the suicide (p 43) are reminiscent of *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (1720) (Chikamatsu 1961, 206). The story's epic and heroic dimensions are hence entwined with a series of topoi inspired by classical dramaturgy that add a pathetic undertone to the text.

In the plays featuring lovers' suicides, the text's pathetic quality is usually enhanced by a chiaroscuro aesthetic (sporadic light of dawn, of thunder, contrast between black and white clothes or between night and snow, night and frost, etc.). This technique plunges the reader/spectator into an otherworldly atmosphere, as if the characters were ghosts coming back to life to perform once again, amidst the appropriate props (blowing wind, cawing crows, bare trees, etc.), the pathetic and tragic suicide that ultimately led to their demise. Donald Keene thus assimilates the *michiyuki* – the chant recited by the narrator in the third and last act of *shinjūmono* plays while the lovers travel to their final resting place – to a pacifying prayer (*chinkon*) aimed at the "dead lovers who have been recalled to the stage" (Keene 2004, 243). In this respect, *Shinjūmono* plays owe a lot to *nō* theater and are reminiscent of *yūgen*, an aesthetic ideal cultivated by poets and dramatists from the 12th through the 15th century and "broadly designating an ambiance of mystery, darkness, depth, elegance, calm, transience and sadness" (Kodansha 1993, 1764). Tenebrism is also a major component of *Yūkoku'*s aesthetics. The gap between the light emanating from the protagonists (their clear gaze, the Lieutenant's solar depiction, Reiko's immaculate white clothes) and the dark environment they operate in (the scene takes place at night, their home is dimly lit) gives them the ghostly appearance of spectral creatures shifting about in a minimalist setting similar to that of *mugen-nō* ("dream" *nō* plays in which the *shite*, i.e. principal character, appears in the second act as ghost or spirit) (Leiter 2006, 250). Since the reader has already been informed of the death of the characters, one might consider the entire text as a *michiyuki*. The text hence can be seen as a long lament, a prayer to honor the dead, and even a sort of shamanistic ritual, summoning the deceased characters to return from the grave and play out, in the temple of their old home, the scene of their last night.

Of the two characters, Reiko is probably the one who offers the most mysterious and ghostly image. Keeper of the death chamber (she never leaves their home), she is clearly portrayed as an embodiment of the night: her beauty is compared to "the moon after rain" (Mishima 2010, 7) and her fingers to "the bud of a moonflower" (6), a flower (*yūgao*, literally "evening face" in Japanese) than only opens at night. Her slenderness, her self-effacing manners (5, 29-31), the stillness of her eyes and gaze (18), her calm and measured gestures (7, 22-23, 53-54), and the halo of whiteness encircling her in the shadows (40) makes her look unreal. However the portrait of the Lieutenant also presents itself in a vaporous haze (24):

> Thrusting his face close to the dark, cracked, misted wall mirror, the lieutenant shaved himself with great care. This would be his death face. There must be no unsightly blemishes. The clean-shaven face gleamed once more with a youthful luster, seeming to brighten the darkness of the mirror. There was a certain elegance, he even felt, in the association of death with this radiantly healthy face.
>
> Just as it looked now, this would become his death face! Already, in fact, it had half departed from the lieutenant's personal possession and had become the bust above a dead soldier's memorial.

Shadows, steam from the running hot water, reflections on a cracked mirror… these elements combine here to convey to the "death face" (*shinigao* in Japanese) an aspect of unreality, immersed in the darkness of the tomb. This unreal, vaporous reflection seems to be its own master, bestowed with disconcerting autonomy, as it radiates its own light, and cuts itself loose from its corporeal source. The reflection appears more valuable than the object from which it originated, as if the character's soul had been abducted by the image. Before committing their ultimate act, Takeyama and his wife Reiko have already passed to the shadows.

