

Nostalgia and Self-loathing: Tracing Japanese Aestheticism and Sensibilities in Yukio
Mishima's The Temple of the Golden Pavilion

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Introduction

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion – Yukio Mishima’s fifth novel – revolves around a the character of Mizoguchi who, because of the boyhood trauma of seeing his mother making love to another man in the same room as his terminally ill father, has become a hopeless stutterer. His affliction, combined with his physical ugliness, alienates him from the rest of the world. It is at this point in the story that he becomes an acolyte at the Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, and he develops an obsession for the temple’s beauty. The rest of the novel dwells upon Mizoguchi’s conflicted emotions regarding the temple, and ends with him breaking free of his fixation by burning the temple down, annihilating the cause for it.

A close analysis of this work would focus on the discrepancy between Mizoguchi’s “Inner World” and the “Outer World” of his milieu, dwelling, perhaps, on how the different elements of fiction contribute to the tension evident in Mizoguchi’s perception of himself and how things really are. It may also dwell on the Temple of the Golden Pavilion as a figure of great importance, both symbol and character, standing the center of Mizoguchi’s obsession and thus serving as a driving force within the plot. This sort of reading, however, does not provide fully illuminate the unique power of the novel. Mishima’s works are always informed by particular aesthetic principles whose roots can be traced back to the earliest works of prose and poetry in Japanese literature. This is important due to the very nature of Japanese literature in itself.

Analyzing Japanese Literature Within its Own Context

In his introduction to A History of Japanese Literature: The First Thousand Years, Shuichi Kato outlined five distinctive features of Japanese literature, emphasizing how Japan’s

body of literary works differs in terms of its role in Japanese culture as a whole, the pattern of its historical development, the Japanese language and its writing system, the social background to literature and the underlying Japanese world-view to life, death, religion in philosophy, present in all works of poetry, prose and drama. There is no need to go into the details for all five features, but we must take a note of a few of his statements in order to show why it may be of interest to trace the principles of Japanese aestheticism in The Temple of the Golden Pavilion.

First, Kato states that the Japanese have expressed their thought not so much in abstract philosophical systems as in concrete literary works (1). This sort of orientation is reflective of their basic avoidance of “logic, the abstract and systemization”, and their favoring “emotion, the concrete and the unsystematic”. “Japanese culture as a whole”, Kato says, “has maintained close contact with the realities of everyday life is that the people have always disliked leaving the real physical world behind them and ascending into the ethereal realms of metaphysics” (2). This stands as the direct opposite to the underlying features of Mediterranean and European literature, bodies of works that have always been informed by abstract theological or philosophical structures. To simplify: where literature, like art and music, has always been the handmaiden to European philosophy, Japanese philosophy was shaped by its literature. Japanese literature has, in fact, taken over the role of philosophy in the country.

Second, the historical pattern of development in Japanese literature is not built around the idea of the replacement or reworking of old concepts with the new, but of coexistence between previously established conventions, sensibilities and principles with the newly developed conventions, sensibilities and principles. Kato uses Chinese literature as his example, pointing out how historical continuity and cultural integrity were always threatened whenever a new literary form appeared in the country; there was always “a fierce conflict between the old and the

new”, and one was expected to give way to the other in the end (5). This never happened in Japan, as the expectation was for the new and the old to exist together. Kato points out that since this was the case, each new age, literary forms and aesthetic values became more diverse and multi-faceted (5).

Let us turn our attentions now towards the aesthetic context of Japanese culture. One of the characteristics that any reader will immediately notice about any work of Japanese fiction is the great amount of effort poured into description, and an emphasis on beauty – it would be safe to say that both Japanese authors and the Japanese people in general are preoccupied with the concept. This may be grounded, of course, in their orientation towards the concrete, which then presupposes a keenness of perception, the cultivation of a sensitivity towards that which can be perceived by the senses. Because this aesthetic concern is so prevalent in Japanese literature (both on the side of the readers and on the side of the writers), scholars have given it a name: *mono no aware*, literally translated as “the pathos of things”¹. To quote Richard Hooker, who paraphrased the work of a prominent linguistic and literary scholar named Motoori Norinaga:

