

Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo

—from the viewpoint of World Literature

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In this paper, I am going to focus on two outstanding post WWII novelists; Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo. Interestingly, they are in many respects diametrically opposed. Almost everyone labelled Oe as a left-wing novelist; while on the other hand, the opposite was said of Mishima. I think, however, that you may appreciate Oe better if you wear Mishima's shoes, and frankly the converse can be said as well. Their respective literatures in fact share many common connections as World Literature, which is undoubtedly one of the most exciting areas for today's literary studies.

And actually, I have an alternative motive too. Karatani Kojin, a literary critic and excellent philosopher, said that the modern literature, especially novels, has come to the end of its days. Unfortunately, for the first time, I must admit that I tend to agree with his assertion. But I think we can find a way to challenge his notions through reading Mishima and Oe in a new way. I expect that their works could provide good opportunities for us to obtain a new irreplaceable life-changing perspective. We will be negligent, as literary people, if we don't properly answer Karatani's assertion.

First of all, we should make sure what World Literature means. The term Weltliteratur was first made prominent by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the early 1820s. But for ages, we failed to clarify its true meaning. A discipline that should take over Goethe's cosmopolitan vision of World Literature was comparative literature. But comparative literature had been dominated by a positivistic emphasis concerning trivial relationships. On the other hand, in Japan, World Literature had long been mistaken merely as fashionable literary works arriving from overseas into our small island country. Finally, World Literature has truly materialized to undoubtedly become one of the most exciting areas for today's literary studies. Here World Literature means literary devices which go beyond every kind of border; for example, nationality, regionality, religion, language and in some cases time differences, and manifests common issues in various unique forms for human beings, and provides us truly global perspectives and visions. Actually this kind of World Literature has long existed, but we failed to discover it. If we are accurate, it should appear in its true sense. But, frequently, that is not the case. David Damrosch is presenting World Literature not as a canon of texts but as a mode of circulation and of reading. He also argues that World Literature achieves "that" status when the work is translated into foreign languages. In addition to this, in my opinion, his thought is highly suggestive, especially when we consider about Mishima.

As for Oe, it is obvious that his works are typical World Literature. When Oe won the Nobel Literature Prize in 1994 as the second winner of the Nobel Literature Prize in Japan, (for your information the first winner was Kawabata Yasunari), the Swedish Academy referred to five of Oe's works in order to explain their reason why Oe deserved to win the prize. According to the Swedish Academy's comment, Oe creates with poetic force an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today. And Oe can be of some use in a cure and reconciliation of mankind. Thus, these works of Oe naturally lead us to regard his works as today's typical World Literature.

But as for Mishima, the situation is not so simple. There are many readers all over the world who love Mishima's works, however, almost no attempt has been made previously to closely consider Mishima's works from the viewpoint of World Literature - in the sense that I described just now. In my opinion it is very important to regard Mishima's works as World Literature, but in order to make this view more persuasive and effective, we have to improve a method and theory for study.

So, now when reading Oe's novels closely, I consider some essential aspects of World Literature and appreciate it better. Based on this result, I contemplate the best way of thinking about Mishima's novels as World Literature. A little more specifically, I will clarify how Oe paints a disconcerting picture of the human predicament and provides us some hopeful visions with poetic force; thereby we can try to identify the similarities in Mishima's literature. Contrary to what is generally believed, Mishima paints and conveys these hopeful visions to us more vividly and successfully in one sense than Oe did. But THIS is *only my* opinion. At least, through our approach of individually reading both Mishima's **and** Oe's works "together", they thereby influence each other mutually.

According to the Swedish Academy's comment about Oe, *M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest* (1986), it is one of his most significant novels. At the beginning of this novel, Oe explains the importance of his two abbreviations in his life; M/T.

(quotation)

M/T. Since this combination of M and T got a special meaning for me, a long time has passed.

This is the first line of this novel. The capital M in the title stands for "the matriarch", and T for "the trickster". Throughout the course of the novel these anthropological types are embodied in different incarnations.

And actually, two fundamental themes specific to Oe flowed into this novel. One theme is the impact of Japan's catastrophic defeat of WW2. Another theme is the difficulty that he had with

his son's brain disorder. In fact, Oe experienced Japan's defeat at the age of ten in the old village where he was born in Shikoku-island in 1945, and in 1963 he had his child when he was 28 years old.

Although, Oe himself experienced these two themes in his own personal life, in this novel, *M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest*, he didn't treat these themes as personal accounts. He very uniquely developed the so-called grotesque realism, the narratology of Faulkner-style saga, the method of anthropology and some other methodologies of the modern novel, and he integrated his own personal matters successfully into these newly developed methodologies.

