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God Is Dead, Long Live the Emperor!

Nietzschean Motifs of Death and Nihilism in Some Late Writings of Yukio Mishima (1925–1970)

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Abstract

This critical essay proposes an interpretation of the nihilism at the heart of the titular story of the newly translated collection of writings by Yukio Mishima (1925–1970), Voices of the Fallen Heroes and Other Stories (Vintage International: New York, 2025). The proposed Nietzschean reading takes this nihilism to be at least one natural consequence of 'the death of God,' which finds an unexpected parallel in Mishima's reframing of Emperor Hirohito's renunciation of his own divinity following the defeat of the Japanese Imperial Army in WWII. The essay concludes with some reflections on the limits of Nietzsche's non-metaphysical justification of 'higher types' in light of the Japanese loss of belief in their own higher man and god-in-human-form, the emperor himself.

Keywords: *Yukio Mishima; Friedrich Nietzsche; nihilism; the death of God; Nietzscheanism*

It has been well documented that Nietzsche's ideas were already being passionately debated in Japan during his lifetime.[2] By the time the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima (1925–1970)[3] came of age, he wouldn't have even had to read any of the German philosopher's texts firsthand to be familiar with some of the Nietzscheanisms that had already permeated the intellectual atmosphere of his homeland.[4] It is therefore of some note that he did in fact read *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* during the final years of WWII, speaking as it does to a youthful desire to become better acquainted with Nietzsche's ideas than would have been possible by simply browsing through the secondary literature in Japanese already available, which was not insubstantial even then.[5] It seems to have been above all the Apollonian/Dionysian dualism from Nietzsche's early work that left the most lasting impression on Mishima, which he would eventually rework and reinterpret in his own idiosyncratic way with reference to another of Nietzsche's well-known philosophical concerns: nihilism. In fact, it is this singular focus on the Dionysian – which also incidentally characterizes Nietzsche's later writings, in which Apollo is

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[2] Given his irreversible mental decline, Nietzsche was unfortunately unable to appreciate this during his final years. According to Graham Parkes' chronology, Nietzsche's philosophy had made its way to the island nation only as of the 1890s, where it was immediately welcomed. See especially Parkes 1996, 360 and Starrs 18. Ryôgi Ôkôchi dates the first publications on Nietzsche in Japanese to the 1880s even (37).

[3] I have chosen to write Mishima's name in the standard English name order of given name followed by family name, rather than in the Japanese order, which places the family name first. This is in part because I am referencing a new translation of his stories which prints his name in the English order. In Japan he is known as Mishima Yukio.

[4] See Starrs 21.

[5] Starrs 18–24.

abandoned in favor of an exclusively Dionysian philosophy – that welcomes a reinterpretation of the Greek god as the harbinger of nihilistic destruction. This pairing of the Dionysian with annihilation (not to be confused with the 'nihilism' from some of Nietzsche's late writings, which is better understood as a kind of malaise, the lack of will to create anything of value, the *loss* of values themselves)[6] is palpable in two stories in particular from a newly translated collection of some of Mishima's late writings, *Voices of the Fallen Heroes and Other Stories*, edited by Stephen Dodd and introduced by John Nathan.

The two stories in question are "The Peacocks" ("Kujaku") and "True Love at Dawn" ("Asa no Jun'ai"), both originally published in 1965 and translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter and John Nathan, respectively. In both stories, the reader is confronted with characters in possession of a primordial urge to destroy and take the lives of what for each of them could be called the embodiment of the beautiful and the real, each time discovering a new beauty – and a new *meaning* – in (paradoxically) immortalizing their victims in death. One can see what a bare Dionysian aesthetic is for Mishima, whose protagonists know full well that their destructive urges are inexplicable with reference to a rational moral system comprehensible to their peers. When one such protagonist is being interrogated for a homicide which he committed and openly admits to, his interrogator attempts to make sense of his 'act of passion' in a way that might exonerate him: "There's no doubt about your crime. But if it turns out you were acting on the blind anger of a young person who's been used, manipulated as a tool, that might be considered an extenuating circumstance. So why not call it that?" The culprit is unwavering, however, and refuses to compartmentalize his actions as such: "I can't. Because it wasn't simple anger. […] I pointed the blade of my knife at them and rose up. […] Because they were beautiful and real. That's it. That's why. I didn't have a single other reason to kill them." (Mishima 137–138)[7]

There is another sense of nihilism to which I've already alluded above, and which more accurately describes what Mishima himself was touching on in his late writings. The nihilism meant here is best understood as the consequence of what Nietzsche called 'the death of God,' and represents a seemingly total loss of values and meaning through the

