

Loquacity of the Body and its Singular Poetics in Yukio Mishima's Taiyō to Tetsu (Sun and Steel)*

Malvika Jayakumar

Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India

E-mail: malvikajayakumar@gmail.com

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Abstract

The body is often the receptacle for formulaic modes of literary criticism, whether as a template for political concepts like the Nation or as a physical reflection of inner turmoil or class struggle. This predictable modus operandi of literary criticism in viewing the body leaves limited space for exploring the material experiences of the body. The Cartesian mind-body binary in representing the body relegates the body to an inferior status. Japanese author Yukio Mishima rejects this conventional treatment of the body in his autobiographical essay *Taiyō to Tetsu* (1990), as he creates an aesthetic theory premised on the material body and syncretises body and spirit in his quest for perfection. While Mishima's reputation is marred by his sadistic "...perversions and quasi-fascistic politics...especially after he committed ritual suicide," this article, through a reading of his essay, strives to explore the postcritical turn in Mishima's understanding of the body. Even while eliciting polarising reactions to his works and life, Mishima's views on the material body strongly indicate a unique critical tradition (Piven, 2001, p. 771). Reading Mishima from this lens leads to complex questions about the role of the critic in unearthing fresh grounds for analysis and the possibility for gleaning unique ideas from the text.

Keywords: Postcritique; Mishima; Body

Introduction

Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* employs the term 'critique' to indicate the systematic study of human cognition. Published in 1781, when Enlightenment rationality was giving way to Romantic ideals and traditional morality, *Critique of Pure Reason* critiqued "...reason by reason itself," to showcase that Newtonian science, traditional morality and religion are mutually consistent (Rohlf). It is to address this crisis of the empiricist epistemology associated with Enlightenment that Kant projects 'metaphysics' as the bedrock of human cognition. He defines metaphysics as "...the principles...[transcending] all

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the limits of experience and therefore [withdrawing] themselves from all experimental tests” (p. xviii). Kant’s disavowal of experiential knowledge suggests the presence of a priori knowledge in the process of cognition.

Kant also discusses the concept of ‘transcendental idealism,’ according to which it is impossible to perceive objects in their internal purity, as only their appearances get cognized through individual sensibilities of space and time, thereby laying the groundwork for ‘transcendental aesthetics.’ Since space-time perception is rooted in internal intuition/sensibilities, and precedes the cognition of external knowledge, Kant’s arguments suggest that a priori knowledge is inevitably structured through one’s sensibilities. His propositions contributed to a recognition of the failure of experiential knowledge in perceiving reality, which offered the philosophical rationale for Romanticism. Despite an evident transition from empiricism, and highlighting the limitations of romanticism, the internal structures of both Enlightenment and Romantic modes of criticism remained essentially cerebral. The presence of the corporeal body in the changing modes of criticism finds little to no mention in the dominant theories of western philosophy.

Kant’s philosophy can be understood as a critique of ‘critique,’ since he expresses the inability of existing patterns of critique to grasp the reality of objects. His idea of critique, in turn, offers a logical explanation for the imposition of one’s biases while attempting to interpret reality, something which literary criticism is often censured for. Kant’s ideas, it could be argued, not only project the image of philosophy as an esoteric preserve, but also establish the very supremacy of the mind which Enlightenment rationalism so consummately practised. The reductive of Kantian philosophy become apparent from Jacques Derrida’s argument in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1988) that western logos has always occupied the hegemonic centre of the structure of metaphysics. Here, postcritical inquiry enables the deconstruction of this hegemonic centre through deflections from ossified modes of criticism. One form of deflection may be to discover other epistemic traditions which challenge the uniform, Eurocentric tilt of philosophy.