Although gloomy and spectral, and wholly encompassed in a dark environment (dark interior of the dwelling, darkness of the night outside), Shinji and Reiko's shadows appear luminous (*cf.* above: "gleamed", "youthful-luster", "radiantly") and very close to the glorious immobility of statues (slow gestures, body upright and drawn out of its outlines, decisive words showing the irremovable resolution of the characters, etc.). The fact that the lieutenant's clouded reflection moors itself to the soldier's memorial emphasizes the connections between ghostly death and vaporous body on the one hand and monumental death and glorious body on the other. I've mentioned above the heroic body's "empty shell". The rhetorical portrait's perfection traces its outlines in an abstract void where

idealized shapes do not face reality's imperfection. One could interpret the vaporous body as an expression of this nothingness at work beneath the statue's sharp outlines. Broken by the cracked mirror and worn away by mist, the lieutenant's reflection splits up in the void. This image is redolent of a psychotic representation of the body struggling against nothingness and felt as a "container that has lost its content" (Pankow 1993, 63). While seemingly very different as one monumental and one ethereal, the heroic and the vaporous body share common points. They both deny physical materiality, they reject the real and organic body with its blemishes and its flaccidity. This rejection is particularly evident in the coitus scene at the end of chapter three (Mishima 2010, 34). The description is strangely distant and cold depicted only by means of overused metaphors ("wing", "dizzying heights", "summit"). In this manner, coitus is presented in a very conventional and abstract way. As Jerry S. Piven has observed, the coitus scene is an unreal "platonic simulacrum" (Piven 2004, 27). In *Yūkoku*, the body, whether ghostly or heroic, vaporous or set in stone, is thus always portrayed as being in some way deceased and extraneous to the reality of organic life. The disembowelment scene and pertaining organic and vivid description introduces, accordingly, a complete rupture within the text.

Death alive, fragmented body and the "aesthetics of cruelty"

Several thinkers, such as philosopher Georges Bataille (Bataille 1961, 63–64) and anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas 2002), have pointed out two antithetical representations of death: on the one hand, pure and rigid death, cold and silent, symbolized by whitened bones and the stillness of the tomb, and, on the other, impure death, a living and disquieting death, organic and sullied, symbolized by worms, spurting fluids and swollen putrefying flesh. When reading *Yūkoku*, one is first confronted with cold and a solemn death. Despite the disquieting spectral images and chilling atmosphere conveyed by the representations of the vaporous body, the concept of death remains abstract, enclosed in the scriptural sign to which the characters, as a mere set of lines, tend to be reduced. From the middle of chapter four, however, the long disembowelment scene breaks off from these sober and measured images and confronts us with the horror and violence of organic death. The narrator directly announces this reversal: Death, he tells us in the beginning of chapter four, is "peering down" at the characters and is soon to "stand before" them (Mishima 2010, 36-39). The lieutenant also tells

his wife that his disembowelment is probably going to be "unpleasant" to witness (41). The subtle distinction between the expressions "death face" (*shinigao*) in chapter 3 (Mishima 2005, 87-92) and "face of death" (*shi no kao*) in chapter 4 (Mishima 2005, 96) symbolizes the journey from rigid, statuesque death – death as a taxidermy bringing out beautiful shapes – to contaminating, incarnated, moving death. The most striking yet poetic embodiment of the shift from pure death to impure death is the description of Reiko's tears. While the first sobs leave no mark on her white statue-like face, the subsequent ones spoil her makeup (Mishima 2010, 43). As incidental as it may seem, this detail carries a deep meaning: the mask of Beautiful Shapes is falling apart. In the face of *seppuku* violence, the couple's cold restraint crumbles. Corporeal secretions flood the room, suggesting the liquefaction of the heroic body.