[6] In his 2011 essay on the tragic overcoming of nihilism in Nietzsche's philosophy, Philipp Schwab gives a nuanced analysis of Nietzsche's many-sided conceptualization of nihilism in relation to the latter's equally manifold 'philosophy of the tragic.' Through a critical reading of Nietzsche's thesis in *The Birth of Tragedy* on the way in which Attic tragedy was successful in overcoming the basic pessimistic insight of the meaninglessness of human existence, above all by means of the interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian, Schwab convincingly shows how Nietzsche's early conception of the tragic serves as both a model for, and antidote to, nihilism itself. The pessimism at the heart of tragedy and the destructive nature of the Dionysian in particular prove to be two sides of nihilism in need of overcoming, for which Nietzsche developed his 'philosophy of the tragic' (see especially Schwab 584–586, 594–595 and 599–605). From this, one gets an idea of how Mishima's own understanding of nihilism could have derived from the equally pessimistic and destructive Dionysian element in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Starrs 32–34 draws a further connection between the nihilism in Mishima's writings and the psychology developed in *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*.

[7] A less sadistic appropriation of the Dionysian by Mishima, based solely on his early reading of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, is analyzed by Graham Parkes in his study of masks in Nietzsche, Rilke and Mishima. See Parkes 1987, 73 and 77.

loss of the metaphysical ground on which these formerly rested.[8] This Nietzschean motif of divine death may at first seem to be of little relevance to a reading of Mishima's critical assessment of what to him, at least, was undoubtedly an increasingly nihilistic Japan. After all, Nietzsche makes it clear that what he is describing is a *European* phenomenon first and foremost. In aphorism 343 of the appended Fifth Book of *The Gay Science* from 1887, he qualifies 'the death of God' as the 'death' of the *Christian* God,[9] which is to say the fact that the latter had since become no longer believable, thus representing for Nietzsche a kind of anti-redemption to the original redemption symbolized throughout Europe's roughly 2,000-year-long Christian history by God on the cross. Surely this growing European atheism couldn't have impacted the Japanese much, who had not undergone the thorough Christianization and subsequent disillusionment with this tradition that characterizes the culture of Nietzsche's Europe.

Or so it would seem. Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) did believe Europe's spiritual crisis to be relevant to Japan's own. The relevance is twofold for Nishitani: for one, the swift and – by Karl Löwith's estimation at least, whom Nishitani quotes approvingly in his book-length essay, *Nihirizumu*[10] – *uncritical* adoption of Western standards during the Meiji Restoration had the unintended consequence of eradicating Japan's own spiritual traditions beyond repair, namely Buddhism and Confucianism. For Nishitani, only a deeper historical reflection on this loss could adequately address this spiritual crisis, and it is precisely European nihilism – characterized as it is by a self-conscious confrontation with its own history of loss – which could serve as a model for how to do this in Japan. A renewed reflection on the parallel outlooks of Buddhism and European nihilism also appears promising for Nishitani to this end (see Nishitani 173–181).

As Mishima's writings forcefully demonstrate, Buddhism and Confucianism were not the sole casualties of Japanese Westernization, but the emperor system itself, rooted in the indigenous Shinto belief. It is here that Nietzsche's motif of 'the death of God' does in fact – albeit unexpectedly and perhaps even unbeknownst to Mishima himself – seep into Mishima's writings, for though the lost belief in an almighty Christian God did not affect Japan in the same way that it did Europe, the Japanese did in fact lose their ground when their sovereign lord renounced his own divinity, thereby resulting in a trauma that has perhaps not yet been worked through fully. I am referring to Emperor Hirohito's proclamation following Japan's defeat in WWII: "In fact, I was not a god." It is *this* 'death of God' on Japanese soil that Mishima thematizes in the titular story of the new collection, "Voices of the Fallen Heroes" ("Eirei no koe"), first published in 1966 and translated for the collection by Paul McCarthy.

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[8] On the whole, the critical engagement with nihilism in Japan during the postwar years is more characterized by this latter concept of nihilism qua decadence, loss of meaning and metaphysical ground, which takes the European context of this loss as foundational. See especially Nishitani 6–8 and 69–72, who also finds a positive expression of nihilism in Nietzsche's *amor fati* (cf. 50–53). Though Nishitani does not make the connection explicit, Parkes 1996, 370–372 draws out the Zen Buddhist overtones of Nishitani's interpretation of *amor fati* in Nietzsche. On *amor fati* in relation to the Buddhist notion of karma, see Ôkôchi's 1972 essay.

[9] KSA 3, 573.

[10] Translated by Graham Parkes and quoted here as *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.

