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A Gaze into the Temple of Dawn: Yukio Mishima's “Absence in Presence”

Gabriele Schwab

“[A]s long as self-consciousness (the self) existed and perceived, the world was nothing more than a phenomenal shadow, a reflection of the ego's perceptions; the world was nothing and therefore nonexistent” (125). These reflections in Yukio Mishima's *The Temple of Dawn* pertain to its main character, Honda, the “Western Japanese” lawyer who, looking back at his life, comes to “realize that what had permitted him to live the way he had was the strength of Western thought, imported from the outside” (25).

The Temple of Dawn, the third novel in Mishima's tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, is a novel about the cultural contact between East and West in this century which Mishima traces from a Tokyo in 1912, with its decline of the ancient aristocracy and the emergence of a new elite of rich provincial families, to the late sixties, the last years of his own life. Mediated through Honda's relationships with Kiyooki Matsugae and later with Isao, the young patriot for the Emperor's Japan who until his premature death through *seppuku* uncompromisingly clings to the purity of traditional Japanese culture, the text also probes the “question of an unadulterated Japan” (25). Honda and his counterparts, Kiyooki and Isao, are cast as complementary characters who represent the tension between cultural hybridity and a sometimes militant nostalgia for purity. At one level of the narrative, this tension is enacted through the notion of transmigration. Apart from materializing in Kiyosaki's and Isao's reincarnations, the latter is also

reflected in Honda's attempt to integrate Eastern and Western transcendental philosophies. Cultural contact is thus not restricted to concrete forms of contact between East and West but also encompasses a mediation between Eastern and Western histories of philosophical dualism. We find Honda's narrative interspersed with numerous theoretical reflections on the historical development of Buddhism as well as the opposition between immanence and transcendence, emotion and rationalism, passion and detachment or sensual perception and pure consciousness. These dualisms determine Honda's actions which also reveal them as deeply gendered oppositions.

Toward the end of the novel, Honda, about whom the narrator remarks that "he had once been the personification of cerebration" (25), concludes his confrontation between Eastern and Western thought with the statement: "Unfertilized thinking brings death" (25). *The Sea of Fertility* is a text which — as Mishima puts it in a remark to Donald Keene — "superimposes the image of cosmic nihilism on that of the fertile sea" and thereby reenacts and, as I will argue, inadvertently complicates the conventional binarism between masculine transcendence and feminine immanence.

As Simone de Beauvoir has argued in *The Second Sex*, Western philosophies have predicated this opposition on a binary model of self and other in which the subject is always linked to masculine transcendence. This tradition is invoked at the end of *The Temple of Dawn* in a "peephole-episode" which echoes Sartre's famous "keyhole-episode" in *Being and Nothingness*. Mishima thus also superimposes the image of an Eastern cosmic nihilism on that of a Western existential nihilism, creating an intertextual resonance which confronts Sartre's transcendental philosophy and its inherent "cerebration," with the "fertile sea" of immanence and desire. As I want to show in the following, this meditation on "being" and "nothingness" by a "Westernized Japanese" draws out tacit assumptions of both cultural traditions.

In the last section of *The Temple of Dawn*, Honda peeks through a hole in the wall behind his bookshelf in order to gaze at Ying Chan, a nineteen-year-old Thai girl. Honda suspects this exotic Other to be the third link in the chain of reincarnation which embraces his two friends who both died at age twenty, Kiyooki Matsugae and Isao, whose life Honda records in *Runaway Horses*. This reincarnation ignites a mystical love for Ying Chan in Honda and leads him to undertake a long spiritual pilgrimage to India and the holy places of Buddhism which thoroughly transforms his whole philosophy of life.

A decade later, however, we find Honda's spiritual enlightenment "contaminated" by the seductions of postwar hedonism and the attractions of Japan's new hybrid culture in the fifties. This is when he meets Ying Chan again at a party which he hosts at his house. And this time, far from confining himself to the mystical nature of his desire, he succumbs to an obsessive desire to see her naked.

Honda pursues his plan to spy on her with an ingenious and meticulous network of intricate arrangements. After building a swimming pool in his garden for the sole purpose of having her exposed in her nakedness, he invites a number of friends over to celebrate the opening of the pool. Ying Chan is accompanied by their mutual friend Keiko, a woman of about fifty years of age who, being one of those New Japanese women who pursue a "perfectly splendid mingling of East and West" (269), is also Honda's confidante. The two women are supposed to stay overnight in different guest rooms, one of them adjacent to Honda's room with the peephole.

Honda's project, however, is complicated by the fact that two other friends insist on staying overnight which, in turn, requires that he put Keiko into one room with Ying Chan. When Honda finally peeps through the hole, he, to his horror, discovers the two women in the act of making love. But he also discovers the three moles on Ying Chan's body which finally identify her without any doubt as a reincarnation of Kiyooki Matsugae. At this moment, his act of voyeurism is interrupted by his wife. Using his discovery of the three moles in order to cover up his voyeurism while asserting his transcendence, Honda invites her to peep through the hole and thus enters into a game of complicity with her which eventually leads to the conclusion of the book.