The description of the *seppuku* is precisely evocative of Georges Bataille's notion of plethora, life's "impersonal growth" shown by the sacrificer when exposing the sacrificed animal's "blood-swollen organs" (Bataille 1986, 91). Life's organic continuity unveils itself within discontinuity, death surges like life itself. By disemboweling himself, the lieutenant displays to his wife (and to the reader) a death that has "the upsurge of life" whereas life is given "the momentousness and the vertigo of death" (Bataille 1986, 91). Death is described as a violent thrust, a splashing disarray: blood "spurted from the wound as if propelled by the beat of the pulse" (Mishima 2010, 49) and is finally "scattered everywhere". Those outpourings come to a climax with the depiction of the intestine coming out from the stomach:

> By the time the lieutenant had at last drawn the sword across to the right side of his stomach, the blade was already cutting shallow and had revealed its naked tip, slippery with blood and grease. But, suddenly stricken by a fit of vomiting, the lieutenant cried out hoarsely. The vomiting made the fierce pain fiercer still, and the stomach, which had thus far remained firm and compact, now abruptly heaved, opening wide its wound, and the entrails burst through, as if the wound too were vomiting. Seemingly ignorant of their master's suffering, the entrails gave an impression of robust health and almost disagreeable vitality as they slipped smoothly out and spilled over into the crotch. The lieutenant's head drooped, his shoulders heaved, his eyes opened to narrow slits, and a thin trickle of saliva dribbled from his mouth. The gold markings on his epaulettes caught the light and glinted. (Mishima 2010, 50)

The stomach muscles' "sharp relief", depicted in the previous chapter redolent of Greek statuary becomes loose and liquid. The stomach is thus the focal point from which two antithetical images of death and body

unfurl: the heroic body associated with monumental death on the one hand and the liquid body associated with living death, on the other. Thereby, the latter takes the form of death as rebirth, a fantasy very frequent in Mishima's work (Piralian 1989; Piven 2004). The entrails, represented as individualized and animated, resemble a monstrous infant taking over the life of its progenitor.

The *seppuku* scene, featuring both eruptive themes and the concept of dismemberment, epitomizes the ambivalence of the death wish while simultaneously implying a surge (*Strieb* in German) and a regression. By disembowelling himself, the lieutenant severs his body into two separate pieces and therefore moves towards a state of increased disintegration. This urge for fragmentation is a typical feature of the death wish as conceptualized by Sigmund Freud or Melanie Klein (Laplanche, Pontalis, and Lagache 1992, 371–378). But the fragmented body could also be viewed as the reverse and complementing side of the empty body that I have mentioned above. The image of a body whose constitutive parts dissociate from one another – each piece, exactly like the entrails in the previous extract, turning into an independent and autonomous body in itself – is a common feature of the psychotic universe, often used or articulated in the representation of "body without content" (Pankow 1993, 277). In this regard, the character's impression of seeing his own face, as described by the narrator, detached from himself in order to be inscribed on the dead soldier's memorial, would be a harbinger of the *seppuku*'s fragmentation underpinning the interdependence between the psychotic portrayals working within the text. Through these psychotic depictions, monumental and ghostly death appears to be deeply connected to the impurity of living death.

Mishima clearly wants to give an anatomically correct account of the character's disembowelment, which implies listing internal organs, elaborating on the precise size of the wound, describing the smell in the room. Nevertheless, the author's libidinal investment towards death clouds the realistic dimension of the scene so that it becomes wild and hallucinatory. This aspect is materialized by the use of eruptive motifs, the personification of the entrails and the astronomical amount of gushing blood that gives to this scene a morbid sexual tone. Still, Mishima's well-known personal obsession with death (Nathan 2000; Starrs 1994; Piven 2004) alone cannot account for these depictions, he also draws inspiration from previous cultural representations of violent death. As Noguchi Takehiko points out, this curious blend of realism and grotesque outrageousness is reminiscent of the decadent arts of the 19th century, famous for violence-depicting popular arts forms in Edo urban culture

(Noguchi 1968, 227). It is a key element in one of the most popular Edo art forms, the Kabuki theater. The expression "aesthetic of cruelty" (*zankoku no bi*) was coined to describe this complacent fascination for violence (Leiter 2006, 444), as portrayed by famous playwrights such as Tsuruya Nanboku (1755-1829) and Kawatake Mokuami (1816-1893). One could also mention the gory woodblock prints of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892), often representing *seppuku*, beheading and other incidents involving bloodshed (Hunter 2012). In this sense, one of the first roles of the "aesthetic of cruelty" is the excessive depiction of sheer horror.