While the community centric ‘I’ of Eastern philosophy is conventionally pitted against the individualistic Western ‘I,’ the “...critique’s methodologies and commitments [still] betray a Eurocentric bias,” especially in the critical treatment of the body (Anker and Felski, 2017, p. 13). That is, despite the vastly different idioms regarding the ‘self’ in Eastern and Western philosophies, both these schools reflect a western bias in their effacement of the material body. For instance, the Advaita Vedanta of Indian philosophy, though radically different from the rhetorical idiom employed by Western philosophy, also effaces the material body through concepts like ‘ātman’ and ‘brahman.’ Advaita Vedanta combines religious/yogic practices with its theory, yet it is still aimed at moksha (salvation) from the material confines of the body. Hence, contrary to popular belief, the Western rationalism of the mind is not necessarily contrasted by the Eastern spiritualism of the body. Rather, irrespective of the entirely different rhetorical modes employed by the Western and Eastern philosophies, they end up denigrating the material body. Another approach is to study the State’s control

over body's form and functions, which is critical for numerous fields like queer studies, sexuality studies, disability studies and so on.

While drawing conversations around the body, these aforementioned approaches still treat the body as a blank template for the State to reflect its ideas. The body's material impulses are barely acknowledged within the critical field. In this context, Japanese author Yukio Mishima's works appear to reject a clear hierarchy between the mind and body. Even though his construction of the universal, heroic body has been conventionally viewed as being circumscribed by the traditional samurai code of patriotism yoked to an abstract 'collective self,' for Mishima, the depths "...are shallow, commonplace" (Taiyō to Tetsu, 1990, p. 63). Therefore, he gives primacy to the outlying edges of the body and captures the very ontological complexities of the postcritical subject. Within his oeuvre, one text that explicitly deals with the impulses of the material body by conflating action and thought is the essay, *Taiyō to Tetsu* which would be the primary focus of this article in its study of a fresh critical approach towards the body by Mishima.

Revival of the Body in *Taiyō to Tetsu*

In *Taiyō to Tetsu* Mishima underlines the need to develop a language of the body, since as far as he can remember, he has the earliest memory of his words and almost none of his body. The author observes that compared to the average individual, his "...memory of words reaches back far farther than [his] memory of the flesh" (p. 1). Despite decrying the secondary status of the body in contemporary intellectual tradition, Mishima acknowledges the impossibility of isolating the body from the spirit. Instead, he attempts to conflate thought and action in order to augment the poetic qualities of the body and achieves a harmonization of the mind and body in his theory. In *Cinematic Nihilism* (2017), scholar John Marmysz mentions the finitude of Mishima's body when he underscores the "hopelessly strained relationship between the real and the ideal" which is "[r]eminiscent of Plato's claim that the physical world is simultaneously a conduit as well as an impediment to the attainment of the highest ideals" (p. 184). In other words, the body helps in the attainment of perfection, but to uphold the absolute, the body must be separated/eliminated. *Taiyō to Tetsu*, though, focuses more on the process of attaining perfection, as a result, achieving greater synthesis between mind and body than Mishima's other works.

As per Mishima, while the average individual is an outsider to quintessential intellectual endeavors, the poetic qualities of the body obfuscate the dichotomy between the intellectual and the non-intellectual. The author emphasizes this point by including quotidian experiences into the intellectual tradition. The poetic qualities of the body become evident in the essay when Mishima evocatively describes the intoxicated gaze of men carrying portable deities to the shrine. After participating in it himself, he compares the act to poetic inspiration. He explains that the sharing of physical burden evokes thoughts resembling poetic inspiration, and that are fragments of a community rather than being individualistic,

provided certain physical conditions are equal and a certain physical burden shared, so long as an equal physical stress is savored and an identical intoxication overtakes all alike, then differences of individual sensibility are restricted by countless factors to an absolute minimum....what I had witnessed was no individual illusion, but one fragment of a well-defined group vision. (p. 6)

Mishima underlines the need for bodily harmony by regarding markers of ugliness like corpulence or malnourishment as signs of narcissism. His literary concerns, as a result, are not only about training the mind but equally as much the body. While such examples of rejecting physical diversity may be equated with his ultra-nationalist politics and are by no means socially unproblematic, his arguments inevitably outline the loquacity of the body, often glossed over for the intellectual world of words.

Through the case of the powerful impact of the sun on the body, both beautifying and changing the body's physical form or color, Mishima conceptualizes an ideal 'intellectual' whose ideas are not merely ensconced in the abstract world of words. The author lays out a philosophy premised on carrying his ideas to the greatest extremes so much so that the body itself becomes symptomatic of such ideas, thereby upholding the body's loquacity. For Mishima, hence, the description of rippling muscles is an indicator of the balance between mind and body. His view of the body can be read as a critique of the conventional propensities of academia.