In order to understand Mishima's superimposition of the two different epistemologies of the gaze in Eastern and Western culture, it is important to observe how his peephole-episode mirrors its Western equivalent in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, the pursuing gaze of the Other fashions the very mode of being. The keyhole episode, a narrative of spying and being spied upon, functions as a parable of the dynamic which constitutes the relationship between self and other in general: a person, "moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice," looks through a keyhole. Behind the door "a spectacle is to be seen." All of a sudden, the person — whom we may assume to be male even though (or because) Sartre attempts to efface gender from his theory — hears footsteps in the hall and realizes that someone is looking at him. "What does this mean?" Sartre asks. "It means that I am

suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure — modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective *cogito*” (319).

Far from being innocent, the dynamic of gazing, which forms and modifies the very structure of subjectivity, is, for Sartre, born out of pride and shame — two emotions which, in our culture, regulate the internalization of social norms. Shame is “shame of self; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging” (320).

Sartre’s judgmental Other inflicts shame, guilt, anguish, and alienation. For Sartre, *esse est percipi* is tantamount to installing a “panopticum” within the subject. From this perspective, Kafka’s *The Trial* appears as the imaginary world which best evokes the mode of affection which the gaze of the Other, the “Surveyor,” imposes onto the self: “that gloomy, evanescent atmosphere of *The Trial*, that ignorance which, however, is lived as ignorance, that total opacity which can only be felt as a presentiment across a total translucency — this is nothing but the description of our being-in-the-midst-of-the-world-for-others” (326).¹

For Sartre, the very fact of being an object for the Other’s gaze is an experience of a degrading fixation: “Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being an object, that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed and dependent being which I am for the Other” (338). Being an object for the Other is, then, a process of pure “objectification,” a reduction or fixation — and ultimately a destruction — of subjectivity.

However, Sartre does designate one intersubjective space that ostensibly remains “protected” from the destructive gaze of the Other: the sanctuary of love. And yet, even though love is, according to Sartre, the only form of relating differently to the Other, a close reading reveals that his discourse on love remains caught in his general concept of the Other and obeys the same logic of objectification. When Sartre asks “Why does the lover want to be loved?” he can only conclude that “[t]he lover wants to capture a consciousness,” and that “it is the Other’s freedom that we want to get hold of” (448). The Hegelian dialectic of master and slave provides Sartre with a structural framework for conceptualizing love according to a dynamic of power and domination. This dynamic turns Sartre’s “enterprise of love” into a paradox: the lover wants to get hold of the Other’s freedom, but in order to sustain love, this freedom would have to be maintained. “The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved” (448). This is where seduction

enters the stage, so to speak, as a substitute for the “will to power.” Since love cannot be willed, “love can in no way be distinguished from the enterprise of seduction” (454). Inverting the original dynamic of the gaze, seduction means to put oneself beneath the Other’s gaze and to risk the danger of “being-seen.” Paradoxically, the lover’s gaze must, according to Sartre, neither seek to objectify the Other nor to reveal the lover’s subjectivity. It rather attempts to “assimilate the Other’s subjectivity” (454).

For Sartre, the paradox of love results from his assumption that, while love is a “pure engagement without reciprocity” (458), it is nonetheless shared by two subjects who have reciprocal expectations of being loved. This paradox turns love into a spiraling abyss of illusions and delusions, “a system of indefinite reference . . . a game of mirrors” (459). The lover’s illusion of “transcendence” or “pure subjectivity” is, however, always inherently threatened by the actual or virtual gaze of a third person: “it suffices that the lovers should be *looked at* together by a third person in order for each one to experience not only his own objectivation but that of the other as well” (460).²

Precisely this position of lovers, looked at by a third person, provides the starting point for Mishima’s peephole episode. It comes as no surprise that one of the great writers of the Japanese, whom John Hersey once characterized as “a people obsessed with a fear of being spied upon” (4), would be highly responsive to the cultural paranoia of the gaze in Sartre’s existentialism. And yet, Mishima’s text not only mirrors but also complicates Sartre’s famous episode by introducing two elements which remain so obviously repressed in Sartre’s narrative: first, instead of positing the dynamic of love as an exception, he incorporates it into the peephole scenario, and second, instead of confining his readers to the spectacle of the voyeur, he implicates them in the secret behind the door.

In fact, Mishima draws to the center of the scene a glaring absence in Sartre’s episode, namely the fact that the object of the voyeur’s gaze is usually a sexual act. Sartre leaves us completely on one side of the keyhole, barring us, so to speak, from the spectacle behind the door. Along with the conceptual effacement of gender or, more adequately, the feminine, Sartre thus also obliterates the traces of sexual politics involved in the act of voyeurism. It is precisely these blind spots in Sartre’s reading of his own fictional scene which allow him to exempt the dynamic of sexual politics from this spectacle of voyeurism. Mishima, by contrast, emphasizes the intricately intertwined relationship between love, sexual politics, and voyeurism and exposes the

latter as a radicalization of the psychosocial regulation of perception and visibility.