The climax of this novel is the allegorically transformed traditional village community's war against the Empire of Japan, which was desperately fighting against the Allies in the final stages of WW2. Ironically, the Empire of Japan resulted from the outcomes of modernization and westernization since The Meiji Restoration. After the village community **and** the Empire of Japan were both defeated, the novel is concluded in the following way. In this text, KOWASUHITO (destroyer) is the name of a young man who led this village during the mythical age, and MORINOHUSHIGI is a mysterious presence which was found in the virgin forest.

(quotation)

When I take a survey of my life, as I said at the beginning of this story, I can find two abbreviations M/T marked at every points of my important life scene. The significance of the myth and history of the basin in the forest for me, which I feel was shown to me very recently, was revealed by M, my mother, and T, my son. My mother says that MORINOHUSHIGI is a chiming music surrounded with soft and faint light, and I think that my son emphasizes the significance because he wrote the name of that music, "KOWASUHITO", in the margin of the musical score. [.....] I've been around for over 50 years and although I've made some naughty mistakes, like a trickster, I've also had many "enlightening" experiences in my life. Now I am waiting for MORINOHUSHIGI, which is illuminated with the soft light, to give me a signal with a chiming music and I wait to hear it talk to me, this final time, the most trusted tradition which could purify our spirit, probably by means of the voice of the matriarch.

As a result, Oe successfully set out in clear relief the serious conflict and a possible harmonization between the modernization rushed by the influence of the West and the cosmology of the traditional Japanese village community. If he didn't have a creative imagination and an ability to express himself in this way, he would have failed in writing this kind of novel and he would merely be telling a story from his private diary or personal life. He also depicted his son, who has a very unique ability to compose music, both of which are anthropological subjects, and kinds of saviours, for those who live in this dissonant world.

As I mentioned before, *M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest* deals with some **methodologies of the modern novel** effectively. Originally this novel is based on Oe's private matters, but he succeeded in narrating them by means of such methodologies. For these reasons, this is why *M/T and the narrative about the marvels of the forest* should be regarded as World Literature. But I think that this understanding is not exclusively correct.

Good Bye, My Books! (2005), which was published about 10 years after he won the Nobel Prize, is a good example for us to pursue this issue. Because this novel is seemingly not written using the same methodologies as *M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest*, it instead appears rather to be a naive I-novel, watakushi-shosetsu.

In fact, this novel is the last one of the trilogy based on Oe's private life. Choko Kogito, a protagonist who is an old international novelist, represents Oe Kenzaburo himself. In the Japanese language, the sound of this name, Kogito, is the same as that of Cartesian's Cogito, and the Kanji, Chinese character, of Kogito means a person who holds on to outdated morality. Here Oe as a novelist parodied himself as a stubborn democrat who blindly believed in modern rationalism. At the beginning of this novel, Tsubaki Shigeru, a famous architect and one of the protagonist's old friends (who is based on one of Oe's real friends, Hara Hiroshi), comes to see Choko Kogito, and he reads the beginning of Kogito's novel- which is actually the beginning of Oe's real novel written in 1972. These facts suggest that this novel is based on the real Oe's private life and his writing method seems to be that of I-novel, watakushi-shosetsu,- which is the most typical form of modern Japanese novel.

This novel, however, is not a simple watakushi-shosetsu. It gradually comes to contain more fictional episodes and to become a transformed or evolved watakushi-shosetsu on the World Literature level. This is obvious after we read the whole story. Actually Shigeru, who was heavily influenced by the 911 attacks, planned a new type of terrorism in Tokyo and tried to involve Kogito in it. According to this plan, Shigeru, who secretly wanted to plant a bomb in a skyscraper, would ask Kogito to warn people on TV and to evacuate them from the building before the deadly explosion. If Kogito was not to be taken seriously by everyone, thousands of people would be killed. This plan, however, was rejected by the terrorist group which Shigeru belonged to. Instead of this plan, Shigeru tried to reveal the method of blowing up the building on the internet using the video which recorded the explosion of Kogito's villa as a simulation of the attack. The result is tragically ironic. Two young members took exception to Shigeru because he decided at the last moment to downscale his plan due to cowardice. The two young members went ahead of Shigeru, and blew up Kogito's villa using a kind of suicide attack method.

