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Sympathie mit dem Tode

On Nietzsche, Mishima and the “free death”

Hehr und heil,
kühn und feig,
Todgeweihtes Haupt!
Todgeweihtes Herz!

R. Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*¹

1. Old age, love and death

“Die at the right time: thus Zarathustra teaches it”². To outline some points of contact and disagreement between Nietzsche and Hiraoka Kimitake (公威 平岡) – aka Mishima Yukio (由紀夫 三島) – it is possible to start from this exhortation, contained in the *Zarathustra*’s chapter *On Free Death*. Several important studies have already highlighted Mishima’s intellectual debt to Nietzsche³. For instance, the recurrent description of the crisis of traditional Japanese values in Mishima’s works recalls on several levels the Nietzschean reflection on the European disease of *déca-*

¹ R. Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde Libretto*, Henricus Großdruck, Berlin 2019, p. 5. (Splendid and strong / Bold and cowardly! / Head destined for death! / Heart destined for death!).

² F. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra, On Free Death*, A. del Caro and R. Pippin (ed. by), transl. by A. del Caro, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 53. The translations used in this essay are from the Cambridge Edition of Nietzsche’s works. Both the passages of the Nietzsche’s works and the posthumous fragments are however identified in the original German with reference to the Colli-Montinari standard edition. (Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden: KSA, hg. von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, de Gruyter, München-New York 1980-). KSA 4, *Vom freien Tode*, p. 93: “Stirb zur rechten Zeit: also lehrt es Zarathustra”.

³ See R. Starrs, *Nietzschean Dialectics in the Novels of Mishima Yukio*, “Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur und Völkerkunde Ostasiens e.V.”, 149-150, 1991, pp. 17-40; Id., *Deadly dialectics: sex, violence, and nihilism in the world of Yukio Mishima*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1994; M. Ken’ichi, *Mishima und Nietzsche – Fin de siècle-Ästhetik und radikaler Nationalismus*, in I. Hijiya-Kirschner-G. Bierwirth (ed. by), *Yukio Mishima Poesie, Performanz und Politik*, Iudicium, München 2010, pp. 32-49.

dence and nihilism. Elements of consonance must then be recognized in Mishima's critique of "herd morality", as well as of democracy and socialist ideology. The exaltation of comfort and bourgeois mediocrity is in turn an element that both Nietzsche and Mishima condemn. It should also be recognised in Mishima a "Nietzschean" devaluation of speculative thinking and an inclination for a philosophy of action, devoted to a strengthening of life and to a psycho-physical self-care. This peculiar form of self-care is to be cultivated through a reevaluation of the body, which must be shaped by constant exercise and meditative practice. The pivotal notion of "mask", the conception of the "tragic" and the question of the "free death" constitute further points of intersection between the two Authors. This last topic has stimulated scholars of Mishima's work for decades⁴, but it has not yet been analytically related to Nietzsche's reflection on suicide.

On the fiftieth anniversary of Mishima's *seppuku* (切腹), this essay aims to identify some affinities and differences between the Japanese writer's and Nietzsche's thoughts on the theme of "free death". This specific topic will allow for more points of comparison between the European and Japanese cultures. So it is not simply a question of resuming an analysis of the reasons for Mishima's suicide, since, as Francesco Saba Sardi points out: "The dogged attempt to answer these questions is equal to the vanity of the efforts: like every suicide, Mishima has brought his secret with him"⁵. Any borderline situation (*Grenzsituation*), observes Jaspers⁶, condemns to checkmate and to shipwreck the attempt to lock the being in the prison of unequivocal definitions. From the historical, aesthetic and intercultural points of view this comparison is instead an opportunity to more broadly reflect on the fundamental philosophical plexuses of life and death, love and art, freedom and necessity.

While Nietzsche's reflection on the theme of "free death" is influenced solely by Western philosophical tradition – in particular, classical Greek thought, Stoicism, Christianity, Romanticism and Schopenhauer's pessimism – Mishima's literary, theatrical and cinematographic work is

⁴ See H. Miller, *Reflections on the death of Mishima*, Capra Press, Santa Barbara 1972; R.J. Lifton-K.Shūichi-R. Michael, *Six lives, six deaths. Portraits from modern Japan*, Yale University Press, New York 1979; H. Scott-Stokes, *The life and death of Yukio Mishima*, Noonday Press, New York 1995; Kanji Nishio (西尾幹二), *Mishima Yukio no shi to watashi (The death of Yukio Mishima and I, 三島由紀夫の死と私)*, Kyōto, Tōeisha 2008.

⁵ F. Saba Sardi, Introduzione a Y. Mishima, *La via del samurai*, transl. it. by P.S. Paolini, Bompiani, Milano 1983, p. 2. See Y. Mishima, *On Hagakure. The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*, transl. from the Japanese by K. Sparling Souvenir Press, London 1977. (My own transl. from Italian).

⁶ See K. Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, O. Immel (ed. by), Schwabe AG, Basel 2019, p. 12 ff.

characterized by the tension between European sensibility and Japanese cultural identity, which coexist and contrast in the same time. Regarding European influence, in Mishima's reflection on death and in his act of committing suicide, there is a convergence between the original values of heroic Greece, Wagner's Romanticism, a peculiar reading of Nietzsche's philosophy, a certain scent of D'Annunzio's poetic and a Freudian "death impulse". Regarding the traditional Japanese culture on Mishima's thought, he refers to the samurai ethics of the "Way of the Warrior" (*Bushidō* 武士道), to the precepts of *Hagakure* (*Hidden by the Leaves* or *Hidden leaves*, 葉隠)⁷, to Zen Buddhism, to Japanese nationalist radicalism and to faith in the cult of the Emperor. Throughout his life Mishima dialogues with death, he courts it and exorcises it, he puts it on stage and artistically describes his encounter with it. Death must come when one is at the height of his intellectual faculties and physical vigour, "it must cut the thread of life with iron, like a Greek hero on the battlefield, a samurai during the battle, a kamikaze in the holocaust at sea! All kidnapped into nothingness like the foam of cherry blossoms at the touch of the breeze"⁸.

Identifying the *kairòs* of death, making it the climax of the theatrical work of art of one's life, is what Mishima did with his famous ritual sacrifice on November 25, 1970.

"To die thus is best", Zarathustra says, "to die fighting and to squander a great soul"⁹. This is what Mishima intended to do: to set out fighting against the spectres of old age, physical decadence, of the political and moral decline of his nation, of the decomposition of society, of the degradation of literature and its reduction to a commercial phenomenon. "One must stop letting oneself be eaten, when one tastes best; this is known by those who want to be loved for a long time"¹⁰. The autumnal metaphors of superabundance, among the most suggestive in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, refer to the natural need to fall – like ripe fruit – when one is at the height of his power: "The figs fall from the trees, they are good and sweet; and as they fall, their red skin ruptures. I am a north wind to ripe figs"¹¹. The metaphor of ripe fruits recalls the free death of Alabanda in

⁷ T. Yamamoto, *Hagakure. The book of hidden leaves*, Mikazuki Publishing House, London 2012.

⁸ G.C. Calza, Prefazione a Y. Mishima, *Colori proibiti*, transl. by L. Origlia, Feltrinelli, Milano 1989, p. 4. (My own transl. from Italian). See Y. Mishima, *Forbidden Colors*, transl. from the Japanese by A.H. Marks, Avon, New York 1970.

⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra, On Free Death*, cit., p. 53. KSA 4, *Vom freien Tode*, p. 93: "Also zu sterben ist das Beste; [...] im Kampfe zu sterben und eine grosse Seele zu verschwenden".

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54. KSA 4, *Vom freien Tode*, p. 94: "Man muss aufhören, sich essen zu lassen, wenn man am besten schmeckt: das wissen Die, welche lange geliebt werden wollen".

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *On the Blessed Isles*, p. 65. KSA 4, *Auf den glückseligen Inseln*, p. 109: "Die Feigen fallen von den Bäumen, sie sind gut und süß; und indem sie fallen, reisst ihnen die

Hyperion, in which Hölderlin – which for Nietzsche represents a fundamental reference point – makes the protagonist speak in this way before abandoning his friend: “‘Yes! Die’, I cried, ‘die!’ Your heart is glorious enough, your life is ripe, like grapes in autumn”¹².