The ensuing “endless game of mirrors” that entangles Mishima’s characters is accordingly embedded in a textual strategy that explicitly focuses on sexuality and gender. At the same time the text incorporates this focus into the larger framework of a philosophy and epistemology of perception and a cultural code of the gaze and of visibility. Honda is cast as the mediator for this double coding of perception. Rather than as a simple voyeur, Honda is presented as a highly complex and intellectually sophisticated figure who is not only deeply self-critical about his own act but also attempts to redeem his voyeuristic pleasures by embedding them within a cosmological theory of perception. On the one hand, the text leaves no doubt that Honda’s attempt to turn his voyeurism into a sublime experience of transcendence is a rationalization, a product of his old “cerebration” which may never fully account for his desire. Yet, on the other hand, it reveals that this pathology is not merely a personal idiosyncrasy but a cultural pathology which is already operative at the level of a philosophy of perception which polarizes and hierarchizes the opposition between immanence and transcendence. This becomes most obvious after Honda’s exposure to the gaze of his wife Rié, cast in the role of Sartre’s “third person” who discovers the voyeur.

From the outset, Honda’s high self-reflexivity mirrors his actions in the theoretical reflections of a voyeur who is not only able to “see” his own “perversion” but has already viewed it in an epistemology of perception as paradox in which whatever you can see is already contaminated by the gaze’s confinement to immanence. Honda is already an object to his own perception before he concretely becomes, like Sartre’s protagonist, an object of the other’s gaze. Moreover, the narrative strategies which cast Ying Chan as the object of the male gaze are themselves highly self-reflexive. They perform a narrative mimicry of the internal dynamic of the gaze in order continually to remove Ying Chan from the locus of perception — even during the voyeuristic scene proper. This removal, in turn, is self-reflexively attributed to the paradox of the voyeur’s inability to see: “Honda’s perception itself became a screen and was defective, an infinitesimal obstruction” (*Temple* 297).

Equally telling is that the narrative of this voyeur, who grounds his philosophy of the gaze in the awareness that “the world could be transformed through observation” (322), opens with the line: “The reality of Ying Chan was limited by the Ying

Chan he could observe" (296). The paradoxical *function* of the gaze is related to the known on the one hand and to love on the other. Loving Ying Chan, for Honda, would mean to do exactly the opposite of the voyeur, namely, "to keep Ying Chan as far away as possible from the talons of his perception" (296). Love, as Honda knows, depends on the unknown, the secret, and the desire of the voyeur is focused upon "seeing the unseeable" and upon unveiling the secret while remaining undetected:

Therefore his desire to see Ying Chan in the nude, a Ying Chan unknown to anyone, became an unattainable desire divided contradictorily into perception and love. Seeing already lay within the sphere of perception, and even if Ying Chan was not aware of it, from the moment he had peeped through the luminous hole in the back of the bookcase, she had become an inhabitant of a world created by her perception. In her world, contaminated by his the moment he laid eyes on it, what he really wanted to see would never appear. His love could not be fulfilled. And yet, if he did not see, love would forever be precluded. (296)

This paradoxical desire to see what cannot be seen brings the "base desire" of the voyeur into proximity with the "temptation of sublimity" (316): "Manifestly only ugliness and disgrace lay in store, yet these palpitations had the richness and the brilliance of a rainbow; something indistinguishable from the sublime burst forth" (315-16). Representing the unrepresentable founds the paradox of a gaze which obliterates the subject, a representation verging on death. Both partake in the negation of the other. For Honda, however, Ying Chan exists only insofar as he is able to perceive her. If he were able to remove that "infinitesimal obstruction," the gaze, he would enact his own death:

It now became clear that Honda's ultimate desire, what he really, really wanted to see, could exist only in a world where he did not. In order to see what he truly wished he must die. When a voyeur recognizes that he can realize his ends only by eliminating the basic act of watching, this means his death as such. (297)

Like Sartre, Mishima emphasizes the deadening quality of the gaze. But while Sartre assumes that it is inherent to the gaze in general, Mishima attributes it specifically to voyeurism predicated on a nostalgia for transcendence in relation to which immanence appears only as an illusion of the real. Crucial for the implied politics of gender and the emotions in these tran-

scendental philosophies is the fact that, however different they may be otherwise, they both can posit “love” only as an impossible project and in terms of a paradox related to the gaze and perception. For Honda, the death brought about by the gaze no longer remains a mere metaphor for the obliteration of subjectivity. Honda literally fantasizes the scene of his own suicide, his “exit from a world contaminated by perception” (297). But in a battle of the sexes carried out through the gaze, Honda’s death would be Ying Chan’s triumph: “at the very moment of his departure she would stand radiantly before him; nothing was so predictable as this” (297).

The epistemological intricacy of Honda’s position as a voyeur is enhanced by the fact that the fantasy of this “Western Japanese” approximates Western theories of representation to Eastern philosophies of mind. (The “indispensable formalities” which open the “ceremony” of voyeurism contain a subtle irony: in order to gain access to the peephole, Honda must remove from his bookshelf the classics of Western literature which, in this case, form a very concrete “obstruction” for his perception.) Sartre’s definition of symbolization and representation as a destruction of the object finds its Eastern equivalent in Honda’s adoption of the philosophy of the Yuishiki School, which considers the root of perception as “the eternal *alaya* consciousness that discards the world one instant without regret and renews it in the next” (297).³ This consciousness is in constant flux, formed not only by all mental activities but also by the physical objects of perception. *Alaya* consciousness is considered to be “the migrating body and generative power of samsara and reincarnation” (121) in that it makes all mind and matter materialize.