Finally, Shigeru and Kogito did not express the truth. They created a cover-up story, hiding the fact that it was a suicide bombing by saying it was accidental. Shigeru and Kogito avoided punishment and they remained relatively unscathed, except for limited public criticism. I would

rather say, however, that they continue to seek something new in a stumbling manner, like those who are dying. Oe depicts how the elderly who are at a loss for what to do generally try to go on with their lives. This story gives a hint of a vision which helps us to continue living in this world.

From the above, though *Good Bye, My Books!* is apparently not written using the same methodologies that *M/T and the Narrative about the Marvels of the Forest* is written, it is however worthy to be regarded as a work of World Literature. The reason for this is that the author is trying to find a new way to pursue common issues in today's world and offer new perspectives and visions to us. And some methodologies of the modern novel like so-called grotesque realism, the narratology of Faulkner-style saga, and the method of anthropology and so on, are not at the forefront, but they are deconstructed and re-integrated in the background of this novel produced by Oe's creativity. I think that the essential aspects of World Literature lie in these points. Some methodologies of the modern novel may be essential to construct a World Literature, but it is not necessary for such methodologies to be brought into focus in the novel. Understanding *Good Bye My Books!* in this way provides a clue for us to read other such novels, including Mishima's novels, from the perspective of World Literature.

Now I am going to take up Mishima's masterpiece, *The Sea of Fertility*. Here Mishima didn't use any varieties of modern novel methodologies. At least it doesn't appear to be that way.

As is well known, *The Sea of Fertility* is a tetralogy and the protagonists of each volume are linked together by the cycle of reincarnation. A protagonist of the first volume transmigrates to a protagonist of the second volume. And so this process continues from volume to volume up until the fourth volume. But at the end of this tetralogy, the reality is made clear by a Buddhist abbess Satoko, who was a former lover of a protagonist of the first volume. She explained the truth to another character in the novel, Mr. Honda, who was a close friend of the protagonist of the first volume, and he himself was **not** a reincarnation but a witness of the reincarnation from the beginning of this tetralogy. Also, at the same time, the **reader** is informed about the reality.

According to Satoko, a protagonist of the fourth volume is a fake. And even worse, the **whole** story regarding the reincarnation is a delusion of the witness, old Honda. He is shocked by a kind of ontological crisis. Finally, he is left absolutely alone in the nunnery's garden, which symbolizes the whole world and then all his memories are lost and disappear.

The fact that Mishima committed the hara-kiri suicide on the very day he finished this masterpiece embarrassed us to such a degree that for a long time we have not been able to interpret this ending properly. But now, we feel obliged to reevaluate this tetralogy for many reasons.

First of all, since 2000, many previously unknown documents, including manuscripts, drafts and private letters from Mishima, have been published in the new version of Mishima's complete works which I compiled. These materials contain lots of important information about the

process that generated *The Sea of Fertility*, which persuade us to explore the deepest meanings and essential themes of this novel, which we have thus far not noticed. For example, in his initial scenario, a reincarnation of the fourth volume is in fact genuine. Guided by this pure, handsome young man, transmigrated from preceding protagonists, an old witness of reincarnation is enlightened and enjoys a happy death. Also, this material states that in his early days Mishima's idea was influenced by Proust's short novel: *La Mort de Baldassare Silvande, Vicomte de Sylvania*, which is included in his first published collection of works: *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*. In this novel, Proust depicted how Vicomte de Sylvania, a main character, enjoyed his death guided by all his happy memories. This is a very original form of the theme of memories which is pursued throughout *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Mishima denied this Proustian ending of his tetralogy however, and after thoroughly examining his own theme, he finally reversed his novel's ending entirely. In Mishima's original scenario an old witness would enjoy his death, but in his final manuscripts that old witness falls into nihilism.

There is more important material. One is a private letter which Mishima sent to a famous literary critic, Nakamura Mitsuo, who was also one of Mishima's old friends. In that letter Mishima told him about the basic idea of his masterpiece. According to this letter, when Mishima started writing *The Sea of Fertility*, he regarded some western novelists such as Balzac, Émile Zola, Marcel Proust and Jean-Paul Sartre as his rivals, and tried to write a long novel which would capture the spirit or essence of that age and /or respond to the demands of that age in a different way to those Western novelists' methods. Actually, the conceptual story of reincarnation is the form Mishima adopted in order to depict society and our times in a unique way, which we never saw previously. In comparison, the theory of reincarnation for Mishima corresponds to that of natural history for Balzac and the philosophy of time for Proust. In fact, Mishima loved the story of reincarnation and viewed it as a mysterious fairy tale, but it doesn't necessarily therefore mean that he believed in reincarnation as a truth in our lives. Essentially for Mishima, reincarnation in Buddhism is instead a philosophical theory about time and space.