As for the relationship between old age, suicide and the ancient world, in an aphorism of *Human, All Too Human* (1878), whose title is *Old age and death*, Nietzsche writes:

Disregarding the demands made by religion one might well ask: why should it be more laudable for an old man who senses the decline of his powers to await his slow exhaustion and dissolution than in full consciousness to set himself a limit? Suicide is in this case a wholly natural and obvious action, which as a victory for reason ought fairly to awaken reverence: and did awaken it in those ages when the heads of Greek philosophy and the most upright Roman patriots were accustomed to die by suicide.¹³

The question posed by Nietzsche is resumed in section 185 (*Of Rational Death*) in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*: “What is more rational, to stop the machine when the work one demands of it has been completed – or to let it run on until it stops of its own accord, that is to say until it is ruined?”¹⁴. In both passages, the theme of old age is central: voluntary (*freiwillig*) death – that is, suicide (*Selbsttödtung*) – appears to Nietzsche a natural choice for the elderly man, “a wholly natural and obvious action”, an alternative to “the desire to carry on existing from day to day, anxiously consulting physicians and observing scrupulous rules of conduct”¹⁵.

The interweaving of old age, physical decay and the Hellenic world evoked by Nietzsche clearly emerges in the Mishima’s youthful work *For-*

rothe Haut. Ein Nordwind bin ich reifen Feigen”.

¹² F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion and selected poems*, E.L. Santner (ed. by), Continuum, New York 1990, p. 116.

¹³ F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, transl. by J.L. Hollingdale, introd. by R. Schacht, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, § 80, p. 47. KSA 2, *Greis und Tod*, p. 85: “Abgesehen von den Forderungen, welche die Religion stellt, darf man wohl fragen: warum sollt es für einen alt gewordenen Mann, welcher die Abnahme seiner Kräfte spürt, rühmlicher sein, seine langsame Erschöpfung und Auflösung abzuwarten, als sich mit vollem Bewusstsein ein Ziel zu setzen? Die Selbsttödtung ist in diesem Falle eine ganz natürliche naheliegende Handlung, welche als ein Sieg der Vernunft billigerweise Ehrfurcht erwecken sollte: und auch erweckt hat, in jenen Zeiten als die Häupter der griechischen Philosophie und die wackersten römischen Patrioten durch Selbsttödtung zu sterben pflegten”.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, § 185, p. 355. KSA 2, *Vom vernünftigen Tode*, p. 632: “Was ist vernünftiger, die Maschine stillzustellen, wenn das Werk, das man von ihr verlangte, ausgeführt ist, – oder sie laufen zu lassen, bis sie von selber stille steht, das heisst bis sie verdorben ist”?

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, § 80, p. 47. KSA 2, *Greis und Tod*, p. 85: “Die Sucht dagegen, sich mit ängstlicher Berathung von Aerzten und peinlichster Lebensart von Tag zu Tage fortzustricken”.

bidden Colours (*Kinjiki*, 禁色). The plot describes the insincere relationship between homosexual Yuichi and his wife Yasuko, as well as the desire for revenge that the old misogynistic writer Shunsuké, characterized by physical ugliness and inability to seduce, directs towards women. In this writing the old Shunsuké – the Japanese “fallen self” of Mishima – sees the young Yuichi emerge from the sea. The young man is perfect as a statue of Apollo with a “stern style”, and therefore a symbol of Mishima’s love for the Greek harmony of the bodies:

As it reached the shallows and seemed about to break, suddenly in the middle of the wave a swimmer stood out. Quickly his body seemed to erase the wave. Then he stood up. His sturdy legs kicked the ocean shallows as he walked forward.

He was an amazingly beautiful young man. His body surpassed the sculptures of ancient Greece. It was like the Apollo modelled in bronze by an artist of the Peloponnesus school.¹⁶

Already in this work the two opposite worlds – the European and the Japanese worlds – are both present as elements of internal tearing in both the spirit of Mishima and the Japanese society of his time. In *Forbidden Colors* Yuichi thus symbolizes the “classic” ideal of beauty and physical integrity, the world of the senses and erotic Greek homosexual seduction. Shunsuké, on the other hand, is the mirror of a decadent Japan, as well as the literary transposition of the intellectual dimension, (the *sophia* separated from the *soma*). The old Shunsuké wants to possess and manoeuvre Yuichi, which refers to the ideal of the *kalòs kai agathòs* and to “a certain sweetness of the early Renaissance”¹⁷.

In the 1952 travel report entitled *The Cup of Apollo* (*Aporo no Sakazuki*, アポロの杯, 1952), the tension between the Japanese roots of Mishima and the fascination for the ancient European heritage emerges in the description of Greece. This Greek “sublime land” captivates the writer more than the colours of Hawaii, the frenzy of New York, the brightness of Brazil, the metamorphosis of the Amazon forest or the winter dreariness of Paris. This land drunk with life appears to the young writer the place that par excellence contrasts senescence and death:

The Greeks believed in the immortality of beauty. They carved in stone the perfect beauty of the human body. I don’t know if the Japanese believed in the immortality of beauty or not. In anticipation of the day when the con-

¹⁶ Y. Mishima, *Forbidden colours*, cit., p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

crete beauty of the body would decay, they always imitated the melancholy form of death. I think that the asymmetrical beauty of the stone garden suggests the immortality of death itself.¹⁸

Before explicitly taking up the theme of suicide again, we should refer to the work *House of the sleeping beauties* (*Nemureru bijo*, 眠れる美女, 1961) by Kawabata Yasunari. In this novel – for which Mishima wrote the preface – the relationship between youth, eroticism, old age and death is explicit and extraordinarily described. The old Eguchi, thanks to a friend, begins to visit a peculiar house of pleasure in which he spends the night next to very young virgins, who are asleep with a powerful sleeping pill, without, however, being allowed to wake them up or even to possess them sexually. Eguchi examines these “sleepy dolls” in detail with the coldness of a surgeon. This “cult of virgins” of Kawabata, observes Mishima, is closely linked to the themes of death and impossibility. The old Eguchi’s inability to possess young women evidences a strong link between eroticism and death.

The sleeping beauties, which in Kawabata’s novel represent deadly dolls, allude to necrophilia which is masterfully described by Mishima in his work *The Music* (*Ongaku*, 音楽, 1965). The protagonist of the novel, Reiko Yumikawa, is a young woman with perfect features, from a good and rich family. Yet there is something in her life that does not work and prevents her happiness and satisfaction: a dark discomfort that physiologically manifests itself in nervous tics. Reiko no longer hears “the music”, which is not the music of sounds, notes and symphonies, but that of bodies and sexual pleasure. Only the sight of her cancer-ridden cousin’s body can awaken in her erotic attraction and dormant desire. When the dying cousin achieves the climax of suffering, Reiko finally reaches orgasm: she feels “the music” again. By recounting her last moments with her dying cousin to the psychoanalyst Dr. Shiomi, Reiko reveals her attraction to decay: “‘I’m in pain... hold my hand’, he barely said. I immediately squeezed his hand hard. I distinctly remember the slight tremor of that hand in my palm. It was then, Doctor, that something happened to me? Suddenly I heard the music”¹⁹.

The affinity with Kawabata’s work becomes more explicit when Reiko makes the acquaintance of Hanai, a young intellectual and impotent aristocrat. Their bond is erotically embodied in the de-sexualized practice of sleeping naked together “without doing anything” in an allegorical

¹⁸ Y. Mishima, *La coppa di Apollo*, M.C. Migliore (ed. by), Leonardo, Milano 1993, p. 93. (My own transl. from Italian).

¹⁹ Y. Mishima, *Musica*, transl. by E. Ciccarella, Feltrinelli, Milano 1994, p. 90. (My own transl. from Italian).

staging of dying²⁰. Reiko and Hanai sleep like naked corpses in a grave. Similarly, old Eguchi lies next to the sleeping beauties, who are nothing but distant simulacrum of life.

When Kawabata writes *House of the sleeping beauties* he was already sixty-two years old. Eguchi is sixty-seven years old and lives his old age with a constant sense of oppression, linked to the weight of his past, which is evoked by the sleeping girls. The various women possessed by and who escaped from the protagonist during his youth symbolize something that is now precluded, forbidden, impossible, something that is reminded at every moment by the living corpse that lies next to him. What's the difference between this sleeping girl and a doll if not the blood running through her veins? – Eguchi repeatedly asks himself. What is the difference between himself and a corpse if he can no longer be a man (i.e. own the young girls)? Old age is seen by Kawabata – in perfect consonance with Nietzsche – as continuous violence, a state of apparent death against which he can only fight through suicide. While Mishima, however, ends his life during the prime of his vitality, Kawabata falls into chronic depression, plagued by Parkinson's disease and nightmares about his friend's *seppuku*. In mysterious circumstances, Kawabata dies on April 16, 1972, asphyxiated by gas.

