THE SEA OF FERTILITY, by Yukio Mishima

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Yukio Mishima's tetralogy*, The Sea of Fertility, offers Westerners a cultural and historical view of Japan in the twentieth century that is probably unobtainable elsewhere, except through scholarly study. This series traces the development of modern Japan from 1912 through the late 1960's. Each novel concentrates on a different era and crises in the history of that country. Yet throughout unification is achieved not merely through chronology. Mishima discusses the cultural conflicts between old imperial Japan and modern westernized Japan through his characters: Kiyoaki's alternate attraction to and rejection of the aristocracy in the person of Satoka; Isao's assassination coup against the rising industrial elite; and Honda's inner philosophical/sensual dichotomy. Uniting all is the Buddhist philosophy of reincarnation.

These novels intertwine so many concepts, symbols, and dreams that it is impossible to render anything but a bare sketch of the themes and characters. In Spring Snow (my personal favorite) one is introduced to Kiyoaki Matsugae, son of a "noveau riche" samurai family; Satoka Ayakuras, daughter of an old but declining noble family; and to Shigekuni Honda, the narrator, member of a middle class family, and confidant of Kiyoaki. Kiyoaki is raised by the Ayakuras to forward his family's prestige. This is the basis of his alternately loving and hating relationship with Satoka. Not until her engagement to a prince is announced does Kiyoaki realize the extent of his passion. They have an intense, doomed affair that forms a link through the tetralogy.

Kiyoaki is obsessed with his dreams which he records in a diary. This Dream Diary not only symbolizes his passion but also begins Mishima's journey into Buddhist concepts of reincarnation. On his deathbed, Kiyoaki entrusts his diary to Honda. It is this diary that most securely stitches the novels together.

When Runaway Horses opens, Honda is in his early thirties, a lawyer and judge. He sees a boy, Isao Iinuma, undergoing purification at a shrine. On his left breast are three small moles, exactly like Kiyoaki's. This startles Honda, a man of rationality and cynicism, into believing Isao is the incarnation of Kiyoaki's soul.

In the subsequent novels, Kiyoaki's soul reappears again, as a Thai princess, Ying Chan, and as an orphan harbor signalman, Toru Yasunaga. All four die before their twenty-first birthdays, all have the same three moles, all have their physical forms foreshadowed in the Dream Diary, and all, except possibly Toru, live with a fatal passion and destiny that ultimately consumes them. That Toru's incarnation remains in question is essential to Mishima's final point.

The historical forces Mishima discusses begin in 1921 shortly after Japan's victory over Russia. Western influences are subtlely expressed in Spring Snow, which is the most historically isolated of the four novels. As a contrast, the second book, Runaway Horses, is the most historical, on a political level. In it, the roots and nature of Japanese fanaticism of the 1930's are explored. Although The Temple of Dawn deals with the aspect of Japanese history most known in the West--the eve, duration, and aftermath of World War II--much of the story occurs in Thailand and India and is concerned with religion and mysticism. Then in the 1950's the novel returns to Japan where American influence and Japanese decadence are manifest. The Decay of the Angel, set in the late 1960's, incorporates Mishima's analysis of decaying aristocratic and samurai traditions, the value of Buddhist philosophy, and his pessimistic view of the modern era.

* Each novel contains about 300 pages, but each is complete unto itself. Therefore the series can be split up and read over an extended period, but I suggest reading it all at once for the full impact.