In his opinion, it explains to us the discontinuity in continuity and the continuity in discontinuity. It teaches us that what is being is inevitably what is not being, and what is not being is inevitably what is being too. Here is the reason why reincarnation could be the device with which Mishima depicts our modern world and meets the demands of it. We, the Japanese people, suffered obviously from tough disconnections and nihilism, which were caused by rapid modernization, the catastrophic defeat of WW2 and the subsequent undisguised bare-knuckle rapid economic growth after the war. Moreover, I refer also to recurring serious natural disasters and a horrific nuclear accident which occurred after Mishima's death. Despite this, we have had to continue living our lives, seeking a plausible and popularly dependable theory, by which we could survive this nihilistic dissonant world. From Mishima's viewpoint, Buddhist reincarnation is a sufficiently well-grounded

theory and although he wasn't Buddhist, he appreciated its meaning. Popular postwar Japanese thinking suggests that Buddhist reincarnation is fanciful and isn't a realistic part of Japanese culture or beliefs. But Mishima didn't agree with this popular thinking and he thought, like himself, most people sought something hopeful in which they could believe.

Although this situation seems to be indigenous to Japan especially, I believe it is actually common and universal in the 21st century. Mishima's materials, draft notes and private letters tell us that even if he personally didn't study some methodologies of the modern novel or use them openly in his novels unlike Oe, Mishima considered in his own way what formed the background of such methodologies, and wrote *The Sea of Fertility* in this unique way based on his thoughts. As *Good Bye, My Books!* shows, methodologies of the modern novel may be essential to construct a World Literature, but it is not necessary for such methodologies to be brought into focus in the novel. Then Mishima's novel should be understood and appreciated best when it is read as a form of World Literature. According to the Swedish Academy's comment, the world which Oe depicted is in a predicament and the situation in Mishima's case is also the same. Furthermore, in light of the numerous natural disasters and nuclear accidents these days, we the Japanese people, are facing a potentially unknown type of extinction - possibly ahead of the rest of the world, and it seems obvious to me that Mishima predicted this clearly, several years ago, before Oe was aware of it. And I have to say that Mishima came to think that we were in such a fatally serious situation that the story of reincarnation didn't work any more.

The question then – does Mishima's *The Sea of Fertility* provide us some kind of hopeful vision as Oe's works do? It is also one of the essential elements for World Literature. Upon first reading, it seems to present us only deadly nihilism and does not provide us any kind of hope. Mishima finally reversed his original plan of *The Sea of Fertility*'s ending entirely and denied the theory of reincarnation at the end of the day, after thoroughly examining his own theme and the deadly situation in Japan. A more careful reading, however, tells us that it has a potential power which encourages us to survive this pessimistic world. Mishima quoted some famous classic literary works, including *The Tale of Genji* and Basho's works, specifically for example in the last scene of *The Sea of Fertility*, in a very unique manner, which I will explain now. Mishima not only follows the original material precisely, but he also changes its essence very obviously in a creative way.

As for *The Tale of Genji*, the story of Ukifune, Kaoru's lover, is quoted by Mishima in the last part of *The Sea of Fertility*. Ukifune attempted suicide by drowning caused by the embarrassment of being involved in a sexual relationship with another man, Nio-no-miya, but she survived the attempt and eventually became a nun. After some time, a letter from Kaoru reached Ukifune. But she was extremely puzzled and said to the nuns who were taking care of her,

(quotation)

I'm too confused and upset at the moment. Let me have a little time to recover before I reply. I'm trying my best to remember the past, but it doesn't come back to me at all. It's like a mysterious, unpleasant dream that I can't comprehend. Perhaps, if I can calm myself a little, my memory will return, and I will understand what this letter refers to. Today, I want a messenger to take it back to the gentleman. It would be terribly embarrassing if, in fact, it was meant for another woman.

In the novel Ukifune can't remember Kaoru, and similarly Satoko doesn't recognize the first volume's protagonist; Kiyooki, who was a former lover of Satoko. There is, however, a significant difference between these two cases. Though Ukifune's situation is expressed by means of excellent literary rhetoric, the essence of the story is interpreted as an extreme embarrassment or repressions of her traumatic love experience. But in the case of *The Sea of Fertility*, it is not a single psychological factor but rather a combination of ontological, historical and religious issues that caused Honda and Satoko to lose their memories. Because abbess Satoko's statement that the whole story regarding the reincarnation is a delusion of the witness, that leads Honda into an ontological crisis and thus his predicament symbolizes the horrifying outcome of modernity. What is important here, is while quoting the original material, Mishima changed that meaning distinctly using his unique creativity. In other words, although the content which is depicted at the end of this long novel is itself very nihilistic and negative, the creativity which distinctly changes the context is obviously positive.