Mishima's other works also offer glimpses of his ideas about the body, namely, his novel *Gogo no eiko* (1963), wherein he is disappointed by the loss of the ideal image of action in a new postwar reality. Mishima depicts this view through the figure of Ryuji, the sailor, who has lost touch with the sea after meeting the protagonist's mother, ultimately prompting the protagonist and his nihilistic gang members to plan his murder and dismemberment in order to regain the sailor's absolute perfection. In fact, Jerry Piven in "Phallic Narcissism, Anal Sadism, and Oral Discord: The Case of Yukio Mishima, Part I" (2001) avers that

Mishima consistently uses similar characters and conflicts in his fiction, often centering around the obsession with death, tragic love, erotic violence, and a solipsistic absorption in perverse and narcissistic fantasies. While enacting these themes, the characters inevitably construct an image of the aesthetic lyrical aspects that Mishima himself struggled to manifest: vitality, beauty and delicacy. The protagonists of his novels are surrogates for himself, his ideas, and his aesthetics. (p. 771-72)

To this end, another work echoing such themes, especially where the author's literary interests become palpable through the characters' treatment of their bodies is the short story "*Yūkoku*" (1995). Inspired by real life events, this story depicts a newly married lieutenant of the Japanese Imperial Army who disembowels himself due to being torn between his duty and loyalty towards his friends turned mutineers. Following suit, his young wife Reiko, having been schooled in her husband's spiritual and moral philosophies, stands witness to his

agonizing death and kills herself afterwards by stabbing her throat. Despite documenting the lieutenant's suicide with excruciating details, the story initially presents the young couple with a porcelain like quality, thereby identifying ephemeral beauty with self-annihilation. Their fragile beauty is made evident in the story through the description of the couple in a photograph. The lieutenant is described as majestic in his military uniform, bearing a severe expression and reflecting "...the clear integrity of youth," whereas the bride is slender and delicate "...like the bud of the moonflower" (p. 94). The photograph provides an effective juxtaposition between perfection and fragility, as after their suicide this photograph is picked up by people to reflect on the "...curse on these seemingly flawless unions" (p. 94).

Even more alarming is the placidity of the couple in spite of their imminent suicides. Both of them go about their daily chores, even experiencing an exceptional sense of clarity and happiness in their businesses as the author notes that the couple "[w]ith happiness almost too abundantly in their hearts...could not help smiling at each other. Reiko felt as if she had returned to her wedding night" (p. 100). In this manner not only does Mishima associate death with a greater sense of clarity and insight, but also a heightened sense of eroticism as he constantly invokes the metaphor of the wedding night in the story culminating in the couple's frenzied love making just before their suicides. It is at this point of total freedom that the lieutenant and his wife feel that "...the object of their bodily desire [is] death itself" (p. 103). This fusion of death and eroticism is another major theme in Mishima's oeuvre which is elucidated by Piven as a "[r]evenge taken upon vulnerability and erotic merger by killing the helplessly ejaculating subject, and further, vulnerability, impotence, and weakness are destroyed by killing the ejaculating subject before the orgasm detumesces flaccidly and messily" (p. 787).

Using sexual degradation as an analogy, Piven argues that Mishima expresses his abhorrence for the image of the decaying intellectual. This notion is evident even in *Taiyō to Tetsu* when the author comments that death gives dignity to flesh with the example of a matador whose actions seem ridiculous if not for the prospect of death. Even sculptors capture human form at its finest (with muscles) for beyond that is decline and death (p. 26). Similarly, Mishima conceives of death as an honorable escape from the deleterious impacts of decay on an intellectual. Once again it is the treatment of the body which becomes a marker of intellect instead of just the mind, as textually illustrated by both *Taiyō to Tetsu* and "*Yūkoku*." Through his body the lieutenant, in "*Yūkoku*," physically embodies all of his spiritual and moral ideals at one instant and goes out in a heroic blaze. His mind and body fuse at the moment of his death fulfilling the beautiful and heroic Greek death that Mishima himself aspired for in his life. The body, in this instance, transforms into a register for the lieutenant's protest against following orders to turn against his mutineer friends, even though his method of disembowelment is shackled to tradition.ⁱ