The phrase, derived from *aware*, which, in Heian Japan meant something like “sensitivity” or “sadness”, means “a sensitivity to things.” ...[It]... was the capacity to experience the objective world in a direct and unmediated fashion, to understand sympathetically the objects and the natural world... The Japanese could understand the world directly in identifying themselves with that world; in addition, the Japanese could use language to directly express that connection to the world. ...The poetic and historical texts present the “whole of life,” which has meaning because all of nature and life is animated by the “intentions” of the gods. People experienced this wholeness of life by encountering things (*mono*); these

¹ Alternatively translated as “an empathy toward things” or “a sensitivity of ephemera”.

encounters “moved” or “touched” them (*aware*) — hence the unique Japanese character: “sensitivity to things” (*mono no aware*). This concept became the central aesthetic concept in Japan even into the modern period.

There are two assumptions at work here. The first is that all things in the natural world are beautiful – we deepen this idea further by realizing, through the keenness of perception that *mono no aware* espouses, that there are shades and calibrations to beauty. The second is that one must be sensitive towards the things of the world because they do not last. Death, then, becomes the mother of beauty, in the sense that one would not have to be sensitive towards the natural world if one knew that all the things within it could last forever.

How, then, are we to understand the shades and calibrations to beauty? If we base our discussion on the heightened perception that *mono no aware* calls for plus the natural Japanese tendency to favor the concrete, the sensual and the unsystematic, we can name five characteristics: suggestion, irregularity, perishability, simplicity, and refinement (also interpreted as restraint).

Suggestion. Overtness or directness is offending for the Japanese, as it would imply the assertion of a particular idea or meaning by force. The Japanese favor what we may call “a layering of meaning”; something is what it is, but it also *beyond* what one sees, all the while grounded in the concrete reality of its existence.

Irregularity. Perfection is a limitation; imperfection, on the other hand, may be viewed as the door to infinity, because it provides the means to pursue something that is not achievable in the short run.

Perishability. Grounded completely upon the premise that life is transient, and it is beautiful precisely *because* it is transient. This is also reflective of the Buddhist idea of the Floating World.

Simplicity. Reflective of Zen Buddhism, with its preference on the spare, the monochromatic and the minimalistic. True beauty is in an object that is capable of being tasteful at all times rather than something that is seasonal, or governed by one's tastes at the moment.

Refinement (Restraint). Related to the idea of suggestion; expressing strong emotion is uncouth, and being unable to distinguish the finer points to, for example, a work of art or the different tastes of a dish is a mark of incivility and overall, a lack of sensitivity to one's surroundings. This is also reflective of the Buddhist tenant of compassion.

This context as a whole must be dwelled upon at length precisely because of the fact that literature, for the Japanese, plays the same role as philosophy does in other countries. To read their literature is synonymous with discovering their world view. Furthermore, since the history of Japanese literature is “a subtle combination of diversity and unity, of change and continuity” (Kaito 26), then it is all the more important to study Yukio Mishima's Temple of the Golden Pavilion against the background of previously established conventions, to better see how he may have applied or developed these concepts in his literature. It is also important to dwell upon how Mishima used these conventions to further his own agenda, which is described at length in the section below.

Reflecting upon the Authentic Japanese Identity through The Temple of the Golden Pavilion and the Japanese Concept of Beauty

The latter half of the Showa Period – that is, the period directly after the end of World War II – in Japanese history saw an explosion of literary activity following inhibitions on literary production and stringent censorship. This was also, however, a time when Japan was both struggling back to its feet following the war efforts and catering to the American forces on their shores. In that sense, it would not be entirely inaccurate to say that in spite of the fact that censorship laws had loosened and the country was far more receptive to creative works on the market, writing about particular subjects was considered taboo, if not outright outlawed by Europe and the United States of America.² Yukio Mishima, however, constantly rebelled against these practices through his fiction. As a patriot and nationalist, he believed that Japan should not look towards other countries to define themselves or their destinies by, and there is, to quote Hywel Williams, “a neurotic strain in Mishima’s search for the authentic Japanese”.