2. Freedom, will and subjectivity. Nietzsche and Buddhist Ethics

If we go back to *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, we see that Nietzsche says that involuntary (natural) death is irrational because it occurs independently of a choice, while the only rational death is voluntary death. “Natural death is death independent of all reason, actual *irrational* death [...]. Only in the light of religion can the opposite appear to be the case: because then it is the higher reason (God's) which gives the command which the lower reason has, fairly enough, to submit to”²¹.

Historically, the oldest argument that Western philosophy has advanced against suicide posits that only God or the gods can dispose of our life and of our death²². As suggested by the zarathustrian passage *On*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, cit., § 185, p. 355. KSA 2, *Vom vernünftigen Tode* p. 632: “Der natürliche Tod ist der von aller Vernunft unabhängige, der eigentlich unvernünftige Tod, [...]. Nur unter der religiösen Beleuchtung kann es umgekehrt erscheinen: weil dann, wie billig, die höhere Vernunft (Gottes) ihren Befehl giebt, dem die niedere Vernunft sich zu fügen hat”.

²² See P. Stellino, *Nietzsche on Suicide*, “Nietzsche-Studien”, 42, 1/2013, p. 155. For a wide-ranging and in-depth study on the theme of suicide in Nietzsche see also P. Stellino, *Philosophical Perspectives on Suicide. Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2020.

Free Death, Nietzsche conceives of voluntary death as an act of supreme affirmation of freedom, which is the practice of an active form of nihilism that paradoxically strengthens and consecrates life. The formula “free for death (*zum Tode*) and free in death” clearly indicates that by suicide, we affirm not only our freedom to die, but also our freedom in the broadest sense. From this point of view, Nietzsche’s thought opposes that of Schopenhauer, who, as is well known, observes that the “will to live” survives even when individuals die and that therefore suicide, instead of constituting an act of emancipation and self-affirmation, corresponds to an act of extreme submission to the will:

Whoever is oppressed by the burdens of life, whoever loves life and affirms it, but abhors its torments, and in particular can no longer endure the hard lot that has fallen to just him, cannot hope for deliverance of death, and cannot save himself through suicide. Only by a false illusion does the cool shade of Orcus allure him as a heaven of rest. The hearth rolls on from day into night; the individual dies, but the sun itself burns without intermissions, an eternal noon.²³

If for Schopenhauer one’s ability to freely choose the moment of his own death confirm his slavery to the *Wille*, then for Nietzsche freely choosing death means going beyond slavery to the metaphysical will. This freedom, however, has nothing to do with the concept of “free will”, which the philosopher in *Beyond Good and Evil* defines as an illusory fruit of the “humanity’s excessive pride”²⁴. For Nietzsche, both the “free will” and its opposite, the “non-free will” (of which Schopenhauer speaks), are moral prejudices and consequences of a “too human” simplification. A “boorish naiveté”²⁵ therefore characterizes those who conceive of their actions and responsibilities within the binary logic of cause and effect. Freedom and necessity, cause and effect, subject as *causa sui* are therefore “conventional fictions for the purpose of description and communication, *not* explanation”²⁶.

According to Nietzsche, suicide does not therefore correspond to a gesture of selfish self-affirmation, but to a possibility that “the *sovereign individual* as the ripest fruit on its tree, like only to itself, having

²³ A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, transl. by E.F.J. Payne, Dover, New York, vol. I, § 4, 1969, pp. 280-281.

²⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, R.P. Hortsman, J. Norman (ed. by), transl. by J. Norman, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2002, § 21, p. 21. KSA 5, p. 35: “Der ausschweifende Stolz des Menschen”.

²⁵ *Ibid.* KSA 5, p. 35: “Bäurische Einfalt”.

²⁶ *Ibid.* KSA 5, p. 36: “Conventioneller Fiktionen zum Zweck der Bezeichnung, der Verständigung, nicht der Erklärung”.

freed itself from the morality of custom, an autonomous, supra-ethical individual”²⁷, can independently welcome.

In this criticism of the free will as a subjective responsibility, there is a significant affinity with Zen Buddhist ethics, which – as we shall try to show – in many ways permeates Mishima’s work. Just as for Nietzsche the notion of subject is but a name that connotes a plurality of impulses and an interweaving of perspectives, so in the Buddhist sphere, the “I” is but “an aggregate of elements in progress, that is, a provisional combination of processes”²⁸, characterized by an insubstantial nature (*anattā*). Death therefore represents a certain event that simply disrupts and redistributes these processes. Just as for Nietzsche life is characterized by the eternal flow of becoming, so in the Buddhist sphere, life is a succession of impermanent phenomena. Death therefore does not constitute a definitive break, an *end* with respect to life, but is instead a metamorphosis, an internal transformation, a passage from one state to another, “as it happens when water passes from the liquid state to the gaseous state of vapour or to the solid state of ice”²⁹. Nietzsche’s critique of faith in a metaphysical subjectivity, in a substantial ego, then reveals how responsibility and free will are simplifying mythologies and schematic metaphors, since action is not the production (the effect) of a subject (the cause): “there is no ‘being’ behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; ‘the doer’ is invented as an afterthought, – the doing is everything”³⁰.

Since there is no subject as a source of will that occurs in the Buddhist sphere, the dualism between freedom and necessity as well as free will and destiny is dissolving. In fact, actions are not only the cause and responsibility of an agent, but also depend on a series of interrelationships that are never uniquely attributable to the individual. Therefore, it is not the personality of a subject that produces actions, but the personality is rather the product of the actions themselves. Again: “the doing is everything”.

Suicide is a major problem for Buddhist ethics, as demonstrated by the considerable literature on the subject³¹. In the Pāli Canon, suicide

²⁷ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, K. Ansell-Pearson (ed. by), transl. by C. Diethe, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2007, II, § 2, p. 27. KSA 5, p. 293: “Das souveraine Individuum, das nur sich selbst gleiche, das von der Sittlichkeit der Sitte wieder losgekommene, das autonome übersittliche Individuum.

²⁸ G. Pasqualotto, *Dieci lezioni sul Buddhismo zen*, Marsilio, Venezia 2008, p. 23. (My own transl. from Italian).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, cit., I, § 13, p. 26. KSA 5, p. 279: “Es giebt kein ‘Sein’ hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; ‘der Thäter’ ist zum Thun bloss hinzugeschichtet, – das Thun ist Alles”.

³¹ We refer, in this context, to some precious indications of D. Keown, *Buddhism and Suicide – The Case of Channa* -, “Journal of British Ethics”, 3, 1996, pp. 8-31.

is considered in ambivalent terms: sometimes suicide is criticized and censored, other times it is accepted and approved. In the entry about suicide in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1922), de La Vallee Poussin wrote:

We have therefore good reason to believe (1) that suicide is not an ascetic act leading to spiritual progress and to nirvana, and (2) that no saint or arhat – a spiritually perfect being – will kill himself. But we are confronted with a number of stories which prove beyond dispute that we are mistaken in these two important conclusions.³²

In a contemporary text, F.L. Woodward gives a similar opinion: “There are, however, passages in the Nikāya where the Buddha approves of the suicide of *bhikkhus*: but in these cases they were Arahants, and we are to suppose that such beings who have mastered self, can do what they please as regards the life and death of their carcass”³³. Only death separates the *arhat* (羅漢, *rakan*), which has walked the same path as Buddha and reached holiness, from *nirvāṇa*. In a more recent encyclopaedia entry (1987) Marilyn J. Harran writes: “Buddhism in its various forms affirms that, while suicide as self-sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an arhat, one who has attained enlightenment, it is still very much the exception to the rule”³⁴. In the early 1990s, Becker shows how the Buddha “praised” the suicide of Vakkali and Channa³⁵ and supported the existence of a “consistent Buddhist position” on suicide³⁶.

Therefore, a clear distinction emerges between allowing suicide for enlightened beings and precluding suicide for non-enlightened beings. From this perspective, Lamotte wrote:

The desperate person who takes his own life obviously aspires to annihilation: his suicide, instigated by desire, will not omit him from fruition [of the fruit of his previous actions (Editor’s note)], and he will have to partake of the fruit of his action. In the case of the ordinary man, suicide is a folly and does not achieve the intended aim. [...] In contrast, suicide is justified in the persons of the Noble Ones who have already cut off desire and by so doing neutralised their actions by making them incapable of producing further

³² L. de La Vallee Poussin, “Suicide (Buddhist)” in J. Hastings (ed. by), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Clark, Edinburgh 1922, vol. XII, pp. 24-26.

³³ F.L. Woodward, *The Ethics of Suicide in Greek, Latin and Buddhist Literature*, “Buddhist Annual of Ceylon”, 1922, p. 8.

