‘The Terrible Weapon of the Gravely Injured’ – Mishima Yukio’s Literature and the War

IRMELA HIJIYA-KIRCHNEREIT

In the context of post-war literary and intellectual history, Mishima Yukio tends to be seen as a romantic nihilist and ultra reactionary, a prolific but ultimately predictable writer whose spectacular seppuku accentuated his artistic career. On the other hand, even though his philosophical agenda, as he developed it in a series of essays, seems readily accessible for critical evaluation, his fictional creations do not necessarily conform to this image. If Mishima – and his critics – are convinced that he was deeply shaped by the experience of the war and wartime ideology and regarded the post-war as an ultimately despicable and void period, what are we to make of the fact that, in contrast to many post-war authors, he hardly ever deals with the subject of war in his narratives? Is the war expressed at all in his literary works, and if so, what is its significance? And what conclusions can be drawn from a close reading of some of his more representative works concerning the ‘meaning’ of the war experience for Mishima the writer?

In Mishima’s large literary output – and the vast majority of his fictional works deal with contemporary material – there are surprisingly few narrations in which the Pacific War is more than sporadically hinted at, although mentions of the war can be found in many works, even in a novel such as the idyllic Daphnis-and-Chloé tale Shiosai (The Sound of Waves, 1954), whereas in other works, such as in the novels Kyōko no ie (Kyōko’s House, 1958-9) or in the third part of his final tetralogy Hōjō no umi, ‘The Sea of Fertility’, titled Akatsuki no tera (The Temple of Dawn, 1970), the protagonists reminisce war scenarios of death and destruction. We also find, in a short story entitled ‘Botan’ (Peonies), published in 1955, a peculiar reference to
the Nanjing massacre. This reference can be seen as evidence that at that time, these occurrences were not taboo but were still viewed as an established historical truth (Hijiya-Kirschner 1997). The author depicts a single scene, the visit of a first person narrator to a garden of peonies, in which each of the 580 magnificently blooming flowers has its own poetic name. While admiring the flowers, the narrator learns that the garden is tended by a man named Kawamata, a former colonel in the Imperial Army, who made a name for himself as the officer chiefly responsible for the Nanjing massacre. Although responsible for tens of thousands of atrocities, Kawamata is said to have killed only 580 people with his own hands, all of them women. The flowers are thus presented as comprising the secret documentation of the man's wicked deeds and as the glorification of this evil in the eyes of the world.

Mishima's calculated, low-key presentation, with its amoral aestheticism clearly smacks of the spirit of symbolism and European fin de siècle, as evidenced in many of his other works. It is nothing more than an exercise in style, and a weak one at that, and, for all we know, the story did not attract greater attention at the time.

The only work of importance in which the war seems to play a more decisive role is Mishima's novel _Kinkakuji_ (The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, 1955). _Kinkakuji_ is quite unanimously regarded as one of Mishima's masterpieces and has been subjected to many penetrating analyses from Miyoshi Yukio's famous chapter 'Haitoku no rinri' (The ethics of anti-moralism) in his _Sakuhinron no kokoromi_ (An attempt at work-analyses, 1967) through Dennis Washburn's recent reading in his study on modern Japanese fiction and the ethics of identity entitled _Translating Mount Fuji_ (2007). What has not been focused on in detail so far, however, is the question of what function the war has in this carefully plotted work. _Kinkakuji_, as is well known, tells the story of the burning of the famous Zen temple in 1950 from the perspective of the young acolyte who committed the act of arson. Mizoguchi – his name is read symbolically as meaning 'split speech/mouth', alluding to his stuttering and his inability to connect his words with reality – has been alienated from his fellows because of his ugliness and has idolized the Golden Temple since his childhood. In the ten chapters of the story, which develops from May 1942 through July 1950, we witness his mental agonies entirely in the first person, his ‘escape from reality into a romanticized inner world that is suffused with the monument’s imagined beauty’ (Tachibana 1998: 125), as he first gets a chance to visit the temple at the age of fourteen and later is accepted to join the community at the Golden Temple as an acolyte in the summer of 1944. The distance between the idealized beauty constructed in his imagination and the real monument, as well as the unbridgeable distance between the temple and his own ugly existence, remain and produce a paralysing weariness and impotence in Mizoguchi. It is only when he realizes that the growing threat of air raids on Kyoto brings with it the possibility of