As products of *alaya* consciousness, both “self” and “soul” are reduced to ideation. The differentiation between self and other is itself such an ideation, produced by the seventh sense, *manas*, which creates a temporary illusion of individuality and gives rise to egotism and the “attachment to self.” This position marks precisely the paradox of Honda as a voyeur and frames the scene of voyeurism at the end of *The Temple of Dawn*:

Honda could not but think that both the formation of so-called consciousness of self in modern times as well as the fallacy of egotistic philosophy found their origins in the second seed. (123)

According to the Yuishiki school, the world “lives and dies at every moment . . . and only the present instant which one can

touch with one's hand and see with one's eyes is real" (124). Since this also holds true for the existence of the self, we encounter here an Eastern version of *esse est percipi* very different from the Western ones that inspired Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. And yet, curiously enough, these different theories gain their closest proximity in the position of the voyeur. For Honda, the self exists only as long as that self continues to perceive. At the same time, the world of this self is but a reflection of the ego's perceptions.

What most marks the position of the voyeur is that *consciousness only* is haunted by sensuous desire. From the perspective of *alaya* consciousness Honda appears as being "too attached to his perceptions" and therefore unwilling to "give himself completely to this doctrine" (297). Considering the tension between Eastern and Western ways and philosophies of living played out by Honda in this text, one could also say that Honda is already too "Westernized" to completely renounce his attachment to perception, desire, and confirmable reality that encompasses past and future. This becomes most obvious in the fierce belief which shapes and frames his reflections on the Yuishiki school like a refrain, an incantation that recurs after each reflection on basic assumptions of the Yuishiki school: "But the world *must* exist!" (see 125-27).

These reflections on the ontological and epistemological dilemma of a voyeur — who, being torn between Eastern and Western models of the gaze, is falsely attached to his perceptions — precede the narration of the actual voyeuristic scene. The narrative exposure of Honda's act of voyeurism is thus anticipated and broken into myriad reflections on perception and the gaze, and this (quasi)-theoretical sublimation, in turn, orients the perspective of the reader. It effects, in fact, a complex inversion of the standard reaction to voyeurism. While the philosophical reflections prevent us from seeing Honda as a mere voyeur — which would turn him into "the other," the pervert who deserves guilt and shame — these reflections also build suspense surrounding the voyeuristic scene. After such a subliminal theoretical foreplay we can anticipate a climax: that is, the revelation of a secret. Or, as Sartre puts it, we expect that behind the wall "a spectacle is to be seen," and the dynamic of the narrative tells us that it has to be more than the spectacle which Honda expects to see. Instead of leaving us at the safe distance of a pure onlooker, this anticipation shifts the object and focus of aesthetic pleasure and implicates us in Honda's voyeurism. We are pulled

away from the myriad reflections on *consciousness only* and plunged into a world of immanence.

The suspense is intensified during the preparation of the voyeuristic scene. Honda's wife Rié escorts the nineteen-year-old Ying Chan and nearly fifty-year-old friend Keiko onto the terrace in their swimming suits. Honda's attention shifts to Keiko who "seemed voluptuous" and "when seen in profile talking with Rié her curves flowed with statuesque majesty, and the sovereignty of buxom flesh was apparent in the symmetry of the swelling breasts and buttocks" (309). This same cold male gaze which veils degradation in idealization then turns toward Ying Chan:

Clad in a white suit, she was holding a white rubber bathing cap in one hand and pushing back her hair with the other in a relaxed pose, one leg extended beyond the other. In her manner of placing one leg slightly forward, visible from a distance, was a kind of tropical asymmetry that excited people. Strong and yet slim, the long thighs supporting a well-developed torso somehow imparted a feeling of precariousness. (309)

Is this Honda's gaze or the "objective" gaze of a neutral narrator? It does not make any difference, for it is a gaze which transforms the world of these two female characters through observation. Ceasing to exist as subjects, they become bodies — if not body-effects. And yet, in the context of the previous reflections upon the obstruction of the gaze, their aloofness and mysterious absence evokes a curiosity to see behind the aesthetics of an objectified beauty of bodies. Honda's perception is turned back at him so that, for the reader, it is Honda, not the women, who becomes the "object" of a perception which reveals more about the perceiver than about the perceived object.

This inverted direction of the gaze turns into another framing device for the act of voyeurism. Honda's scheme to use the peephole in his library in order to observe Ying Chan sleeping alone had been undermined by the necessity to have her share the room with Keiko. The "spectacle to be seen" then turns out to be Ying Chan and Keiko making love. Again, the scene is cast in terms of a pure facticity focusing on a quasi-objective description of their bodies. But while Honda's gaze focuses on the bodies of the two women, the narrative focuses on Honda's body. The whole scene conveys the obliteration of subjectivity and life on all levels: the annihilation of the two women's subjectivity under Honda's gaze, the transmutation of Honda's emotions into "mechanical, rapid palpitations" (315) of the heart, the

vanishing of desire under the “indispensable formalities” of Honda’s pleasure. Honda’s actions assume the rigidity of a compulsive and mechanistic order where each detail has to be under total control, where the order in which he removes books from the peephole never varies, where he could guess the exact weight of each and knew the odor of accumulated dust. “The touch and the weight of these solemn and imposing volumes and the precision of their arrangement were the indispensable formalities of his pleasure” (317).