Traces of the split consciousness represented by the lieutenant, while comprehensively explored by Mishima, are present in the works of several early 20th century Japanese authors and could be considered symptomatic of the impacts of the Meiji era and onwards.ⁱⁱ Scholar Yoshikuni Igarashi in *Bodies of*

Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970 (2000) notes that in the late 1960s Japanese “society that was eager to leave the memories of war behind,” authors like Mishima “struggled to articulate the meaning of Japan’s loss in 1945 through bodily images” (p. 16). Igarashi explains that “[t]he body for them returns as a locus of conflicting desires: a nostalgia for and a simultaneous repudiation of the past,” wherein the bodies envisaged by these authors “were caught between these contradictory desires and oscillated between the past and the present, repeating that which they simultaneously yearned for and dreaded—their bodily memories of the past” (p. 16-17).ⁱⁱⁱ

Based on Igarashi’s observations, the lieutenant’s brutal decision in “*Yūkoku*” positions him in a liminal space where his body is both protesting yet following traditions, a position which could be read as a reflection of the author’s existential crisis due to the postwar banality of the Japanese society. Mishima, regardless of worshipping the mind, renders the body as an equally complex site. The uniqueness of Mishima’s theory is especially true of his inclusion of the quotidian like the Lieutenant and Reiko bothering with the domestic chores despite their decision to kill themselves, or the struggles of the men carrying the deity for poetic inspiration in *Taiyō to Tetsu*.

The lieutenant and Reiko’s actions might seem similar to Wordsworth’s idea of organic feelings in close communion with nature as theorized in the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1909). But, a direct import of this western brand of criticism would prove reductive and problematic due to Mishima’s criticism being rooted to the samurai code of *Bushido*.^{iv} Not only does Mishima’s association with the samurai code universalizes his vision of the body, but, by including quotidian activities, Mishima also obfuscates the distinctions between the peasantry and the samurai class. As a result, after dabbling with the world of words, when Mishima turns to the labors of the deity bearers in *Taiyō to Tetsu*, it is not merely to ennoble his soul through Wordsworthian aesthetics, but to make up for the physical endeavors he had missed out on up till that point.

Another example of Mishima’s urge to blend critique with physical exertions in *Taiyō to Tetsu* is when he enlists steel equipment for his physical transformation and claims that the pain and shortness of breath during his physical exertions help in erasing imagination. Such instances in the text, while justifiably read as displaying the author’s autocratic tendencies of curbing free thought, could be also construed as an attempt to apply thought to action. Mishima’s postulation on the duality of art and action, in French philosopher Bruno Latour’s words, aids in collapsing the “...two cultures divide” (Anker and Felski, p. 22).

Latour’s two cultures divide refers to the split between the humanities and sciences imposed by humanists and the failure to recognize what the humanities could gain from the sciences. This phrase has been invoked by Anker and Felski in their text *Critique and Postcritique* (2017) to collapse a similar distinction between what is accepted as ‘critique’ and what is naturalized and taken for granted. Anker and Felski argue that “[l]iterary studies, in short, needs new dispositions that can take us not beyond “critique,” but beyond critiquiness” (p. 24). In this case, Mishima’s fresh perspective on the material body achieves

the effect of presenting a new mode of critique that seeks to collapse the boundaries between art and action, the theoretical and the quotidian.

Mishima's self-awareness through the Body

As a corollary to the discussion on the enforced duality between art and action and, in turn, between mind and body, Mishima steers his arguments towards a meditation on death as it appears and death as it is experienced. In order to undercut the conventional ways of seeing, the author offers an analogy of an apple to consider "...the antinomy between seeing and existing," especially when it comes to "...the form of things" (p. 45). According to him, in an apple self-awareness based on words implies seeing right through the skin into the flesh that dilutes the sense of the exterior. On the other hand, a self-awareness based on form means encountering the red, glossy skin of the apple and not a transparent core like the former mode of self-awareness. Mishima further elaborates