An initial reading of The Temple of the Golden Pavilion already reveals that Yukio Mishima’s work reflects an acute sensitivity towards beauty, or more accurately, the Japanese concept of beauty. Through a clever manipulation of the elements of his novel, Mishima reflects upon the aesthetic conventions of suggestion, irregularity, perishability, simplicity and refinement/restraint, and uses them in his pursuit of the authentic Japanese identity.

One of the first things to note about Mishima’s storytelling technique in The Temple of the Golden Pavilion is his deft use of scene and summary. Although his work is “typically Japanese” in his “sensuous and imaginative appreciation of natural detail”, Mishima appears to zero in on particular images that both best reflect the Japanese context of beauty and lend itself into his preoccupations as an author, through the particular neuroticism of Mizoguchi, the main

² This is the case, for example, with samurai tales, which were forbidden following the end of World War II due to their patriotic content and ultra-nationalist tendencies.

character in The Temple of the Golden Pavilion. Let us analyze a particular set of passages, lifted from the first chapter of the book, in order to illustrate this:

It happened that the young man had taken off... his uniform and hung it on the white fence. The trousers and the white undershirt, as they hung there directly next to all the flowers – yes, it was the smell of a young man’s sweat-moistened skin that they gave off. A bee mistakenly alighted on that white, shining shirt-flower. The uniform cap, adorned with its gold braid, rested on one part of the fence, just as if it were on the wearer’s head, the cap sat there correctly, pulled down over the eyes. (Mishima 7-8)

We note how Mishima pays a great amount of attention to describing this otherwise simple picture of a discarded uniform: he describes things in microscopic detail, effectively moving away from the realm of summary and into the realm of scene, aptly freezing – or in this case, slowing down – time in order to appreciate the moment.

...Looking at these objects that he had discarded, I had the impression that I was seeing some sort of honorable grave. The abundant May flowers strengthened this feeling. The cap, which reflected the jet back of the visor, and the sword and its leather belt, which were hanging there next to it, had all been separated from his body and exuded an especially lyrical beauty. They were themselves as perfect as my memory of him – indeed, they looked to me like relics left by a young hero who has departed for the battlefield. (Mishima 8)

In the next paragraph, we moved from a description of the scene to the character’s interpretation of what the scene before him represents, along with his appreciation of its beauty. Note how Mishima joins the ideas of perishability and simplicity together in the passage.

I made sure that there was no one about. I heard the sound of cheering from the direction of the wrestling-ring. From my pocket I took out the rusty knife that I used for sharpening my pencils; then I crept up to the fence, and on the back of the beautiful black scabbard of the sword I engraved several ugly cuts...

(Mishima 8)

Here we see an extension of the principle of perishability, and the addition of irregularity. Mizoguchi is portrayed throughout the novel as a character who, due to his undesirable physical qualities, is obsessed beauty, something that remains permanently inaccessible to him regardless of his efforts to attain it. He constantly hangs between wanting to possess the beauty he sees in the natural world around him or destroy it, or ‘doctor’ it according to how he feels it ought to look. His actions in the last paragraph seem indicative of him acting out this compulsion.

Mishima repeats this pattern – painting a moment through a synchronic treatment of time, returning to the inner thoughts and personal perception of Mizoguchi, then showing how Mizoguchi either imagines the degradation or ‘death’ of the beauty in front of him or moves to cause its degradation or death for himself – several times throughout the novel. Some other noteworthy examples are Mizoguchi’s memories of his mother sleeping with another man in the presence of his ailing father, his witnessing of the tea-drinking ceremony carried out by a woman for her departing lover, his observation of a fly alighting upon the breast of a prostitute (the first and only woman he ever manages to sleep with, without the Temple’s “interference”) and his various meditations on the Temple of the Golden Pavilion throughout the book. It is important to note that some of the images that Mishima chooses to focus on are ones that would normally be considered taboo by the proper society of his time.