Honda’s gaze is as objectifying as the ritualistic formalities with which he prepares the voyeuristic scene. It is a decidedly aesthetic gaze. Its formalistic aestheticism, however, has a coldness to it, since it contains the emotional involvement and closes it off from the “object” of love. Idealization and degradation are two inseparable sides of this “politics of love” that pertains to the voyeuristic gaze. Honda sees “inextricably entangled limbs writhed on the bed,” “a white plump body and a dusky one,” “two heads of black shadowy hair,” “two black pubescent mounds,” “breasts with nipples turned toward the light” and “perspiration flowing slowly down the spine” (317-18). Under the shock of witnessing the two woman making love to each other, Honda’s gaze aggressively turns them into “fragmented bodies” exposed to the gaze in a stage of disfiguration like iconic remnants of their dissolution as subjects:

Ying Chan’s beautiful, dark breasts were drenched with perspiration, the right one crushed and disfigured beneath Keiko’s body, while the left, heaving vigorously, lay voluptuously on her left arm with which she was caressing Keiko’s belly. (319-20)

These cold and distancing notations of a voyeur, one whose passions are self-enclosed and contained within the aesthetics of ritual, reveal how the assumed “objectivity” of a purely descriptive gaze is, in fact, a disfiguration — if not a deadening stare. In this respect, too, the voyeuristic gaze is linked to death: while the only way really to see what the voyeur wants to see would entail his own death as such, the only way to bring his field of vision under the same control as the environment surrounding it would entail the death of the perceived object. It is in accordance with the inner logic of this gaze, then, that Ying Chan reminds Honda of “the fresco at the Ajanta cave temple depicting the dying dancer” (309). Honda’s gaze must compulsively turn the flow of life in the act of love between the two women into stasis. Their

perspiration, their passionate caresses, their flowing hair, and the wild movements of their bodies have to be transformed into frozen images, the still life of the voyeur's closed field of vision. The desire incarcerated in this vision is a desire for the constancy of stable and clearcut objects, for the enclosure of the controllable and the exclusion of otherness. It is, in other words, the desire for the constancy of petrified objects which, as Sartre has emphasized, is inherent to the basic categories of Cartesian epistemology.

Mishima shows how Honda's gaze must assimilate the love-scene and the passion he witnesses to this fear of the uncontrollable flow of life, and, more importantly, the desire of women. In the distorting mirror of voyeuristic vision, the scene of love turns into a male fantasy of struggle and destruction.

When the envisioned summit, that unknown golden limit was manifest, the scene was completely transformed, and Honda could see the two women entangled beneath his gaze only in their suffering and torture. They were battered by the dissatisfaction of the flesh, their gathered brows were filled with pain, and their hot limbs seemed to writhe as though trying to escape from what seared them. They possessed no wings. They continued their futile thrashings to escape from their suffering; and yet their flesh firmly retained them. Only rape could bring release. (319)

Horrified by this spectacle of lesbian desire and sexuality, Honda can only perceive its purely carnal manifestations. Moreover, his perception transforms their sexual act according to his own projections in which their *jouissance* can only appear as "suffering," "torture," "battered by the dissatisfaction of their flesh," "filled with pain," and "trying to escape." The lesbian lovers are, in other words, "firmly retained by their flesh" — frozen in immanence.

But once again we become witness of a curious inversion of the gaze. The narrative leaves no doubt that the scene behind the door is *transformed* by the voyeur's perception. Inadvertently, the spectacle behind the door mirrors the voyeur whose own gaze falls back on him once it is mediated through the narrative. Thus we come to perceive Honda as the one who is caught in the immanence of the others' flesh, while the two women remain curiously "innocent" and untouched by his gaze.

This scene of a visual disfiguration of lesbian desire by a male voyeur is, however, followed by one of double recognition: Ying Chan exposes her side and reveals the three moles which identify

her as a reincarnation of Kiyooki Matsugae. When Honda sees the deeper source of his mystical love confirmed, he is released from the prison of his own gaze: under the forceful destruction of the voyeuristic gaze which the discovery of the moles brings about, a different "seeing" look is born — if only for a fleeting moment. "As if his eyes had been pierced with arrows" (320), the infinitesimal obstruction of the gaze is finally removed and Ying Chan's subjectivity "restored" in a matter of seconds. This transformation, however, still removes her as a subject in a different way, precisely because the restoration of subjectivity is bound to its fusion with another subjectivity: that of his friend Matsugae.

After Honda's discovery of the moles, Ying Chan ceases simply to be the woman whom he desires (or, for that matter, the woman who desires another woman). She merges with the man whom Honda had tacitly desired all his life and is thus transformed into a complex figure of overdetermined homoerotic desire. She now incorporates Honda's desire for Matsugae, the sensitive melancholy youth who "was praised for his extraordinary beauty" (*Spring Snow* 8). Ying Chan's reincarnation of Matsugae suggests that, perhaps unconsciously, Honda's desire for her had already traversed the boundaries of gender. Her subject position is hence marked — for Honda and the reader — as that of a man of feminine beauty and sensitivity, reincarnated as a woman. In this position she ideally combines for Honda the mystery of the feminine (immanence) with the mystery of transmigration (transcendence).