at the heart of that apple, shut up within the flesh of the fruit, the core lurks in its wan darkness, tremblingly anxious to find some way to reassure itself that it is a perfect apple. The apple certainly exists, but to the core this existence as yet seems inadequate; if words cannot endorse it, then the only way to endorse it is with the eyes. Indeed, for the core the only sure mode of existence is to exist and to see at the same time. There is only one method of solving this contradiction. It is for a knife to plunge deep into the apple so that it is split open and the core is exposed to the light—to the same light, that is, as the surface skin. Yet then the existence of the cut apple falls into fragments; the core of the apple sacrifices existence for the sake of seeing. (p. 45)

The realization of fragmentation, for Mishima, is representative of death filling the void between simply seeing and seeing with self-awareness. Since words are employed to fill the eternal waiting room of life, it becomes imperative for Mishima to augment his self-awareness through his physical transformation and reach a peak before declining into death. In this manner, by deeming all physical actions as oriented towards death, he strives to recuperate the centrality of a material existence.

The conflation of art and action, style and ethos of action does not merely indicate a romanticization of death. Rather, the author discusses art and action as resisting death. For him death is more real in action, and employs the falsehood of art to serve its reality. For instance, honor and fame through death are eulogized in epic poems. Hence, while art serves falsehoods in its own fictive world, physical training has helped Mishima unlock the mysteries of life, as now he knows how to deal with the enforced dualities of existence and also live with the awareness of the imminence of death. In other words, death is treated as disciplining factor for the body. Moreover, beginning from the age of seventeen onwards, the author wanted to leave a personal monument eliciting heady, intoxicated emotions. But post World War II, as was the case with the Japanese society in general, his urge for an absolute monument dampened. It is

through this essay that Mishima outlines the philosophical rationale to recuperate that old feeling of youthful intoxication through physical training.

Given that his preoccupation with physical training and ritual suicide is traditionally yoked to the morbid urges of the *bushido* code, Mishima's arguments are often used to establish eastern philosophy as diametrically opposed to western philosophy. But, G. Cameron Hurst III in "Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidō Ideal" (1990) depicts this notion of a samurai ideal as a predominantly Tokugawa^v and Meiji era jingoistic construction, which does not having too many cultural precedents.^{vi} He notes that "...bushido...emphasized unflinching loyalty to the emperor, even to the point of willingly sacrificing one's life, by suicide if necessary" (p. 511).^{vii} Despite this emphasis on suicide having gained currency in the popular perceptions towards Japanese philosophy, it is a fairly recent development concretized by the likes of Nitobe Inazo.^{viii} This conception of *bushido* as an age-old precept could be gauged from the major objection to Inazo's text *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*,

that to imagine that there was a normative system of ethical thought, a "code" of behavior that was first universal among the samurai and then in fact became the "soul" of all Japanese citizens, and that this body of ethical thought was called bushido, whose tenets could be recited as readily as the Ten Commandments, or the Boy Scout Motto, is simply inaccurate. (Hurst III, p. 513)

The image of the faithful samurai who kills himself after his master dies as a symbol of the unity of honor and mortality (or mind and body), hence, invokes Mishima's apple analogy of achieving self-awareness at the moment of fragmentation. This anxiety to unite mind and body in the criticisms of Inazo and Mishima is often read as reactionary responses to the influx of the overwhelmingly cerebral western philosophy into Japanese society. As Hurst III's arguments suggest, there was no systematic study of the body as a valid ground for criticism in the Japanese society either. Rather, these conscious attempts to distance oneself from the western 'other' correspond to the Meiji self's conflicts with western individualism and its efforts to project Japanese development as distinct from western industrialization (McKinney, 2010, p. 1-7).^{ix}

Having established the distinctness of Mishima's mode of criticism from western modes and the relative contemporariness of his arguments, it is also important to discuss his treatment of the body in service of his political ideology. This approach invokes Hannah Arendt's text, *The Human Condition* (1958), which discusses an active life by distinguishing *vita activa* (active life) from *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), though it calls for a very different application of action than Mishima. Despite sharing many similarities like realizing the human potential for action, both Arendt and Mishima differ in the sense that the former talks about labor, work and action in terms of "...practical politics," or as "setting for politics," while the latter tries to combine aesthetics and politics to underscore a mode of life experienced through the body (Canovan, 1998, p. ix).^x