However, the "aesthetic of cruelty" also aims at aestheticizing violence. The chromatic contrast between red and white, already present in 18th century Kabuki (Costineanu 1996, 360–365), is considered as one of the plastic topoi of Edo decadent arts. Furthermore, Kabuki playwrights also toyed with the discrepancy between the atrocity of a scene and the lyrical images it can induce (Brandon and Leiter 2002). Mishima uses both of these aesthetic devices in *Yūkoku*. The red/white chromatic dichotomy in the seppuku scene mirrors the chiaroscuro atmosphere in the beginning of the story. A crimson drop of blood lands on Reiko's white kimono. Later, as it is impregnated with Shinji's blood, it becomes the canvas of a "bold vivid pattern" (Mishima 2010, 53). Similarly to the splendid arabesques of Tsukioka's woodblock prints, blood does not flow in a disorderly and unpredictable fashion, but in decorative curves creating an intricate design. Such an aesthetic death arouses lyrical images, at times voluntarily naïve, discordant with the realistic quality of the scene (49):

> The pain spread slowly outward from the inner depths until the whole stomach reverberated. It was like the wild clanging of a bell. Or like a thousand bells which jangled simultaneously at every breath he breathed and every throb of his pulse, rocking his whole being. The lieutenant could no longer stop himself from moaning. But by now the blade had cut its way through to below the navel, and when he noticed this he felt a sense of satisfaction, and a renewal of courage.
>
> The volume of blood had steadily increased, and now it spurted from the wound as if propelled by the beat of the pulse. The mat before the lieutenant was drenched red with splattered blood, and more blood overflowed onto it from pools which gathered in the folds of the lieutenant's khaki trousers. A spot, like a bird, came flying across to Reiko and settled on the lap of her white silk kimono.

Thus the reader is swayed between poetic metaphors and vivid details; such a contrast is augmented by the back-and-forth motion between auditive descriptions (bells ringing / lieutenant's moaning) and visual

descriptions (bird / spurt of blood propelled by the beat of the pulse). The conflict between the violence of the scene and the subtlety of the imagery reaches its peak when Mishima evokes the figure of the "little bird" (*kotori* in the Japanese text) (Mishima 2005, 105), a cliché representation of innocence and frailty, whose long flight appears to us as in slow motion.

The living Death and the aesthetic of cruelty play a crucial role in the renewal of stereotypes. Set portrayals derived from very coded genres like *gunkimono* and *shinjūmono* collide with an entirely different set of representations. The epic, in which the intertextual storyline of seppuku is rooted, propounds a conventional and extremely ethereal image of disembowelment. It is "death without dying" as Andrew Rankin states when discussing *Kamakura ōzōshi* (*The Great Book of Kamakura*), an epic from the end of the 15th century (Rankin 2011, 16):

> There is something distinctly unnatural about this report of suicide and executions. A fastidious censor has cleansed the episode of unsightliness. Though sixteen men stab themselves to death, there is no blood, no screaming, no agony. We might say that there is no dying, there is only death. […] This sort of aesthetic is ubiquitous in samurai texts, and has been a crucial factor in fostering and promoting the seppuku ideal.

Mishima maintains the epic and monumental setting associated with an abstract and innocuous death. However, by indulgently dwelling on organic death he deliberately brings into opposition two antithetical and somehow incompatible representations of violent and exemplary demise. By focusing on "dying" rather than "death", Mishima expands the representation of *seppuku* and splits its epic framework. The aesthetic of cruelty also bestows upon Reiko's character features that do not fit the image of an exemplary wife that was first given to her. With blood spattered on her dress, the misty and otherworldly aspect of her character takes on a ghastly and eerie dimension. In the last chapter, Reiko lingers in the room where the smell of putrefaction is already rising and gazes at length, as if mesmerized, at her husband's body on whose lips she finally places a kiss. Yoshimura Teiji says that the character conveys a feeling of "terror attached to evil spirits who are not of this world" (Yoshimura 1971, 106). It becomes difficult for the reader to discern whether this text is an epic panegyric or a crucible for fanciful and lurid representations. This discrepancy within the text might encourage him to go through the novella again with a new reading strategy. Revisiting the text will reveal the ambiguity that surges from the collision of stereotypes and enable the reader to uncover in the solemn images of the first chapters subtle

forerunners of the gruesome and psychotic devastation that is soon to take place.