This mystery, however, is destroyed in the act of voyeurism. As a woman who makes love to another woman Ying Chan had become, under Honda's gaze, a figure exposing immanence trapped in carnal desire. As the reincarnation of a man, by contrast, she figures the hope of transcendence. This ambiguity also reveals that, for Honda, Ying Chan becomes a subject *only* as a figure of transcendence. As a woman she remains a figuration of immanence, that is, Other. The temporary presence of Ying Chan as a subject and a figure of transcendence is immediately disrupted by another devastating scene of recognition. Honda's wife Rié taps on his back: "What are you doing? I suspected as much" (320). Honda, the voyeur discovered in his shameful act, now turns into the object of his wife's contemptuous and judgemental gaze. And yet the guilt that one would expect to follow this discovery is effaced by the emotional impact of the discovery of the moles which had transformed the nature of the voyeuristic act itself. Honda, however, turns this discovery into a

second betrayal of Ying Chan by skillfully using it in order to both involve Rié in his voyeurism and veil his carnal desire in an aura of transcendence and mystic connectedness. He invites Rié to peek through the peephole, knowing that her curiosity will out-win her dignity.

The abyss of these multiple refractions of the gaze in connection with the scenes of involuntary recognitions is widened onto a further level: when Honda observes “the demeaning position of his wife” he recognizes himself in her. By way of a negative identification Honda thus becomes the object of a different self-perception. Seeing himself in his wife makes him other to himself. The dynamic of the gaze is carried infinitely further than in Sartre’s key-hole episode: while Honda can still maintain his defenses when discovered by his wife, they break down when he becomes the witness of her demeaning act which mirrors his own. His shame is also the shame of having sunken as low as his wife, whom he holds in contempt. Against Honda’s will, however, their complicity binds them together — even though each of them sees a quite different spectacle. Rié delights in the scandalous spectacle of love between her rival and another woman and is instantly cured from her jealousy, while Honda marvels at the mystery of transmigration and mourns the lost “innocence” of his mystical love — which he nonetheless betrays when he invites his wife to partake in his voyeuristic act.

If the transgression of the voyeur lies in violating the secrecy of sexual intimacy, Honda links the secret of Ying Chan’s and Keiko’s intimacy to a deeper secret that he shares with his wife: the secret of Matsugae’s reincarnations. Rié, however, had already violated this secret long before when she was raking through Honda’s study and read Matsugae’s diary. By exposing Ying Chan to Rié’s gaze under the pretext of sharing with her the discovery of the moles, Honda becomes complicit after the fact in Rié’s earlier violation. He thus betrays both Ying Chan and Matsugae to Rié in order to cover up his own shame. Rié’s and Honda’s complicity in these violations of secrets, however, only reveals the abyss between their different relations to birth and death. Rié, who cannot have children of her own, envied Ying Chan’s presumed fecundity — an envy revealed in her earlier remark to Honda: “With a body like that she ought to have a lot of children” (313). She is cured from her envy and jealousy when she discovers that Ying Chan sleeps with a woman. The complicity between Honda and Rié does not remain restricted to her becoming a “co-conspirator by having been a voyeur too” (322), but is followed by their collectively ostracizing Ying Chan

for her otherness. Despite Honda's condescension toward his wife, he is overcome by a sudden impulse to share her disdain for Ying Chan and Keiko.

Honda felt momentarily how good it would have been if they could have been like so many other couples in the world, if they could flaunt their impeccable moral rectitude like immaculately white aprons across their chests, sit at table three times a day and proudly eat to their satisfaction, if they could assume the right to disdain other things in the world."
(322)

What both Honda and Rié gain from their voyeurism is the shared disdain for otherness, and "what remained now was mutual consolation" (322). By turning Ying Chan into an odious other and thus destroying the mystic ground for Honda's love, Rié has been "cured" and gains the strength to ask Honda about adopting a child. Honda, however, has already transcended to another scale of desire: his sense of death and birth is no longer bound to a woman who gives birth, because he already reaches for immortality through reincarnation. His desire for Ying Chan was bound to the impossible love of a voyeur and is inseparable from the notion of his own death. Voyeurism thus appears as the ultimate antithesis to love.

Discovering Ying Chan with Keiko has destroyed Honda's voyeuristic pleasure. "Death has flown from Honda's heart the moment he had seen Keiko and Ying Chan together" and has made room for the mystery of transmigration: "Now there was reason to believe that he might be immortal" (323). Since he is immortal, his need for children has vanished. Instead of raising children, he will be reborn himself. "'No,' he said with determination, plucking a piece of tobacco from his lip, 'it's better to live by ourselves. I prefer not having any heir'" (323). In this moment, Honda and Rié — in the midst of their complicity of shared secrets and despite Honda's seeing himself as object in Rié — become incompatible others to each other.