Both Mishima and Arendt cite the Greeks to discuss active life. While Arendt discusses the combination of *praxis* (action) and *lexis* (speech) in the

Greek public sphere to legitimize the use of power, Mishima tightly secures the material body to focus on the aesthetics of his political ideology and devises a mode to train his body. On the one hand Arendt only underscores the vibrant Greek public sphere as a political statement, Mishima on the other hand calls for reviving the dead language of action through bodily transformation into the classical Greek ideal. Moreover, the Greek urge for a beautiful death and fame could be emulated, as per Mishima, through the intense training undergone by him. It could be proposed that Mishima's postulation on the classical body reveals a mode of life which projects his imperialist ideology.

Mishima's ideology can be explained through the 'empire organ theory' elaborated by Noguchi Takehiko and Teruko Craig in "Mishima Yukio and Kita Ikki: The Aesthetics and Politics of Ultrnationalism in Japan" (1984).^{xi} They outline the empire organ theory as according a divine status to the emperor based on a legal document like the Constitution. Takehiko and Craig also assert that Mishima rejects this organ theory in his writing, since it curtails the emperor's powers by understanding it as an organ to a larger framework like the Constitution instead of rendering the imperial position as politically unaccountable. They explain this opposition as having more to do with the creation of specific aesthetics that balance mind and body instead of any political disagreements with the organ theory. In Mishima's case, Takehiko and Craig's critique of the empire organ theory could be observed in the way he sense trains his body not to achieve a certain ideal but to achieve a balance between the corporeal world and the intellectual world. The aim here is not to completely overrule theory, but rather, to pare it down, since Mishima himself acknowledges in *Taiyō to Tetsu* the inability to entirely disassociate himself from the world of words.

Mishima's position might be even indicative of ascribing to the emperor the qualities of the sun. This analogy guides the corporeal reorientation of the subject from a fragmented focus on multiple legislations in a Republic to a single-minded drive to protect the person of an ultimate individual. Not only does such a notion augments Mishima's political ideology, but also helps to resolve the contradictions in his ideology as laid out by Dick Wagenaar and Yoshio Iwamoto in "Yukio Mishima: Dialectics of Mind and Body" (1975):

With the distinction between form and content generally acknowledged to be artificial, the use of it as a basis for criticism of Mishima must seem highly suspect. But not in every type of literary expression does the "how" absolutely determine our sense of the "what." Mishima himself was fond of the distinction. For just as the ideal male for him was a classically proportioned physique enclosing an active mind in harmony with it, so a work of art was, ideally, a classically proportioned form containing a richly emotional and vibrantly intellectual content. But where nature may succeed, art sometimes falters. In the give-and-take between form and formlessness, in whose process Mishima felt to reside the central impulse behind his aesthetics, one or the other may gain the upper hand, seriously compromising the finished work. (p. 55)

Evident from the above arguments, hence, is an obfuscation of the boundaries between form and content through Mishima's aesthetics which fuse together the how and what of the text. Since the content of his criticisms also entails outlining a specific mode of being to achieve his goals, *Taiyō to Tetsu* ends up merging the author's aesthetics and political ideology.

Conclusion

Mishima's novel mode of criticism which gives primacy to the body is reminiscent of Anker and Felski's attempts to unearth "...fresh ways of interpreting literary and cultural texts that acknowledges, nonetheless, its inevitable dependency on the very practices it is questioning," apparent from Mishima's own acceptance of his inability to entirely dislocate his arguments from the intellectual world of words (p. 1). This notion, in turn, introduces Latour's dismissal of the conventional mode of straitjacketing discourses into watertight categories, especially that into scientific and unscientific in "Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004).^{xii}

Latour's criticism of the unquestioning consumption of the 'matters of fact' behind the creation of several discourses underscores the need to question the preexisting baggage regarding certain discourses, in Mishima's case, the popular perceptions towards ultranationalist, right wing criticism. In other words, taking into account Anker, Felski and Latour's calls for a fresh mode of criticism, it appears that simply reading Mishima as an ultranationalist imperialist might prove reductive. While one may note that the control he tries to exert over his body reflects his own autocratic values, one should also pay attention to how the inclusion of the material body in Mishima's philosophical discussions challenges the accepted contours of criticism.