³⁴ M.J. Harran, “Suicide (Buddhism and Confucianism)”, in M. Eliade (ed. in chief), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Macmillan, New York 1987, vol. 14, p.129.

³⁵ C.B. Becker, *Breaking the Circle: death and the afterlife in Buddhism*. Southern Illinois Univ. Press, Carbondale 1993, p. 136.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

fruit. From the point of view of early Buddhism, suicide is a normal matter in the case of the Noble Ones who, having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into *Nirvanā*, thus definitively escaping from the world of rebirths.³⁷

Suicide is only allowed when it is not motivated by thirst and lust (*tanhā*): “There is nothing intrinsically wrong with taking one’s own life, if not done in hate, anger or fear”³⁸.

As the *arhat*, Zarathustra has the features of the “transfigured (*Verwandelter*)” and the “awakened (*Erwachter*)”, and he is “circumfused with light (*Umleuchteter*)”; therefore, he sees free death “as the peaceful and respectable completion of a meaningful life”³⁹.

To further develop the plexus between will and freedom with respect to “free death”, perhaps it is appropriate to first highlight the differences between how Nietzsche and Mishima conceive of the “hero” and then question the relationship between *seppuku* and Zen Buddhism.

3. Freedom, will and obedience. The hero and the *bushi*

In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche offers this controversial aphorism:

Sick people are parasites on society. It is indecent to keep living in a certain state. [...]. Dying proudly when it is no longer feasible to live proudly. Death chosen freely, death at the right time, [...] this makes it possible to have a real leave, [...] and a real assessment of everything that has been achieved or willed, a summation of life – all in contrast to the pathetic and horrible comedy that Christianity stages around the hour of death. [...]. More than anything, and in spite of all the coward ices of prejudice, this establishes the proper (which is to say physiological) appreciation of a so-called natural death: which, at the end of the day, is itself just an ‘unnatural’ death, a suicide. You are never destroyed by anyone except yourself. This is just a death under the most despicable conditions, an unfree death, a death at the wrong time, a coward’s death. Out of love for life –, you should want death to be different, free, conscious, without chance, without surprises... [...]. When you do away with yourself you are doing the most admirable thing there is: it almost makes you deserve to live...⁴⁰

³⁷ E. Lamotte, *Religious Suicide in Early Buddhism*, “Buddhist Studies Review”, 4, 1987, pp. 105-126.

³⁸ C.B. Becker, *Breaking the Circle: death and the afterlife in Buddhism*, cit., p. 137.

³⁹ P. Stellino, *Nietzsche on Suicide*, cit., p. 158.

⁴⁰ F. Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, A. Ridley-J. Norman (ed. by), transl. by J. Norman, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2005, *Skirmishes of an Untimely Man*, § 36, pp. 209-210. KSA 6, p. 134: “Der Kranke ist ein Parasit der Gesellschaft. In einem gewissen

The freedom of suicide is for Nietzsche, first and foremost, a “physiological” freedom for the body, when it becomes “the stunted, often sick and thick-witted prison warder”⁴¹. The goal of man, in this perspective, must not be to defend his own state at any price, i.e. to respect the basic law of nature that in the *Ethica Spinoza* defines *conatus in sese servandi*⁴². To *preserve, endure and accept* what has been dispensed to us by God, even in its mortified, exhausted, sick and decadent forms, presupposes a thrifty and defensive attitude towards life. Nietzsche opposes this “conservative” and “parsimonious” attitude with a natural inclination to gift and dissipation. That is to say: a natural inclination “to twilight” by excess of fullness. It is thus important to evoke a parallel between the character of Empedocles and that of Zarathustra⁴³: the descent of Empedocles into the crater of Etna is a sacrifice moved by his Promethean love for mortals, which is reflected in the descent of Zarathustra among men, moved by his love for the overman. Similar to the Platonic myth of the cave, these “descents” expose both Empedocles and Zarathustra to death.

The freedom to choose suicide is also freedom from both the fear of death and the dynamic of guilt and punishment that is typical of Christian morality. “The pathetic and horrible comedy” of Christianity *despises and condemns* suicide as a capital sin. In *The City of God*, Augustine of Hippo was the first to theorize the Christian anathema against suicide, arguing – on the basis of the biblical commandment “thou shalt not kill” – that he who inflicts death sins against God and commits an injustice to the community:

Zustände ist es unanständig, noch länger zu leben. [...] Auf eine stolze Art sterben, wenn es nicht mehr möglich ist, auf eine stolze Art zu leben. Der Tod, aus freien Stücken gewählt, der Tod zur rechten Zeit [...] insgleichen ein wirkliches Abschätzen des Erreichten und Gewollten, eine Summierung des Lebens – alles im Gegensatz zu der erbärmlichen und schauerhaften Komödie, die das Christentum mit der Sterbestunde getrieben hat. Hier gilt es, allen Feigheiten des Vorurteils zum Trotz, vor allem die richtige, das heißt physiologische Würdigung des sogenannten natürlichen Todes herzustellen: der zuletzt auch nur ein »unnatürlicher«, ein Selbstmord ist. Man geht nie durch jemand anderes zugrunde, als durch sich selbst. Nur ist es der Tod unter den verächtlichsten Bedingungen, ein unfreier Tod, ein Tod zur unrechten Zeit, ein Feiglings-Tod. Man sollte, aus Liebe zum Leben -, den Tod anders wollen, frei, bewußt, ohne Zufall, ohne Überfall... [...]. Wenn man sich abschafft, tut man die achtungswürdigste Sache, die es gibt: man verdient beinahe damit, zu leben...”.

⁴¹ F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, cit., § 185, p. 355. KSA 2, *Vom vernünftigen Tode*, p. 633: “Der verkümmerte, oft kranke und stumpfsinnige Gefängniswärter der Herr ist”.

⁴² B. Spinoza, *The Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)*, transl. by R.H.M. Elwes, The Pennsylvania State Univ., Hazleton 2000, part. III, prop. 6, p. 11: “Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours (*conatur*) to persist in its own being”.

⁴³ See V. Vivarelli, *Empedocle e Zarathustra: dissipazione di ricchezza e volontà di tramonto*, in G. Campioni-A. Venturelli (ed. by), *La 'biblioteca ideale' di Nietzsche*, Guida, Napoli 1992, pp. 205-206.

It is significant that in Holy Scripture no passage can be found enjoining or permitting suicide either in order to hasten our entry into immortality or to void or avoid temporal evils. God's command, "Thou shalt not kill" is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction [...]. It only remains for us to apply the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", to man alone, oneself and others. And, of course, one who kills himself kills a man.⁴⁴

Against the Christian logic of the commandment and cogency of religious law, Nietzsche assumes the freedom to die as a natural option, a hypothesis beyond good and evil, a gesture freed from guilt, that is to say: unrestricted from the moral values postulated by Christianity. Suicide therefore appears to be an extreme form of emancipation from any dogmatic obedience, as a return to the earth: "I want to become earth again, so that I may have peace in the one who bore me"⁴⁵. Perhaps these considerations make it possible to recognize the most profound difference between Nietzsche's and Mishima's conceptions of suicide. If for Nietzsche "free death" should be a luminous and joyful act, a celebration for the free spirit that has reached the highest degree of fullness and independence from (Christian) morality, for Mishima suicide appears instead a practice closely linked to the warrior code (武道, *budō*). This gesture, according to the Japanese writer, therefore appears to be subordinate to the *ethos* of the samurai, the Japanese State and the religious authority of the Emperor. If Nietzsche recognizes in the State a repressive institution, an "idol" that suffocates and engulfs the vast man (the free spirit that is par excellence *apatride, heimatlos*, without a homeland)⁴⁶, Mishima hopes for a restoration of both the nationalistic ideals of the "Warrior's Path" and devotion to the Emperor.

Following the announcement of the "death of God" and the dissolution of traditional values, suicide in Nietzsche becomes a radical expression of freedom from dogma, while those who commit *seppuku*, according to Mishima, cannot do otherwise, as *they have no choice*. The samurai who rejects self-sacrifice exposes himself to a vile shame, which humiliates the ideals of nobility and rigorism of the "Yamato race" and foments the mediocrity and weakness that dishearten Japan.

Yet Mishima paradoxically claims, commenting on *Hagakure*, that

⁴⁴ St. Augustine, *The city of God. Books I-VIII*, transl. by D.B. Zema-G.G. Walsh, in R.G. Deferrari (ed. by), *The Fathers of the Church*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1950-54, chap. 20, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra, On Free Death*, cit., p. 55. KSA 4, *Vom freien Tode*, p. 95: "Und zur Erde will ich wieder werden, dass ich in Der Ruhe habe, die mich gebar".