Our second point of discussion revolves around Mizoguchi and Kashiwagi. We have already mentioned Mizoguchi's physical ugliness; the novel describes how this ugliness, coupled with the fact that Mizoguchi is a stutterer, effectively alienates him from the people around him. Mizoguchi then turns inward, rendering himself deliberately impenetrable to those who attempt to understand him: this does, for a good length of the novel, become a peculiar source of strength for him, but does not prevent him from being a victim of his own self-loathing. Kashiwagi, however, chooses to deal with his physical imperfection in a starkly different fashion from Mizoguchi: he embraces his defect, acting as though it is perfectly normal for him to be flawed. Their first encounter in the novel even begins with Kashiwagi ridiculing Mizoguchi, making him repeat what he is saying because he claims that he cannot understand the other boy due to his horrible stuttering. He also draws the distinction between them, verbalizing the fundamental difference between them as characters:

Kashiwagi licked the end of his chopsticks and continued: "I know very well why you started talking to me, Mizoguchi – that's your name, isn't it? Well, if you think that we ought to become friends just because we're both cripples, I don't mind. But compared to what's wrong with me, do you really think your stuttering is such an important affair? You make too much of yourself, don't you? As a result, you make too much of your stuttering as well as of yourself." (Mishima 87)

The novel also illustrates how Kashiwagi uses his physical defect to aid him in engaging in his sexual liaisons with women of all ages. Kashiwagi's peculiarities seem to be a strange affirmation of the principle of irregularity in that something that is normally and undoubtedly ugly can wield a strange kind of power over other people, and becomes that which distinguishes Kashiwagi from everyone else, even if it is usually perceived in a very negative light. In some

sense, this is an odd reversal of the principle of irregularity, as there is no possible way in which Mizoguchi or Kashiwagi could correct their physical flaws. Their imperfection, then, is not a ‘door to infinity’ but a dead end, one that they are forced to contend with against the backdrop of a society obsessed with the idea of the beautiful.

Third, we have the Temple of the Golden Pavilion as Mizoguchi’s representation for the unattainable principle of beauty and purity. It is noted early on in the novel that because of his father’s stories of the temple, Mizoguchi’s perceptions on what beauty ought to be were already clearly defined by the Temple, even before he knew what it looked like in reality. “Thus the Golden Temple was apparently everywhere,” Mizoguchi narrates in the fourth page of Chapter One. He compares it to the invisible presence of the sea close to his village: a presence, barely detectable by his five senses, but undeniably there. When he finally comes to see the temple for himself near the beginning of the story, Mizoguchi is momentarily disillusioned, as his once nebulous mental image of the Temple is solidified into something real and, by default, limited, but the disillusionment barely lasts for long, and he continues to revere the temple much in the same fashion as he did when he was younger. He also perceives himself as intimate with the Temple, something of beauty that has lasted over a long period of time, and yet was ultimately transient, capable of being marred or destroyed. He has fantasies of the Temple being destroyed during one of the regular air raids over Japan, as a sort of self-actualization and freedom through the annihilation of one’s physical form:

I was almost intoxicated with the thought that the fire which would destroy me would probably also destroy the Golden Temple. Existing as we did under the same curse, under the same ill-omened fiery destiny, the temple and I had come to inhabit worlds of the same dimension. Just like my own frail, ugly body, the

temple's body, hard though it was, consisted of combustible carbon. At times I felt that it would be possible for me to flee this place, taking along the temple concealed in my flesh, in my system – just as a thief swallows a precious jewel when making his escape. (Mishima 43)

The paragraphs succeeding that passage describe how an air raid never came to Kyoto, and Mizoguchi actually despaired when the Temple remained intact. This obsession builds throughout the story, especially after Mizoguchi's encounter with his ambitious mother: his mother places pressure on him to inherit the Temple after the death of his Superior, yet Mizoguchi remains uncertain as to whether he wants the Temple for himself or if he wants to destroy it – and himself – through arson.