The reader may come to feel about all protagonists in this scene what Honda projects onto the two women while he watches them make love: "the fact that every atom of their bodies was still isolated in maddening aloneness. They were feverishly striving to come closer, toward the greater intimacy, to fuse one into the other, but to no avail" (318). This is the deepest tension which Mishima conveys throughout his texts, his lesson about the gaze and otherness: his characters, isolated in maddening aloneness, feverishly striving to come closer, are mirror-effects of a language

which mimics their yearning for a greater intimacy, but at the same time celebrates the indispensable distancing formalities of an aesthetic pleasure which knows the intricacies of the gaze and its intimate connection to language.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre analyzes the gaze and its mediation of otherness as “a fundamental mode of language” (455). According to Sartre, language is already given in the recognition of the Other. In this sense, Mishima’s style and mode of discourse, his figurations of poetic language can also be read as his mode of mediating otherness. Mishima’s precisely calculated spacing of aesthetic distance has the power to masterfully draw the reader in, thus evoking a yearning for greater intimacy similar to the one which his characters indirectly expose.⁴ At the same time, however, he makes one realize that such intimacy may only be obtained by reaching beyond the vicissitudes of a gaze that gives one “the right to disdain other things in the world” (322).

Honda’s epistemology of perception as paradox is thus mirrored in Mishima’s aesthetics of reading as paradox. What one experiences most painfully while reading his texts is what one will never find there. The “absence in presence” paradoxically turns into a “presence in absence.” The very paradox of Mishima’s superimposition of the image of cosmic nihilism on that of the fertile sea generates its own rebirth in the reader — as Other.

This assumption entails interesting ramifications if we ask how a reading of Mishima’s texts differs according to gender or culture. We may assume that a female reader reacts differently from a male reader to the decidedly masculinist if not sexist perspective of most of Mishima’s main characters, as well as to the gendered assumptions about transcendence and immanence. We may equally assume that the reader’s reception of Mishima’s “mingling of East and West” and his depictions of the tension between the old and the new Japan differs according to the cultural background of a specific reader (and her attitude to this culture). What interests me here, however, is the multiplicity of possible readings, a multiplicity which is rooted in the complexity and ambivalence of Mishima’s characters as well as in the poised ambivalence of the text itself. Rather than simply criticizing Mishima for the beliefs and ideologies of his characters, I have chosen to pursue a reading which emphasizes their ambivalence as part of a general textual ambivalence. This method of reading ultimately determines how one evaluates the gender

politics of this text as well the status one gives to Mishima's reflections on transcendence and immanence.

While at a general philosophical level the polarity between cosmic nihilism and the fertile sea recalls Western and Eastern traditions of masculine transcendence and feminine immanence, Mishima also links this model more specifically to the historical equation of the feminine with immanence in Japanese thought in the early twentieth century (see Jackson 7). And yet, as we have seen, the peephole episode in *The Temple of Dawn* inadvertently challenges Mishima's model of male transcendence. The sexual politics implicit in its dramatization of gender not only performs a gendered intertextual response to the existential nihilism of Sartre's keyhole episode, but also threatens to undermine Mishima's own cosmic nihilism from within. It may be true that, on one level, Honda embodies masculine transcendence, while Rié embodies feminine immanence. But this perspective is revealed as a deeply ideological one. At the level of dramatic action, Honda is caught in a humiliating act of voyeurism, a discovery which leads him, moreover, to resign himself to a bondage of complicity with his wife. On the practical level of his quotidian life with Rié, his attempted withdrawal from the world into cosmic transcendence is reduced to nothing more but the shared disdain of "other things in the world." His complicity with Rié thus betrays his own Buddhist philosophy of cosmic transcendence.

But the scene also reveals how Honda's hope of cosmic transcendence is contaminated by the intricate series of his betrayals. In his act of voyeurism he betrays both the mystery of his homoerotic bond to his friend Matsugae and his mystical love to the "Other," the Thai woman. To become obvious, this betrayal needed the "third person," Rié, who exposes the dynamic of the voyeur's gaze to Honda as well as the reader at the very moment in which she partakes in it. At a philosophical level, Honda's double betrayal also entails a double betrayal of the feminine: caught in the immanence of his voyeurism, Honda violently rejects his own alignment with the feminine. He destroys his desire for Ying Chan and, by giving away the secret of Matsugae's reincarnation, betrays the friend who, during his life, embodied the eroticism of the feminine male and who, after his death, is reincarnated in the exotic female.

Mishima's narrative enacts this destruction of the feminine in the final scene which figures Ying Chan's death. Bitten by a cobra, Ying Chan dies because she is ignorant of the *Sutra of the Peacock Wisdom King* which Honda knows: "If you are bitten by a

snake, all you have to do is chant this spell: *ma yu kitsu ra tei sha ka*" (294). The very last sentences of *The Temple of Dawn* speak of Ying Chan's final convulsions which uncannily recall her convulsions during the act of making love to Keiko. But, as we recall, this first scene of a convulsive love was an effect of the voyeuristic gaze of Honda, for whom desire is intricately linked to death — "How alike were the voices of pleasure and death!" (315) — and who had envisioned Ying Chan as a "dying dancer."

If we recall that classical Japanese literature was configured as feminine (see Jackson 7) and the feminine was equated with immanence in Japanese thought in the early twentieth century, then Honda's cosmic nihilism might appear as a recourse to a philosophical system used defensively in an attempt to suppress the feminine in Japanese culture. Earl Jackson, Jr. argues that Mishima's model of male transcendence must be understood in the context of his role in the re-masculinization of Japanese culture through selective internalization of Western attitudes toward the Other (7).