⁴⁶ See A. Giacomelli, "Mondo proprio" e "Mondo altro". *Considerazioni (in)attuali sull'estetica fra Europa e Giappone a partire da Nietzsche*, "Studi di Estetica", XLVI, 1/2018, p. 59.

“the positive form of suicide called *hara-kiri* is not a sign of defeat, as in the West, but the ultimate expression of free will, in order to protect one’s honor”⁴⁷. Death is therefore presented together as a necessary decision and expression of free will as well as the oxymoron of an obligatory choice.

Since adolescence, Nietzsche has been fascinated by the Romantic subject of rebellious titanism, including the hero’s challenge to the sky. The young Nietzsche draws on the rich literary tradition of the so-called *Goethezeit* which – starting with the *Empedocles* of Hölderlin – addresses suicide. The Romantic “free death” is conceived, on the one hand, as an extreme consequence of titanism, and, therefore, as a heroic sacrifice and gesture of defiance by “the man in revolt” (as Camus would say) towards the world⁴⁸. On the other hand, it is perceived as the result of despair comprised of a pessimistic and melancholic vision of existence, whose lack of meaning leads to self-annihilation. At the beginning of the Hölderlin drama, the priest Ermocrate describes Empedocles as subverting the laws and customs, as a person who is an upsetting and blasphemous flame, “Familiar with the Gods. /Thus to the crowd his words re-sounds /as though from Mount Olympus”⁴⁹.

An exemplary expression of the desire to rebel against any form of power lies in the character of Prometheus, who, in open transgression with divine precepts, commits the original crime (and not the original sin)⁵⁰ of opposing Zeus by providing men with the means to emancipate themselves from divine subjugation. “Never yet has law formed a great man”, writes Schiller, “tis liberty that breeds giants and heroes”⁵¹. Promethean heroism, expressed in a short drama by the adolescent Nietzsche (*Prometheus*, 1861) – whose references are Hesiod’s *Theogony* (vv. 521-564) and Goethe’s *Promethean Hymn* of 1773 – anticipates the central themes of freedom and destiny that will find their first expression in the early writings *Fate and History* (1862) and *Freedom of Will and Fate* (1862).

In a symbolical way, the *hybris* of the son of Japetus represents the

⁴⁷ Y. Mishima, *The way of the samurai. On Hagakure in Modern Life*, transl. by K. Sparling, Pedegree, New York 1983, p. 46.

⁴⁸ A. Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, transl. by A. Bower, Vintage Books, New York 1956.

⁴⁹ F. Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles. A Mourning Play [Second Version]*, ed. and transl. by D. Farrell Krell, Suny Press, Albany 2009, vv. 31-33, p. 115.

⁵⁰ See F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, R. Geuss-R. Speirs (ed. by), transl. by R. Speirs, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2007, § 9, p. 50. See also G. Pasqualotto, *Goethe e Nietzsche. Mensch e Über-mensch*, in Id., *Saggi su Nietzsche*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1998, p. 89.

⁵¹ F. Schiller, *The Robbers*, transl. by D. MacDonald, Oberon Books, London 1998, act I, scene 2, p. 27.

liberation of the potentialities contained in Human being, who recognizes in himself a divine and over-human spark. The lone titan is therefore a revolutionary and superhomistic figure, devoted to the killing of any “father figure” (*patralóia*). The hero is the protagonist of his own twilight, he has the features of the fallen angel, he shares the rebellious spirit of the Milton’s Satan, who does not bend to the moral law. Elements of Romantic Satanism and Promethean impatience with authority emerge in a novel, entitled *Euphorion*⁵², sketched by Nietzsche in the summer of 1862. The name recalls the character from Goethe’s *Faust* who alludes to the figure of Byron. In the Greek myth, Euphorion is the son of Helen and Achilles, a demi-god who arouses the love of Zeus. In the Goethian context he is the image of the warrior genius and of the Romantic hero. In his impetuous enthusiasm he throws himself off a cliff to reach the fighters whose war songs he hears and like a new Icarus, is supported by the wind for a moment before falling to his death. The funeral choir sung by the maidens in *Faust* thus symbolizes Goethe’s epitaph to Byron, who died in Missolongi on April 19, 1824, where he had gone to support the Greeks in their struggle against Turkish domination⁵³.

In December 1861, the young Nietzsche used the term *Übermensch* three times to describe Manfred’s Byronian character, as proof of his predilection “for heroes who do not come to terms with any superior force trusting only in the energy of their own will”⁵⁴. He perceived “the robbers”, Prometheus, Euphorion and Manfred as symbols of revolt and challenge against the gods, the fathers, established power, conformism and any form of faith and authority.

Here, the gap between Nietzsche’s reflection – though youthful and naive – and that of Mishima become clear. Nietzsche’s Promethean hero is a subversive, antitheological figure who rebels against the established power and the ancient metaphysical and moral order: is a character who challenges the gods and means to accelerate the twilight of idols. On the other hand, Mishima’s hero (as described in the 1966 novel *The voice of the Hero Spirits* – or *The Voices of Heroic Dead* – *Eirei no koe*, 英霊の聲), honours above all the values of obedience and loyalty to the nation of Japan, which is embodied in the divine figure of the Emperor. Narrating the drama of the young officers who failed in their attempt at a coup

⁵² See F. Nietzsche, *Über die dramatischen Dichtungen Byrons*, in *Frühe Schriften*, H. J. Mette-K.Schlechta-C.Koch (ed. by), Beck, München 1994, vol. II, pp. 9-15.

⁵³ See J.W. Goethe, *Faust*, ed. and transl. by S. Atkins, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton-Oxford 1994, vol. II, vv. 9694-9955, pp. 244-251.

⁵⁴ G. Campioni, *Nietzsche. La morale dell’eroe*, ETS, Pisa 2008, p. 24. (My own transl. from Italian).

d'état on 26th February 1936 to restore the Emperor's absolute power, Mishima outlines an ideal hero. This hero is characterized by absolute purity, daring, youth and contempt for death, as well as unshakeable loyalty and faith in the Supreme Head as the incarnation of a God. His Majesty the Emperor is the direct descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami (the Great Goddess who enlightens Heaven). He is the "most excellent figure", "the one who sits on the throne of the ten virtues", the sacred and inviolable idol with the dragon's face for whom spilling immaculate blood is the supreme joy⁵⁵. This absolute and martial veneration of the Emperor unites the rebels of 1936 with their "younger brothers" of 1944-45: the kamikaze protagonists of the "Special Attack Forces Divine Wind" that attacked and sunk American ships off Formosa and Okinawa. This military action, as far as one can tell, stems from the Nietzschean's hero desire for absolute freedom. Nietzsche's "parricidal" hero, in fact, despises authority and faith; he makes his own laws and does not tolerate any master.

The young Nietzsche's titanism is destined to gradually fade away, giving way to a less mannerist and stereotypical vision of the hero. The most subversive aspects of the heroic type, who is reactive and responds negatively towards authority, will be rejected as the issue of "going beyond" – namely, of being free of resentment – becomes more and more established.

Starting from *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche leaves behind Romantic metaphysics and Wagnerian fascination to reflect on new forms of life that are far removed from the images of the superhuman and the brutal hero, as well as Manfred's satanic charisma or Prometheus' propensity for crime. Nietzsche's overman resembles one who emancipates himself from both addiction to resentment and criticism. The overman is therefore a character who is far from both obedience to the ancient moral and metaphysical orders and fanatical and obsessive rebellion against them⁵⁶.

Mishima's tragic hero, who responds to the canons of the ancient samurai model, must supinely obey precise precepts such as those of *Hagakure*, a classic text of the "way of the sword" composed shortly after 1700, which requires the fighter to live in constant proximity to death. "The Warrior's Path" we read in *Hagakure*, "means to practice death every morning, to be ready to experience it in this or that place, to have death before the eyes, 'to cut' death before the eyes, (*kiiregirete oku*, 切れ切れで置く) is the most

⁵⁵ See. Y. Mishima, *La voce degli spiriti eroici*, L. Origlia (ed. by), SE, Milano 1998, pp. 36-42. (My own transl. from Italian).

⁵⁶ See G. Pasqualotto, *Goethe e Nietzsche. Mensch e Über-mensch*, in Id., *Saggi su Nietzsche*, cit., p. 90.

important thing”⁵⁷, which means: “To die again, morning after morning. If you constantly live in the awareness of death, you reach the full detachment (*jiyū*, 自由) on the Way of the samurai”⁵⁸.