The story is written as a piece of reportage, and its placement in the collection right after the semi-autobiographical – or perhaps fully autobiographical – account from the same year, "From the Wilderness" ("Kōya yori"),[11] could even give the impression that one were witnessing an actual event as faithfully recounted by the unnamed narrator. Despite the supernatural aspect of the events which ensue, the essayistic character of the story is unmistakable. Japanologist Roy Starrs has persuasively argued that Mishima structured many of his works as philosophical arguments (22 bottom). One sees this firsthand in "Voices of the Fallen Heroes," which develops a thesis in multiple iterations and ends with a tragic conclusion. In its most direct form, the thesis could read: Following the defeat of the Japanese Imperial Army in World War II, the emperor should not have renounced his divinity and declared himself human (Mishima 217–218). The reason given is that even if the emperor did not believe himself to be a god, he should not have confessed as much to his people, for to do so meant that their suffering – especially that of his loyal army, not least of all the kamikaze who sacrificed their lives knowingly in his name – had been in vain (Mishima 218–221). This leads to a further elaboration of the thesis, which goes so far as to accept – however desperately – the fact that the emperor may never have been a god in the first place, as his actions during the war would attest, for "had the sovereign actually been a god," bemoan the fallen heroes, "he could never have left unrealized the perfect moment for divine/human dialogue that the gods had so carefully planned" (Mishima 199). Which is to say, even if the emperor were not in fact a god, as he claimed not to be after the war, there were at least times during the war where *he should have been* – i.e. *more than human*, a god-in-human-form (Mishima 192–202, 217–221).

The humanity of the emperor is never doubted in Mishima's story, nor is it given as a reason to doubt his divinity: "Ever since first ascending the Imperial Throne, His Majesty has been a human being. In those dark times, alone, without a friend apart from a handful of old trusted retainers, he has endured all sorts of bitter pain, as a human being. As a human being, purely shining in the distance" (Mishima 217). He is neither the only god, nor even necessarily the highest, though he is believed to occupy a unique position from which to mediate "divine/human dialogue" (Mishima 199). The figure of the emperor as both human and more than human, a god-in-human-form, allows for a unique dialectic, which Mishima lets unfold in his story through the voices of those who sacrificed their lives for this ideal. What can it mean to lose faith in the ideal of the divine sovereign lord of Japan?

The results of the emperor's declaration of humanity for Mishima's fallen heroes are clear: Japan is in a state of decadence from which only the singular devotion to a god-in-human-form can save them. But this is now impossible, and so the spirits of the fallen heroes – now become tortured gods whose voices are channeled through a young Shinto priest – cannot find rest. Were it not for Mishima's own demise from his own singular devotion to an ideal, one could more easily separate the thesis from the writer himself. At

[11] Trans. John Nathan.

the very least, he does not openly argue it – not even as the story's narrator – but places it in the mouth of the priest, whose voice becomes unrecognizable and polyphonous (Mishima 181). In so doing, Mishima makes an interesting case for divine inspiration as barely inseparable from artistic inspiration (Mishima 177): Homer makes an appearance in the story as the young Shinto priest, who was blinded from an accident at eighteen, but now sees all the more clearly (Mishima 180). The muses – the intoning of a stone flute – bring forth the voices of the heroes, who bewail the state of Japan in a manner of speech that is congenial to the listener (Mishima 179):

> 'Now, though the waves of the four seas of this world are by no means calm,
>
> This land of Yamato, of the Rising Sun
>
> Shows an age of "perfect contentment".
>
> Through the imperial benevolence, the world is filled with "peace".
>
> People gaze at one another with soft, peaceful smiles.
>
> Gain and loss are intertwined, friend and foe are joined together.
>
> People run after foreign gold.
>
> Those who no longer wish to fight love whatever is base. (Mishima 182)

Such is the weak resignation scorned here by Mishima's warrior spirits, whose chorus ends with a lament:

> A passionate and heroic spirit has vanished.
>
> Our blood is tainted and stagnant with "peace".
>
> The pure blood that should spurt forth has quite dried up.
>
> Those who should soar to the heavens have their wings broken.
>
> The termites mock at immortal glory.
>
> In such days, why has our divine sovereign lord become no more than human?' (Mishima 183)

To take up once more Nishitani's argument discussed above, it can be seen even in Mishima's story how the two divine deaths – Nietzsche's proclaimed 'death of God' and Emperor Hirohito's renunciation of his own divinity – are in fact related, interconnected even. The same nihilism which had crept into Japanese society through the back door as it were, above all through industrialization and the adoption of Western styles of government, is what proves fatal in the end to the Japanese identity in Mishima's account. In a plot twist of which Nietzsche could only have approved, it is in fact the

