

YUKIO MISHIMA

trans. John Bester

Of late, I have come to sense within myself an accumulation of all kinds of things that cannot find adequate expression via an objective artistic form such as the novel. A lyric poet of twenty might manage it, but I am twenty no longer, and have never been a poet at any rate. I have groped around, therefore, for some other form more suited to such personal utterances and have come up with a kind of hybrid between confession and criticism, a subtly equivocal mode that one might call "confidential criticism."

I see it as a twilight genre between the night of confession and the daylight of criticism. The "I" with which I shall occupy myself will not be the "I" that relates back strictly to myself, but something else, some residue, that remains after all the other words I have uttered have flowed back into me, something that neither relates back nor flows back.

As I pondered the nature of that "I," I was driven to the conclusion that the "I" in question corresponded precisely with the physical space that I occupied. What I was seeking, in short, was a language of the body.

If my self was my dwelling, then my body resembled an orchard that surrounded it. I could either cultivate that orchard to its capacity or leave it for the weeds to run riot in. I was free to choose, but the freedom was not as obvious as it might seem. Many people, indeed, go so far as to refer to the orchards of their dwellings as "destiny."

One day, it occurred to me to set about cultivating my orchard for all I was worth. For my purpose, I used sun and steel. Unceasing sunlight and implements fashioned of steel became the chief elements in my husbandry. Little by little, the orchard began

to bear fruit, and thoughts of the body came to occupy a large part of my consciousness.

All this did not occur, of course, overnight. Nor did it begin without the existence of some deep-lying motive. When I examine closely my early childhood, I realize that my memory of words reaches back far farther than my memory of the flesh. In the average person, I imagine, the body precedes language. In my case, words came first of all; then—belatedly, with every appearance of extreme reluctance, and already clothed in concepts—came the flesh. It was already, as goes without saying, sadly wasted by words.

First comes the pillar of plain wood, then the white ants that feed on it. But for me, the white ants were there from the start, and the pillar of plain wood emerged tardily, already half eaten away.

Let the reader not chide me for comparing my own trade to the white ant. In its essence, any art that relies on words makes use of their ability to eat away—of their corrosive function—just as etching depends on the corrosive power of nitric acid. Yet the simile is not accurate enough; for the copper and the nitric acid used in etching are on a par with each other, both being extracted from nature, while the relation of words to reality is not that of the acid to the plate. Words are a medium that reduces reality to abstraction for transmission to our reason, and in their power to corrode reality inevitably lurks the danger that the words themselves will be corroded too. It might be more appropriate, in fact, to liken their action to that of excess stomach fluids that digest and gradually eat away the stomach itself.

[...]

My composition teacher would often show his displeasure with my work, which was innocent of any words that might be taken as corresponding to reality. It seems that, in my childish way, I had an unconscious presentiment of the subtle, fastidious laws of words, and was aware of the necessity of avoiding as far as possible coming into contact with reality via words if one was to profit from their positive corrosive function and escape their negative aspect—if, to put it more simply, one was to maintain the purity of words. I knew instinctively that the only possibility was to

maintain a constant watch on the corrosive action lest it suddenly come up against some object that it might corrode.

The natural corollary of such a tendency was that I should openly admit the existence of reality and the body only in fields where words had no part whatsoever; thus reality and the body became synonymous for me, the objects, almost, of a kind of fetishism. Without doubt, too, I was quite unconsciously expanding my interest in words to embrace this interest also; and this type of fetishism corresponded exactly to my fetish for words.

In the first stage, I was quite obviously identifying myself with words and setting reality, the flesh, and action on the other side. There is no doubt, either, that my prejudice concerning words was encouraged by this willfully created antinomy, and that my deep-rooted misunderstanding of the nature of reality, the flesh, and action was formed in the same way.

This antinomy rested on the assumption that I myself from the outset was devoid of the flesh, of reality, of action. It was true, indeed, that the flesh came late to me at the beginning, but I was waiting for it with words. I suspect that because of the earlier tendency I spoke of, I did not perceive it, then, as "my body." If I had done so, my words would have lost their purity. I should have been violated by reality, and reality would have become inescapable.

SUNSET DEBRIS (1986)

RON SILLIMAN

from THE AGE OF HUTS

Can you feel it? Does it hurt? Is this too soft? Do you like it? Do you like this? Is this how you like it? Is it alright? Is he there? Is he breathing? Is it him? Is it near? Is it hard? Is it cold? Does it weigh much? Is it heavy? Do you have to carry it far? Are those the hills? Is this where we get off? Which one are you? Are we there yet? Do we need to bring sweaters? Where is the border between blue and green? Has the mail come? Have you come yet? Is it perfect bound? Do you prefer ballpoints? Do you know which insect you most resemble? Is it the red one? Is that your hand? Want to go out? What about dinner? What does it cost? Do you speak English? Has he found his voice yet? Is this anise or is it fennel? Are you high yet? Is your throat sore? Can't you tell dill weed when you see it? Do you smell something burning? Do you hear a ringing sound? Do you hear something whimpering, mewling, crying? Do we get there from here? Does the ink smear? Does the paper get yellow and brittle? Do you prefer soft core? Are they on their way to work? Are they feeling it? Are they locked out? Are you pessimistic? Are you hard? Is that where you live? Is the sink clogged? Have the roaches made a nest in the radio? Are the cats hungry, thirsty, tired? Does he need to have a catheter? Is he the father? Are you a student at the radio school? Are you afraid to fail? Are you in constant fear of assassination? Why has the traffic stopped? Why does blue fade into green? Why didn't I go back to Pasco and become a cop? Why does water curl into the drain in different directions on either side of the equator? Why does my ankle throb? Why do I like it when I pop my knuckles? Is that a bald spot? Is that an ice cap? Is that a birth mark? Will the fog burn off soon? Are her life signs going to stabilize? Can you afford it? Is it gutted? What is it that attracts you to bisexual women? Does it go soggy in the milk? Do people live there? Is there a limit? Did it roll over when it went off the road? Will it further class struggle? Is it legible? Do you feel that it's private? Does it eat flies, worms, children? Is it nasty? Can you get tickets? Do you wear sunglasses out of a misplaced sense of increased privacy? Do you derive