This last reference to the *detachment* of the warrior seems particularly significant, since it allows us to identify a point of connection between the Nietzschean theme of sovereign indifference, the Japanese samurai code and Zen ethics. As contradictory as it may seem, the paths of Zen Buddhism and the *Bushidō* converge. As Reishauer claims:

The anti-scholasticism, the mental discipline – still more the strict physical discipline of the adherents of Zen [...], all appealed to the warrior caste, with its predilection for the spartan life. Zen rapidly became the philosophy of the military men of feudal Japan [...]. Zen contributed much to the development of a toughness of inner fiber and strength of character which typified the warrior of feudal Japan.⁵⁹

For the samurai, the fight is not only a matter of personal and family honour, loyalty to his lord, and devotion to a deeply rooted tradition, but it is also and above all the practice of a peculiar meditative form (*kata*, 型). This form is expressed in the serious dance, which is simultaneously controlled and frenetic, codified and natural, of fight and specifically of duel. The sword and the bow therefore become instruments of a mystical ascent towards *nirvāṇa*, and the blacksmiths who produce the blades are considered as almost priestly figures.

4. *Seppuku* and Zen

As proof of the intrinsic link between Zen and *bushidō*, a classic anecdote – reported in the introduction to the Italian edition of Mishima’s *The way of the samurai* (1967)⁶⁰ – tells of a young man who went to a famous Zen master of *kendō* (the way of the sword), begging to become his pupil. The young man said he was willing to make any sacrifice to shorten his apprenticeship and become a *bushi*. The master told him it would take ten years. Bitterly, the young man then replied that he would work day and night to halve the duration of his apprenticeship. The mas-

⁵⁷ Y. Tsunemoto, *Hagakure. The Book of the Samurai*, transl. by W. Scott Wilson, Kodansha International, Tokyo 1979. (The translation is ours since the specific passage [2, 48] is not reported in the collection of selected passages of the English ed.). See R. Ōhashi, *Kire. Il bello in Giappone*, ed. and transl. by A. Giacomelli, Mimesis, Milano 2017, p. 115.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* (*Hagakure*, *Kikigaki* 1, 2).

⁵⁹ E.O. Reischauer, *Japan: Past and Present*, Knopf, New York 1964, p. 61.

⁶⁰ F. Saba Sardi, Introduzione a Y. Mishima, *La via del samurai*, cit., p. 9.

ter said that in this case, it would take thirty years. The novice ardently assured the master that he would dedicate body and soul to the study of the sword. At which point the master replied, “then it will take seventy years”. The young man, however, did not give up, but stayed with the master, who for three years did not let him touch a sword, forcing him to peel the rice and devote himself to Zen meditation. One day, the master slipped behind him and hit him with a wooden sword: from that day on, he kept sneaking up on him and hit him as many times as he could. The novice thus began to develop a natural sensitivity and to instinctively dodge blows. When the master realized that his body and mind were constantly alert and free from irrelevant desires and thoughts, he began training the novice. The key to the art of the sword is therefore in the Zen ability to empty the mind and internalize the “form” (*kata*) to make the technique natural and instinctive.

Just as the actor in the *nō* theatre achieves what Zeami calls “the imperishable flower”⁶¹ through a practice assimilated to the point of becoming nature itself, so the samurai who follows the path of *Hagakure* comes to grace when he is no longer rationally bound by the need to respect the “rule”. The samurai becomes the rule himself, when he practices that “dancing lightness” – so relevant to Nietzsche – which neutralizes the separation between mind, body and movement. The samurai then no longer needs the intermediary of reflection, the analytical faculty and logical thought. When shooting the arrow or using the sword, he practices perfect concentration, detachment from contingencies and inner quiet. The strict Zen discipline, which induces a state of mind emptied of thoughts of anger, fear and revenge, is necessary for practicing the art of dying. Only Buddhist ethics therefore makes it possible to perform the *seppuku* with lucid detachment. Ritual suicide presupposes meditation and the achievement of serenity that comes from the awareness of the emptiness of phenomena and human life. The suicide thus “turns into a blade like the archer into a target, and the final revelation of the guts opens the hoped-for vision of the Other, that is, the Void”⁶².

It is important to underline that the writing *Fudōchishinmyōroku* (*The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom*, 不動知神妙録,) by Zen Master Takuan Sōhō (沢庵, 1573-1645)⁶³ was the background of the

⁶¹ Zeami, *The Spirit of Nob: A New Translation of the Classic Nob Treatise the Fushikaden*, 風姿花伝, transl. by W. Scott Wilson, Shambhala Publications, Boston 2013. See also R. Ōhashi, *Il “fiore imperituro” nel nō*, in Id., *Kire. Il bello in Giappone*, cit., pp. 25-35.

⁶² F. Saba Sardi, Introduzione a Y. Mishima, *La via del samurai*, cit., p. 10. (My own transl. from Italian).

⁶³ S. Takuan, *The unfettered mind: writings of the Zen Master to the Sword Master*, transl. by W.S. Wilson, Kodansha Internat., Tokyo 1991.

book *Heihō kadensho* (兵法家伝書, 1632)⁶⁴. The title of this work, prior to the *Hagakure*, literally translates as *Written for the transmission within the family [Yagyū] of military rules*⁶⁵. This is a fundamental text of the school of the sword Yagyū shinkageryū (柳生新陰流) containing two chapters entitled *The sword that gives death* (*Satsunintō*, 殺人刀) and *The sword that gives life* (*Katsuninken*, 活人劍). In this text the Immovable Wisdom (*fudōchi*), which moves freely in all directions without disruption, is explained by the use of the long sword (*tachi*, 太刀). The text shows that the Zen Way and the Sword Way are to be seen as one (*zen ken ichi*, 禪劍一致, coincidence of zen and sword). The deepest meaning of the sword is to kill one's own self in order to get free. Foundational to this conception is the Zen thought of the "great death" (*daishi*, 大死), according to which the true awakening occurs after experiencing death. In particular, the chapter of the *Heihō kadensho* entitled *The Sword that gives life* affirms: "The art of war (*heihō*, 兵法) corresponds in many points to Buddhist doctrine (*buppō*, 仏法) and conforms to Zen"⁶⁶.

As is well known, the most detailed and explicit description of the *seppuku* ritual is in Mishima's novel *Patriotism* (literally: "concern for the country", *Yukoku*, 憂国, 1960), which became a film in 1966. The protagonists of the story are Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama and his young bride, Reiko. Some officers planning a military coup do not inform the lieutenant of their plans, as they wish to protect the young couple. Takeyama's superior then orders him to execute the officers who planned the coup, to whom the lieutenant was bound by a pact of solidarity. Furthermore, the lieutenant can neither obey such a command by eliminating his comrades nor disregard the command of his superior. The only choice left to him – and here the relationship between freedom and moral obligation resurfaces – is that of ritual suicide. In the 1966 film *Yukoku* the soundtrack echoes Wagner's aria *Liebestod* (Love Death), from the finale to *Tristan und Isolde* (1859). The musical theme of the film, which interweave love and death, is charged in the Wagnerian drama with Romantic suggestions that allude to both the German Middle Ages and nocturnal Venice. The film, which was produced in great secrecy and presented at

⁶⁴ See. M.I. Morinaga, *Secrecy in Japanese arts: "secret transmission" as a mode of knowledge*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005.

⁶⁵ See M. Yagyū, *The sword & the mind*, ed. and transl. by H. Sato, Overlook Pr. Woodstock 1986; T.F. Cleary-M. Yagyū-S.Takuan, *Soul of the Samurai*, Tuttle, North Clarendon 2005; M. Yagyū, *La spada che dà la vita. Gli insegnamenti segreti della casa dello Shogun*, transl. it. by M. Amarillis Rossi, Luni, Milano 2003, pp. 47-87; see also D. Suzuki, *Lo Zen e la cultura giapponese*, transl. it. by G. Scatista, Adelphi, Milano 2014², pp. 65-182.

⁶⁶ M. Yagyū, *La spada che dà la vita*, cit., p. 48. (My own transl. from Italian). See R. Ōhashi, *Kire. Il bello in Giappone*, cit., pp. 116-117.

the festival of Tours in France, is completely made by Mishima, from the screenplay to the direction and the acting. Within about half an hour, Mishima, as Lieutenant Takeyama, shows how to commit *seppuku*, anticipating the actual ritual suicide that he himself will commit in real life four years later. The scene faithfully recalls the description of the ritual sacrifice. The lieutenant and his bride perform the last act of love and then commit suicide. First Takeyama ends his life through *seppuku*, then Reiko, who was commissioned by her husband to watch him die, stabs herself in the throat with a dagger:

Moving the sword around to his front, he raised himself slightly on his hips and let the upper half of his body lean over the sword point. That he was mustering his whole strength was apparent from the angry tension of the uniform at his shoulders. The lieutenant aimed to strike deep into the left of his stomach. His sharp cry pierced the silence of the room.