English influence of the emperor's old retainer ("a splendid old fox[…] full of ideals of liberty and rationality, […] one of the group of well-groomed, well-mannered gentlemen whom His Majesty had most relied upon from the beginning of his reign in the 1920s" [Mishima 216]) which leads the emperor to view the traditional veneration of his own person as god-in-human-form as a superstitious relic of the past.[12] From the voices of the fallen heroes themselves:

> 'The emperor system, much discussed among the foreign powers, was dangling like white magnolia blossoms in the breeze, reaching out its flowery crown to a dangerous blue sky. In the course of an audience in the late autumn of 1945, Prime Minister Shidehara was told by His Majesty, "Once long ago, an emperor was very ill. He asked that a physician be summoned, but the courtiers answered, 'It would be disrespectful for a mere physician to dare to touch the sacred body of a living god.' They didn't call a physician or give the emperor any medicine. So the emperor's illness worsened, and he died. Isn't that absurd?"
>
> 'By these words, His Majesty was implying that for him to be emperor in a democratic Japan, a rectification of the doctrine of his divinity would be necessary.
>
> 'Standing before him was his loyal old retainer, who had endured so many hardships for the Throne's sake. He was a splendid old fox, in the English manner: a wrinkled man full of ideals of liberty and rationality, a pacifist whose views were born of a profound resentment of the military, the very sound of that word giving him goosebumps. He was one of the group of well-groomed, well-mannered gentlemen whom His Majesty had most relied upon from the beginning of his reign in the 1920s. Overawed, he responded to His Majesty: "The people have such veneration for Your Majesty that they carried the idea of imperial divinity too far. The military abused that idea over the previous decade, launched a disastrous war, and destroyed our homeland. We must now correct that idea and reform it."
>
> 'His Majesty quietly nodded: "At the New Year of 1946, I want to issue an imperial rescript to that effect."
>
> 'Around the same time, in mid-December, a suggestion came from the GHQ, the supreme commander for the Allied Powers, to the Imperial Household Ministry: "We believe that, if the emperor were to make a declaration that he is not divine, it would greatly improve his position." […]' (Mishima 215–216)

One can suspect that Nietzsche would have had more than a little sympathy with Mishima's fallen heroes regarding the tragic aftermath of the emperor's admission. In the *Genealogy* it is not so much the atheism of Nietzsche's contemporaries which concerns him, but rather the fact that no one seems to believe in human greatness anymore, which would

[12] On the English "plebeianism of modern ideas," see KSA 5, 197–198.

appear to be at least one logical consequence of nihilism: with loss of belief in higher ideals, humankind becomes smaller on the whole.[13] The human/god dialectic in Mishima's story is illuminating of this diagnosis of nihilism, for in the case of the Japanese it is in one sense at least *human* greatness which is sacrificed, the loss of belief in a higher man once thought divine. Nietzsche's late writings in particular seek to reignite belief in 'higher men' (*höhere Menschen*), though they also leave open the question whether this is not in fact a doomed effort from the start. Just how is one to go on believing in an illusion of which one is already aware that it is one? Is a god-in-human-form, a 'superhuman,' even an *Übermensch* still worthy of veneration?

Interestingly, in Nietzsche's proclamation of 'the death of God' through the mouth of a madman in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*, the tragedy of this loss is not even felt by the descendants of those who once believed in God, as they are all already atheists. The act of God's murder, as Nietzsche describes it, is as of yet unknown even to the murderers themselves, much like the light of stars light-years removed from us takes time to reach us.[14] Mishima's heroes serve to remind all those with ears to hear it that their emperor's own faltered belief in himself is cataclysmic even for those who did not make the ultimate sacrifice in his name as they had ("Our undying deaths were thus defiled…" [Mishima 218]). This is one sense of nihilism for Nietzsche. With 'the death of God' comes not so much a renewed humanistic belief in the superiority of 'higher types,' although there were indeed many attempts to reclaim this belief, both philosophically and politically, with the most tragic catastrophes resulting therefrom. Rather, the more natural consequence seems to be the widespread loss of belief in all human exemplars. In the absence of a metaphysical belief, is belief in human greatness still possible? And if so, on what grounds? More soberly and somberly, in light especially of the moral and political catastrophes of the 20th and 21st centuries, is such belief even desirable? Do not Nietzsche's and Mishima's own lives and legacies perpetually remind us of just how ill-advised it can be to have such ideals at all? Leaving aside the two men's respective diagnoses of nihilism, what ideals deserve our consideration now that the old beliefs appear to be losing hold?

The new collection of stories of the late Mishima gives the avid reader occasion to reflect more deeply on these questions. A Nietzschean reading of Mishima's stories could serve not only to make sense of his ideas in a Japanese context, but could also reveal further insights from Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern culture, which appears to have a far more global reach than even Nietzsche may have initially suspected.

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