Mizoguchi's reverence of the Temple – and, indirectly, his fixation on the idea of beauty and purity – colors all of his relations with the opposite sex in the novel, interfering with his attempts to connect himself to the real and sensual world through intimate contact with women:

I tried to escape by thinking of the girl in front of me as the object of my lust. I must think of this as being life. I must think of this as the one barrier in the way of my advancing my capturing. For, if I were to miss this chance, life would not come visiting me indefinitely. The memories raced through my mind of all the countless times when my words had been blocked by stuttering and been unable to issue from my mouth and said something, even if it mean stuttering. Thus I could have made life my own. ...Finally I slipped my hand up the girl's skirt. Then the Golden Temple appeared before me.

...Yes, the Golden Temple appeared before me – that strange building which, when one thought it was near, became distant, that building which always floated

clearly in some inscrutable point of space, intimate with the beholder, yet utterly remote. It was this structure that now came and stood between me and the life at which I was aiming. ...The Golden Temple, which sometimes seemed to be so utterly indifferent to me... had now completely engulfed me and had allowed me to be situated within its structure. (Mishima 117-118)

The paragraphs that follow this section proceed to describe, at length, the Temple, and Mizoguchi's feelings of being consumed by it completely. It ends with the implication that no sexual intercourse passed between him and the girl he attempted to sleep with, as indicated in her silent departure after he came to his senses. A similar thing happens to him when he attempts to sleep with the woman whom he spotted with a young soldier in the earlier section of the book, increasing his frustration and ambivalence. It is only after a long period of wandering and his newfound resolution to destroy the Temple (something that he does at the end of the novel) that Mizoguchi is able to sleep with a woman.

Beyond this being a means of subtly suggesting whatever actually transpired between Mizoguchi and the girl, it is also another fall back on the philosophical premise behind the Japanese inclination towards the irregular and the imperfect. Rather than the Temple being revered for possessing something that Mizoguchi can never have, however, it is seen as a massive interference to Mizoguchi engaging in the act of "living" – ironic, given the fact that he is training to become a monk, yet fitting given what Kaito has established as Japanese tendency towards the realms of the physical and the concrete over the abstract and unperceivable.

Conclusion

Mizoguchi eventually came to connect life and living with the idea of intimate contact with the opposite sex – this stands in direct contrast with the tenants of Buddhism: that is, the renouncement of all desire, and the attempt to transcend the boundaries of the physical. Given the particular orientation of the Japanese, however, this would seem to stand in direct contrast with the very nature of the people. With that in mind, it is no wonder that Mizoguchi was constantly plagued by feelings of guilt and self-loathing, desiring what he could not have without assistance due to his ugliness, but unable to act upon it due to the influence of his masters, and his own peculiar reverence for the idea of transcendence. Through The Temple of the Golden Pavilion and Mizoguchi's ambivalence, Mishima appears to have made a critique of the Buddhist influence upon the Japanese people, asserting the ideal that the Japanese are a sensual race, sensitive to that which they can feel and perceive and thus unable to completely separate themselves from the realm of the physical. What Mishima seems to be saying is that distancing one's self from the physical – the beautiful in all its forms – is tantamount to cultural suicide. Relying on the abstract (something that Mizoguchi did for a long time, by imprinting his abstract concept of beauty unto the figure of the Temple) is equivalent to one's death.

It was previously mentioned how the Showa Period was balanced between great amounts of creative activity and both overt and subtle restrictions on what was said or written about. Mishima, however, used The Temple of the Golden Pavilion as a way of asserting his belief in the perceivable and the beautiful. By imbuing his texts with the keenness of perception that *mono no aware* demands and a strong awareness of the aesthetic preoccupations of the Japanese, he seems to be speaking to the people of his time, showing them a side of themselves that they should not deny. Outside of its historical context, however, Mishima's work proves itself to be an exceptional example of how the nature of Japanese literature to balance the old and the new

through craft and story, lending new life into previously established conventions and challenging its contemporaries to find ways in which to further develop the tradition at hand.

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