Despite the effort he had himself put into the blow, the lieutenant had the impression that someone else had struck the side of his stomach agonizingly with a thick rod of iron. For a second or so his head reeled and he had no idea what had happened. The five or six inches of naked point had vanished completely into his flesh, and the white bandage, gripped in his clenched fist, pressed directly against his stomach. [...]. With only his right hand on the sword the lieutenant began to cut sideways across his stomach. But as the blade became entangled with the entrails he was pushed constantly outward by their soft resilience; and the lieutenant realized that it would be necessary, as he cut, to use both hands to keep the point pressed deep into his stomach. He pulled the blade across. It did not cut as easily as he expected. He directed the strength of his whole body into his right hand and pulled again. There was a cut of three or four inches. [...]. The lieutenant could no longer stop himself from moaning. But by now the blade had cut its way through to below the navel, and when he noticed this he felt a sense of satisfaction, and a renewal of courage. The volume of blood had steadily increased, and now it spurted from the wound as if propelled by the beat of the pulse. [...]. Suddenly stricken by a fit of vomiting, the lieutenant cried out hoarsely. The vomiting made the fierce pain fiercer still, and the stomach, which had thus far remained firm and compact, now abruptly heaved, opening wide its wound, and the entrails burst through, as if the wound too were vomiting. Seemingly ignorant of their master's suffering, the entrails gave an impression of robust health and almost disagreeable vitality as they slipped smoothly out and spilled over into the crotch. [...]. Abruptly he threw his body at the blade, and the blade pierced his neck, emerging at the nape. [...]. The lieutenant lay still, cold blue-tinged steel protruding from his neck at the back.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Y. Mishima, *Patriotism*, transl. by G.W. Sargent, New Directions, New York 1966, pp. 44-50.

An equally prophetic portrayal of suicide occurs in the film *Hitokiri* (人斬り, 1969), in which Mishima plays a samurai who performs *seppuku*. Mishima featured a similar representation within the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* (*Hōjō no umi*, 豊饒の海, 1970), which he delivered to his publisher the day before his suicide. In the second volume of this last great work – titled *Runaway horses* – which stages the Buddhist representation of life, the protagonist impersonates an officer during the Pacific war who attempts a coup and then commits suicide.

Mishima's commentary on *Hagakure* is a decisive spiritual testament too. In this work it is clear that the meaning of death extends far beyond the biological death. Death becomes one with life. Schopenhauer's "will to live" (*Wille zum Leben*), which Nietzsche rethinks in terms of "will to power" (*Wille zur Macht*), is constantly intertwined, according to Mishima, by the "will to die" (*Wille zum Tode*). Only this disintegrating thrust gives life its fullness. Death, which the common sense recognizes as being opposed to life, according to the teaching of *Hagakure*, penetrates life by modifying it. Death thus activates a relationship of "discontinuous continuity" with life, which Ōhashi describes with the expression *Kire-tuzuki* (切れ・つづき)⁶⁸. Taken singularly, the notion of *kire* expresses the action of "cut off", which is rendered in German with the predicates *schneiden*, *abschneiden*, *trennen*, *abtrennen*. The *Kire-tuzuki* formula instead indicates a practice of "dis/continuity" or "continuity in cutting", which in the aesthetic field indicates a "cut" of nature by a "technical" intervention of man in order to bring out from it a deeper and more essential naturalness. In the *ikebana* flower, for example, the "death" of the cut flower caused by the dis/continuity of *kire-tsuzuki* allows it to blossom into new life. A continual sense of mortality, which is mostly removed from everyday life, belongs to the *bushi*, to whom, as we have seen, being prepared for death is a fundamental practice. This is the foundation of *Hagakure*'s exhortation to be ready to "reborn as a Nabeshima samurai (侍) seven times to save the fief (国, *kuni*)" (*Yain Kandan, Conversations in the darkness of the night, 夜陰閑談*)⁶⁹. The dis/continuity between life and death postulated in *Hagakure*, recalls in this perspective the spiritual disposition of *shōji*, composed of the two characters that stand for "life" (生) and "death" (死). This notion, which has an eminently practical character, simultaneously expresses the unity and the incessant circularity of life and death that is peculiar to Buddhism.

⁶⁸ R. Ōhashi, *Kire. Il bello in Giappone*, cit., p. 27 ff.

⁶⁹ Y. Tsunemoto, *Hagakure. The Book of the Samurai*, cit., p. 169.

5. Existentialist digression. The art of dying

As Ōhashi states, “if we understand *kire-tsuzuki* and the relationship of ‘life and death’ as an existential philosophy in the Western sense of the term, we are making a serious mistake”⁷⁰. The close links between Mishima’s suicide, *bushidō*, Zen meditation, Buddhist ethics and experiences of *kire-tsuzuki* and *shōji*, however, tends to merge with some classical themes of European existentialism. In this way, the same cultural borders between East and West become dis/continuous. Nietzsche’s reflection on nihilism, death, and the meaning of life, including its anguished absurdity, legitimizes the philosopher’s position – together with Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer – as a founder of early existentialism, which would then inform authors such as Bergson, Sartre, Camus, Derrida, Simone de Beauvoir, Cioran, Jaspers, and, in some respects, Heidegger.

Although Heidegger has notoriously rejected the label of “existentialist”, his phenomenological analysis of human existence (*Dasein*) allows for brief reflection on death. In a crucial paragraph of *Being and Time*, entitled *Existential projection of an authentic Being-towards-death*⁷¹, Heidegger reflects on a constitutive aporia of *Dasein*. Is it possible to speak of a totality, of a fulfilment of life, since *Dasein* is constitutively a power-being, something that as long as it is, is yet to be? Is it possible to capture finitude in its perfection? What *Dasein* lacks to be “a whole”, Heidegger proposes, is its own end. The *Dasein* therefore seems not to be able to reach fulfilment except at the time of death, which at its completion nullifies life itself. In Epicurean terms, if death is what is not there when we are there and what is there when we are not there⁷², if death is what ends life without touching it, than there is a structurally imperfect existence, so that Human being is never fully what he is. From Heidegger’s perspec-

⁷⁰ R. Ōhashi, *Kire. Il bello in Giappone*, cit., p. 116.

⁷¹ See M. Heidegger, *Being and time*, transl. by J. Stambaugh, SUNY, Albany 1996, § 53, pp. 240-246.

⁷² In the famous *Letter to Menoeceus* Epicurus writes: “Accustom thyself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience [...]. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer”. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, R.D. Hicks (transl. and ed. by), Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge Mass. 1925, vol. 2, p. 651. See also S.E. Rosenbaum, *How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus* in D. Benatar (ed. by), *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield 2004, pp. 191-207. From this doctrine arose the Epicurean epitaph: “*Non fui, fui, non-sum, non-curo*” (“I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care”), which is inscribed on the gravestones of his followers.

tive, then, death is not merely a lack of something to be added to life, nor is it simply the “end”, but it is an ontological dimension that belongs to life in an original and constitutive way.

On the one hand, Mishima’s death pulse can be psychoanalytically read as *Todestrieb*, namely as a desire with masochistic implications, for a return to a non-life⁷³; on the other hand, it can be understood, in light of the Heideggerian analytic of existence, as the tension of life towards that non-life which constitutes existence’s impossible fulfilment. The proper character of existence is therefore the “Being-towards-death” (*Sein zum Tode*). This peculiar form of *meditatio mortis* corresponds to the essential anticipation of the extreme possibility of *Dasein*, which is expressed as temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) and mortality (*Sterblichkeit*).

From a clearly critical posture towards Heidegger, Derrida’s reflection provides other important insights into the paradoxically present and absent dis/continuous nature of death. In the work *Aporias: Dying – Awaiting (One Another at) the “Limits of Truth”*, Derrida claims: “death is ultimately the name of impossible simultaneity and of an impossibility that we know simultaneously, at which we await each other, at the same time [...]”⁷⁴. Death then appears – in consonance with Mishima – as the host that haunts our present and the ghost that we constantly await in our “epicurean” awareness of the impossibility of experiencing it. In its impossible ineluctability, death is what we have always been hostages to, even before we were born⁷⁵.

In a note to *Aporias* Derrida cites a passage by Blanchot that in *The Writing of the Disaster* writes: “Dying means: you are dead already, in an immemorial past, of a death which was not yours..., this uncertain death, always anterior-this vestige of a past that never has been individual... Impossible necessary death...”⁷⁶.