I can point out the same thing regarding Mishima's quotation of Basho's work at the end of *The Sea of Fertility*. In Basho's famous essay, *Oku-no Hosomich*, we find the following sentences;

(quotation)

Going around the shore, the rocks and the Buddhist temple to worship, I had a lucid and pure mind surrounded with the beautiful and silent view.

How still it is here

Stinging into the stones

The locusts' trill

Originally, this scene by Basho represents a peaceful state of mind. While quoting this, Mishima changed it into an extremely nihilistic scene. Though it is very ironic, his undoubted creativity works thoroughly well here. Mishima doesn't merely deal with extremely daunting situations humanly, but practically as super-humans or in a god-like manner. Therefore, I think we can identify here a sort of hopeful potentiality to survive the nihilism. And here we also see another

type of reincarnation. At the end of *The Sea of Fertility*, the whole story regarding the reincarnation of these characters is denied, and here instead we realize the reincarnation of Japanese traditional literary works.

Some modern novelists and artists who came after Mishima challenged themselves to create new types of potentiality, inspired by Mishima's creativity. For example, Max Webster, an excellent young English stage director, dramatized this tetralogy in a very unique manner. After he shuffled four stories which comprise this tetralogy, he merged them onto one stage. Therefore, the different times and various scenes derived from each volume of the tetralogy are often played simultaneously on the same stage. For example, sometimes three differently aged renderings of Honda; namely when he was young, middle aged and old, appear on the same stage at the same time. One of the effects of this method of stage direction is that every performance simultaneously on the stage relates together in defiance of the usual restrictions of time and space. Notably, even if only one story relating to one of Honda's persona appears individually on stage, it potentially retains the possibility of polysemy in interpretation. As a result, though the end of *The Sea of Fertility* presents a nihilistic worldview in one way, we, the audience, are simultaneously open to the opposite interpretation of it, due to the positive scene in Volume 1, namely *Spring Snow*. Thus, in spite of the nihilism which erodes everything from the last scene, we also experience that moment when passionate love arises from nothingness.

In conclusion, Mishima's *The Sea of Fertility* provides us with some kind of hopeful vision. *Good Bye, My Books!* shows us that some methodologies of the modern novel seem to be essential to construct World Literature but it is not necessary for such methodologies to be brought into focus in the novel. This understanding leads us to this point, where we can read *The Sea of Fertility* as World Literature. On the other hand, reading *The Sea of Fertility* as World Literature also helps us to understand the background of Oe's works more deeply. In this way, despite Mishima's absence in this world, Oe and Mishima mutually enhance their literary values and potentialities through our acts of reading. This is precisely what I meant at the beginning of this paper, when I wrote that you may appreciate Oe better if you wear Mishima's shoes, and vice versa.

Finally, this is a possible disproof to Karatani's assertion that modern literature, especially novels, has come to the end of its days. We can potentially find a door to a new irreplaceable life-changing perspective to survive our nihilistic dissonant world thanks to modern novels.

* *Good Bye, My Books!* This title originated from the passage in Nabokov's *The Gift*.

Originally it is "Good-by, my book!" But after some consideration, I translated the title of Oe's novel as *Good Bye, My Books!*

三島由紀夫と大江健三郎——世界文学の観点から

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三島由紀夫と大江健三郎は多くの点で正反対の作家と見られている。しかし、実際には両者は問題を共有しており、あえて相手の立場から他方の作品を読むことによって、それぞれの作品の内容と背景をより深く理解し、文学としての可能性を広げることが出来る。本稿では、大江健三郎の『M／Tと森のフシギの物語』、『さようなら、私の本よ!』、および三島由紀夫の四部作『豊饒の海』を取り上げ、このことを検証する。結論として、いずれの作品も現代の世界文学（言語や国境、地域性、宗教などあらゆる境界を越え、人間にとって共通の問題を各々の作品がそれぞれのやり方で明らかにするとともに、世界的なパースペクティブとビジョンを提示する文学）という観点から見て重要な作品であることを明らかにし、さらに進んで、小説を読むという私たちの行為を通じて、「近代文学の終り」（柄谷行人）という主張に対抗する有効な視座が得られる可能性を探ってゆきたい。