Conclusion

While the death of a hero is often seen as a very unique and special event, it is nevertheless depicted using literary or pictorial conventions. Showing or telling death thus implies coping with stereotypes and art's "infinity of codes" (Barthes 1976, 41). Authors can either (helplessly) try to free themselves from such representations or take comfort in them. Mishima Yukio's stance in *Yūkoku* appears to be representative of the latter strategy, referring to a series of literary motifs associated with suicide and violent deaths in Japan. Such an intricate weaving of clichés highlights stylistic and formal aspects of the text, suggesting that the author is intentionally playing with them. The author reworks Japanese literature's topoi about violent death by intermingling and confronting them throughout the novella.

Within a narrative framework evocative of ancient text, the author first makes use of the epic motif of warriors' exemplary "last moments", presenting death as glorious and monumental, a sort of petrified perfection that must be commemorated. The novella also draws its inspiration from "lovers' suicide play" of the bunraku puppet theater. This second stratum of intertextuality adds a pathetic undertone to the heroic theme and is associated with an otherworldly chiaroscuro atmosphere. As is the case in Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *shinjūmono*, the characters resemble ghosts summoned to reenact their suicide. Monumental death thus cannot be dissociated with representations of a ghostly death. These two imageries are not incompatible in the sense that they are both representations of an abstract and empty body. The *seppuku* scene marks, in this regard, a radical change. The evident sexualization (eruptive motifs, etc.) of the disembowelment bring into the reader's mind the author well-known death fantasies. But Mishima also draws upon the readers preexisting images. The two last chapters of the novella are redolent of the notion of "aesthetic of cruelty" inherent to Edo popular arts and implying a fascination and aestheticism towards death and blood. Mishima thus twists conventions and stereotypes of samurai literature to morbidly showcase the physical character of the otherwise bloodlessly depicted and purely ethical seppuku ritual.

The initial framework based on the epic topos of a praiseworthy and beautiful death therefore becomes a matrix in which different representations of violent death present in Japanese literature meet one

another. The novella's minimalism and classical unities of place and time allow the author to hold together these different representations and to turn the text into a highly productive and creative intertextual sounding board. In some ways Mishima in fact makes a virtue out of necessity. Rather than pretentiously try to convey the truth about death and one's final moments, impossible to grasp in their essence, and already subject to a myriad of preexisting codes, it is probably more fruitful and coherent for an author to play with these codes and renew the stereotypes from inside. In *Yūkoku,* stereotypes originating from different textual horizons jostle with one another, conveying doubts about the meaning of the novella: Are the characters moral epic heroes or frightful otherworldly creatures? And to what genre does this text belong, whose epic and clearly archaic frame crumbles in the *seppuku* scene?

This polysemy arouses the reader's interest. In order to answer these questions, he could attempt to draw links between the various, and sometimes antithetical, representations of death and seek a coalescing motif by which the violent death topoi would cast light on one another. One way to reconcile the different and contrasting representations is by using the interpretative grid of psychosis in which the body is perceived as empty or fragmented. These two psychotic images are instilled into three different representations of the body (heroic body, vaporous body and fragmented body) mirroring the three different representations of death present in the text (monumental death, ghostly death and death alive). As a matter of fact, when one speaks about death – about what is in itself an unnarratable conundrum – one is generally speaking about something else: body, desire, unconscious self, etc. (Picard 1995, 60). *Yūkoku* reminds us that death is probably the best alibi writers have at their disposal to recount their most intimate part. In this novella, Mishima succeeds in incorporating personal fantasies into an intermingled framework of intertextual material, making this text at the same time a medium for toying with literary references and conventions, and the locus of his very own libidinal investment.

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