If Heidegger and Derrida radically question the concept of “mortality”, perhaps the most pregnant existentialist contribution to the theme of suicide is that of Camus, who in *The Myth of Sisyphus* writes: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy”⁷⁷.

⁷³ S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, J. Strachey (transl. and ed. by), introd. by G. Zilboorg, Norton, New York-London 1961.

⁷⁴ J. Derrida, *Aporias: Dying – Awaiting (One Another at) the “Limits of Truth”*, transl. by T. Dutoit, Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford 1993, p. 65.

⁷⁵ See. E. Fongaro, *L’ospite di Hakuin – Eternità e fantasmi nelle prime opere di Nishida Kitarō*, “Art History”, 36, 2015, pp. 9-22.

⁷⁶ M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by A. Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1986, pp. 65-66. See. J. Derrida, *Aporias*, cit., p. 87.

⁷⁷ A. Camus, *The myth of Sisyphus*, transl. by J. O’Brien, Penguin, New York 1979, p. 11.

Camus symbolizes the concept of the absurdity of life with the figure of the new Sisyphus, who, “returning towards his rock, in that slight pivoting, [...] contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate”⁷⁸, evidently recalls Nietzsche’s reflection on the tragic. Sisyphus is like “a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end”⁷⁹. This condition of pain and its lack of meaning is, according to Nietzsche, the very foundation of Greek pessimism, which he masterfully condenses in *The Birth of Tragedy* in the dialogue between King Midas and Silenus:

The king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: “Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon.”⁸⁰

Since existence is essentially meaningless – as Silenus (the follower of Dionysus) claims, it is necessary to ask whether the hypothesis of suicide is the only coherent consequence of the terrible presence of pain and the dramatic and lacerating contradictions of life. Nietzsche’s answer to this question is incontrovertibly negative: despite the fact that existence is crisscrossed with anguish and absurdity, it should not be rejected. Nietzsche’s mature philosophy is in fact about “saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems”⁸¹. This is the essence of the “Dionysian *Ja-sagen*”: to *affirm* and *justify* life even in its nocturnal, terrible, problematic and abysmal aspects. It is through art that “saying yes” to life can become effective. According to Nietzsche, art is the most fertile and elevated practice of celebrating existence: “the existence of the world is *justified (gerechtfertigt)* only as an aesthetic phenomenon”⁸². The Dionysian propensity to artistically celebrate the existence was what Socrates

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

⁸⁰ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, cit., § 3, p. 23. KSA 1, § 3, p. 35: “Fragt der König, was für den Menschen das Allerbeste und Aliervorzüglichste sei. Starr und unbeweglich schweigt der Dämon; bis er, durch den König gezwungen, endlich unter gellem Lachen in diese Worte ausbricht: ‘Elendes Eintagsgeschlecht, des Zufalls Kinder und der Mühsal, was zwingst du mich dir zu sagen, was nicht zu hören für dich das Erspriesslichste ist? Das Allerbeste ist für dich gänzlich unerreichbar: nicht geboren zu sein, nicht zu sein, nichts zu sein. Das Zweitbeste aber ist für dich – bald zu sterben’”.

⁸¹ F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, cit., *What I owe the Ancient*, § 5, p. 228. KSA 6, p. 160: “Das Ja-sagen zum Leben selbst noch in seinen fremdesten und härtesten Problemen”.

⁸² F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, cit., § 5, p. 8. KSA 1, p. 47: “Nur als ästhetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt”.

lacked, as Nietzsche explains. After drinking hemlock tea, the philosopher of Athens revealed that the end of life was a *relief* for him. As we read in the *Phaedo*, Socrates' last words were: "Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius; pay it and don't forget"⁸³. A sacrifice of a rooster in the Greek world was performed in favour of the god of medicine, as a sign of gratitude when one was cured of illness. Plato therefore reports Socrates' last message, which is that life is a burden, the end of which is a relief to be celebrated. Thus was born, according to Nietzsche, the decadent parable of western asceticism: "'O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster'. This ridiculous and terrible 'last word' means for those who have ears: 'O Crito, life is a disease'. [...]. Socrates suffered from life! And then he still avenged himself – with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying"⁸⁴. In Nietzsche's mature writings the metaphysical-consolatory ideal of art, which as "a saving sorceress with the power to heal"⁸⁵, veils the unhappiness and nothingness of all things and makes life bearable, is replaced by the idea of art as "the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life"⁸⁶. Art thus represents the fundamental countermovement (*Gegenbewegung*) of nihilism.

When understood in these terms (i.e. as an art form), suicide appear to be justified, as Nietzsche explains. Not every kind of suicide is therefore acceptable: if it is driven by melancholy or by the will to escape life and pain, it can only be an extreme consequence of pessimism and passive nihilism. Free death, then, is not a symptom of *décadence*, nausea, resentment or the will to renounce, but is rather the ultimate opportunity for one's "awakened" spirit to shape himself as a work of art. Moulding oneself can then also mean creating one's own end and shaping one's own destiny through the aesthetic *performance* of psychophysical annihilation.

That's what Mishima did. He could not have actually believed in the success of his daring coup, since he hadn't planned any concrete economic, diplomatic or political strategy. As Ōhashi states:

⁸³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 118 a.

⁸⁴ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, B. Williams (ed. by), transl. by J. Nauckhoff-A. Del Caro, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2001, § 340, p. 194. KSA 3, § 340, p. 569-570: "'Oh Kriton, ich bin dem Asklepios einen Hahn schuldig'. Dieses lächerliche und furchtbare 'letzte Wort' heisst für Den, der Ohren hat: 'Oh Kriton, das Leben ist eine Krankheit!' [...]. Sokrates, Sokrates hat am Leben gelitten! Und er hat noch seine Rache dafür genommen – mit jenem verhüllten, schauerlichen, frommen und blasphemischen Worte!'".

⁸⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, cit., § 7, p. 40. KSA 1, p. 57: "Hier, in dieser höchsten Gefahr des Willens, naht sich, als rettende, heilkundige Zauberin, die Kunst; sie allein vermag jene Ekelgedanken über das Entsetzliche oder Absurde des Daseins in Vorstellungen umzubiegen".

⁸⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1887-1889*, KSA 13, 11 [415], p. 194: "Die große Verführerin zum Leben, das große Stimulans zum Leben".

He needed a stage from which he could bring his *aesthetic ideal* to fruition. This ideal of life had to be permeated by eros and had to find fulfilment in a tragic and dramatic death, tinged with perversion and rigorism, bestiality and a sense of nobility. This ideal did not have to remain on the level of speech, but had to be realized physically *with his own body*. The bodily realization of one's ideal of life ultimately meant nothing other than one's own death, and this same death was staged in a ritualistic and at the same time heroic way.⁸⁷

Consistent with Zarathustra's celebration of "free death", Mishima's *seppuku* therefore seems to express an aesthetic intensification of life. A life that the writer wanted to live and end as a work of art.

⁸⁷ R. Ōhashi, *Qualcosa nella morte più profondo della morte. Sul suicidio di Mishima in relazione al Kire*, in Id., *Kire. Il bello in Giappone*, cit., pp. 183-184. (My own transl. from Italian).

Sympathie mit dem Tode. On Nietzsche, Mishima and the “free death”

This essay aims to focus on some affinities and differences between the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima’s literary, theatrical and cinematographic work and Nietzsche’s thoughts on the theme of “free death”. The aim of this intercultural reflection is to set up an aesthetic and ethical-existential comparison between two of the major interpreters of modernity, respectively European and Japanese. While Nietzsche’s reflection on suicide is influenced solely by Western philosophical tradition, Mishima’s artistic and bodily meditation on *seppuku* (切腹) is characterized by the tension between European sensibility and Japanese cultural identity, which co-exist and contrast in the same time. Mishima hybridises, in his artistic-literary work, the traditional “Way of the Warrior” (*Bushidō* 武士道), precepts of *Hagakure* (葉隠), Zen Buddhism and Japanese nationalist radicalism with the values of heroic Greece, Wagner’s romanticism and a peculiar reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy. How does Mishima interpret Zarathustra’s warning to die “at the right time”? How does Nietzsche’s thought, through Mishima’s reading, come into contact and intertwine with Japanese art and traditional thought? What is the relationship between Nietzsche’s aesthetics, existentialism and Zen Buddhism? By analysing some important relations such as that between love, old age and death and that between freedom, obedience and subjectivity I will try to go through these questions.

KEYWORDS: death, suicide, freedom, Zen, hero