Theorizing on the area of 'personal criticism,' Jane Gallop remarks about the personal being a given within criticism and scholarship being replete with personal narratives (Anderson, 2001, p. 122).^{xiii} As a result, "...[w]hat is at stake is who speaks or rather who is authorized to speak," which, in turn, demonstrates the impossibility of separating Mishima's arguments from his political position (Anderson, p. 123). Yet, this conception also seems to hamper the postcritical turn to reinvigorate saturated approaches. It also begs the question whether it is possible to gauge the original intent of the work without being influenced by the interpretations piled over it over a substantive period. Since the interpretations of the work have continued to be produced and the work itself garners appeal to one section or the other, it becomes equally important to study the functioning of even those discourses dismissed as problematic. Here, the critic's role might be of an informed retrospection with a pinch of salt, and the aim being to find ways to bridge the chasm between theory and practice.

For instance, while studying the implications of the lieutenant's decision to disembowel himself in Mishima's "*Yūkoku*," one must also be aware that the very freedom experienced by the lieutenant at the point of death, in his wife Reiko's case, appears more like a conjugal fidelity that is expected of her and to which she readily complies. Even his quest for bodily uniformity in *Taiyō to Tetsu* and the notion of death giving dignity to flesh offers grounds for

subjugating individual subjectivity to calls for sacrificing the body to uphold the abstract notions of a Nation. Yet, when Mishima details his several rebirths through physical training and the inadequacy of words in gauging self-awareness, he distances himself more and more from the theoretical clutches of traditional literary criticism to explore a more proactive option.

In the process he even seems to introduce critical attitudes premised on physicality towards love as theorized by Piven in “Narcissistic Revenge and Suicide: The Case of Yukio Mishima, Part II” (2002).^{xiv} According to Piven, Mishima views “...the unintellectual relationship as pure, sensual [and one that is] devoid of artifice and unsusceptible to the disappointment inevitably resulting from knowing [one’s] lover” (p. 51). This notion is further explained through Mishima’s own comment that traces of any intellectualism would compel him to make value judgments, ultimately tarnishing his image of an ideal relationship.

As a result, romantic relationships in his works tend to prioritise physicality over emotions. It also ends up demonizing female characters violating the feminine ideal as their control over the male is perceived as inhibiting action and spontaneity (Piven, Part I, p. 776). For instance, the protagonist’s mother, Fusako, in *Gogo no eiko*, is an independent woman who owns a haute couture store. Yet, Fusako is represented as a specimen of the materialistic world who poses an obstacle to Ryuji from realizing his greatness at sea. Despite playing a pivotal role in the developments of the novel, and reflecting on the incursion of western values into the traditional Japanese society, Fusako’s character is barely developed in the novel, especially in comparison to the protagonist and the sailor. Fusako, it seems, simply exists to cause problems for the sailor and to tie him to the materialistic world.

Such conceptions of femininity again indicate how Mishima strives to eschew words in the construction of the ideal, that is, his brand of ideal love and femininity exist in silent physicality. Similarly, in *Taiyō to Tetsu* he blames words for disrupting the present continuous tense of life. He humbly accepts the eventual effacement wrought by death and strives to spend his life in preparation of that eventuality. Yet, it goes without saying that a historicist reading of Mishima lays bare an incontrovertibly misogynistic and fascistic propaganda in support of imperialism. But even his most untenable opinions rather than being plainly spelled out in discourse require an analysis of the characters’ unique relationships with their bodies. In that regard, Mishima’s *Taiyō to Tetsu*, it might be argued, offers a well oiled machinery for a critical literature with the material body at the center.

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Highlight

This article studies how author Yukio Mishima centres the corporeal body over intellectual abstractions in his works. The body is essential to his aesthetic theory which has been analysed through a postcritical lens. The article attempts to demonstrate a fresher mode of criticism encapsulated in lived experiences of the body.