The intertextual game of mirrors, which reflects Mishima's peephole episode in its Sartrean model, however, exposes this attempted suppression or sublimation of the feminine and invites the reader to read the text against the grain of Honda's "masculinist" ideology of its male characters in order to discover its cultural and political unconscious. One aspect in particular complicates Honda's denigration of feminine immanence, namely the transgression of gender boundaries in both the love-scene between the two women and the game of reincarnation. To be sure, when Honda falls in love with Ying Chan he, on one level, desires a woman. But the recognition of the moles and the discovery that she is a reincarnation of Matsugae inserts a shift in this desire and reveals that, at a deeper level, Honda desires in Ying Chan a man. The latter remains a forbidden desire which can be lived only in the sublimated form of an imagined transcendence. Inadvertently, however, the intricacies of this desire and its relation to the game of reincarnation challenge the deceptive conceptual purity and simplicity of a binary opposition between masculine transcendence and feminine immanence.

Notes

¹ The fact that Kafka's sinister fictional world best evokes the atmosphere which grounds Sartre's phenomenology of the gaze reflects how deeply Sartre's model is embedded in the historical context of fascism

in Europe and in a cultural perspective of otherness for which the Jew has become the paradigmatic figure. (*L'Être et le Néant* was published in 1943.) But this context also invites one to question the status of a model which totalizes the persecuting and destructive Other (whose tacit agent is the fascist), a model which subsequently constitutes the basis of an ontology of the gaze with universalist claims. Does this move not end with the consequence that the model inadvertently encrypts the "fascist Other"?

² Sartre's existentialism in *Being and Nothingness* is one of the most striking examples of a tradition of Western theories of otherness based on a deeply rooted cultural paranoia. Sartre does not deem it problematic to construct his theory of the gaze — which, in turn, becomes the basis of his theory of otherness as well as his theory of language — after the model of a gaze involved in an act of *voyeurism*, or, more concretely, the judgmental gaze of a third person on a voyeur who is peeping through a keyhole. The paranoia which governs Sartre's theoretical model of otherness, of course, finds a most fertile ground in the cultural conditions of the time and provides powerful tools to describe the destructive patterns of relating to cultural otherness which prevail in our century. Sartre also writes from within a larger tradition which shares this cultural paranoia. Apart from the fact that Sartre universalizes his model by conceptually eclipsing questions of gender or racial and cultural otherness, he creates a structural problem when, instead of describing specific historical structures, he ontologizes his premises.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the widely shared critique of these obvious theoretical and conceptual problems has rendered Sartre's theory defunct. Although it is true that Sartre has long been removed from the mainstream of the discussion in philosophy and critical theory, the impact of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* on theories of otherness and its dissemination of cultural paranoia can hardly be underestimated. Despite the widespread dismissal of Sartre's phenomenological ontology, the conceptual model of a persecuting, objectifying, and annihilating gaze is retained to this very day by many theories and philosophies as the framework which describes the relationship between self and other, as well as the patterns of relating to cultural otherness. And while most contemporary theories are highly critical of Sartre's existential nihilism — which incidentally provides a perfect conceptual ground for his deeply rooted sexism — many of these theories have inherited not only basic features of his structural model but also his cultural paranoia.

Lacan's theory of the gaze, for one, is deeply affected by Sartre's phenomenology of the gaze which — as he asserts in "The Object Relation and the Intersubjective Relation" — he finds "irrefutable" (*Seminaire* 216). Mediated through Simone de Beauvoir's feminist reevaluation of *Being and Nothingness* in *The Second Sex* and enforced by the intense Lacan-reception among feminists, Sartre's theory also continues indirectly to inform the discussion in feminism — often by

-serving as a negative model, which nonetheless governs the terms of the debate or the structure of theoretical models. I see Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" as an example of such a mediated reception which has enforced a decisive trend of cultural paranoia within film theory.

³ As Mishima tells his readers by way of Honda's theoretical reflections, Yuishiki, or "*consciousness only*," developed as a school in response to Buddhism's rejection of the idea of an innate essence in all creation. This rejection which implied the rejection of the idea of soul, *atman*, introduced deep contradictions and inconsistencies into Buddhism concerning the question of transmigration since Buddhism inherited the idea of *karma* but denied the existence of a transmigrating substance. (Regarding the historical development of the Yuishiki School see *Temple* 23, 119.) The Yuishiki school overcame this contradiction by adopting the concept of "seed perfuming" from the Theravada Sautrantika school according to which "the effect of a good or bad deed remains in one's consciousness, permeating it as the fragrance of perfume permeates clothes" (24). Using this notion, the Yuishiki school established a seventh sense, *manas*, which complements the ordinary six senses and applies to all mental powers that perceive self and individual identity. These seven senses are, in turn, integrated into "the ultimate consciousness" — *alaya* — which "stores away all 'seeds' of the phenomenal world" (119-20).

⁴ The possibility and the extent of this yearning depends, of course, on the individual readers' own attitudes toward or capability for intimacy. In this respect, we may assume that there are important cultural and gender differences in the reception of Mishima's text.

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