BOOK REVIEWS

Hideaki Satō (ed.). *The Collection of Yukio Mishima's Short Essays and Reviews on Sports*. (*Mishima Yukio Supōtsu Ronshū*). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2019. 330 pp. ISBN: 9784003121931

Yukio Mishima, a Japanese novelist well-known to people across the world, was not familiar with sports in his childhood and his adolescence. In 1955, at the age of 30, he trained his body and began to enthusiastically undertake sporting activities. Both before and during his sporting phase, Mishima wrote short essays and reports on sports and martial arts in newspapers and magazines. Those prose pieces were compiled chronologically according to their themes into a volume entitled *The Collection of Yukio Mishima's Short Essays and Reviews on Sports*. The short essays and reports in the anthology evidence Mishima's views on life and death and his philosophy of sports, evincing the progressive changes in his beliefs as his devotion to sports and martial arts increased.

The Collection of Yukio Mishima's Short Essays and Reviews on Sports comprises four parts. The first segment contains Mishima's reports on the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. The second section includes short essays on sports, martial arts, and exercises written by Mishima between the ages of 24 and 34. The third part is composed of Mishima's reviews of boxing matches. The final portion showcases Mishima's essay, "The Sun and Iron," in which he recounts the history of his experience of sports and martial arts and contemplates death.

The first part begins with a piece on the training camp and the opening ceremony of the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo and takes the reader through Mishima's reviews on boxing, weightlifting, track and field events, swimming, gymnastics, and volleyball. It ends with a report on the closing ceremony. Mishima's perspective of the games is sometimes humorous and at other times, it is serious and philosophical. In an article on the tradition of wrestling, Mishima says "I am fond of the feature that nobody takes pride in injury. We must remember that wrestling has valued the beauty of the body from the time of the ancient Greeks" (p. 12). Further, he expresses his opinion of gymnastics as a sport that goes against the natural human state as it requires an aspiration of perfection without error, and he notes the combination of two aspects that define the discipline: "I am

particularly interested in gymnastics because it is the interface between beauty and power and between art and sport" (p. 14). More, he appropriately and humorously describes the athlete's action in a walking race as "a devil of constraint that one tries to run but cannot; an action that looks like a person trying to run away from a nightmare: the upper body desperately makes haste but the lower body accurately maintains a steady pace (pp. 35-36). In any case, Mishima is moved by the sight of athletes playing with full focus and by their spontaneous actions. He recognizes the politics embedded in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games and describes the event as cultural festival that is conceptually against nature. However, he senses the impression of peace in the world when the athletes enter the venue randomly and mix together during the closing ceremony. The Summer Olympics will be held in Tokyo in 2020 again. You may try to watch the Olympic Games with the book by your side.

At the start of the second segment, Mishima compares some sporting disciplines to art. Horse racing reminds him of Eugène Delacroix's painting of a horse; an ice dancer leads his imagination to William Blake's image of a person flying in the sky. After this introduction, Mishima often refers to the centrality of sports and martial arts in the accordance of valance and harmony between his body and mind. In the essay, "On Bodybuilding" for instance, Mishima lauds the positive influence exerted by the discipline of training his body on the achievement of a balance between his body and his mind. The same view finds expression in "Literature and Sport," "Gymnastic and Civilization," "Pen and Sport," "Esoteric Point of *Karate*" and "A Comment on Sport from My Personal Experiences." The last essay details the history of Mishima's experience of sports. In his childhood and adolescence, Mishima harbored a feeling of inferiority with regard to his body. This feeling of inadequacy aroused his enthusiasm for sports. First, he became absorbed in bodybuilding. Next, he gained a degree of confidence in his physique and sought a sport that would train his body harder. Thus, he became interested in boxing. However, he gave up boxing in a year because of his age, and finally began the practice of *kendō*, the Japanese art of fencing, which he felt was most suited to his needs and personality.

Mishima ultimately finds "an ideal of harmony between the body and the mind in *kendō*" (p. 113). He also mentions this phenomenon in the third part of the volume in essays such as "Boxing and a Novel" and "My Sports." However, after he starts practicing *kendō*, his reflections on death increase. For Mishima, *kendō* is the first step toward the

practice of *iaidō*, the Japanese martial art of quickly drawing a real sword from its scabbard in a smooth and controlled manner. In "From a Gym to a *Dōjō*," which implies the meaning "from boxing to *kendō*," Mishima says "People in historical Japan, or the *samurai*, killed others courteously by sword. In contrast, the people of today offer courtesy merely in thoughtless association but not in killing by sword. Such an environment produces butterflies in my stomach" (p. 87). In the essay on the "Suicide of Tsuburaya," Mishima is moved by the ex-Olympic Athlete's death at his own hands and even applauds the act saying, "it is a beautiful and admirable final moment because he left this world due to his sense of honor" (p. 131). These two short essays demonstrate Mishima's criticism of contemporaries who lacked self-discipline. Nevertheless, his enthusiastic practice of *kendō* as a step toward *iaidō* may also have made him criticize others from the perspective of the supreme circumstance, or death.

The third segment is composed of reviews of boxing matches. The reports are again characterized by Mishima's critiques of his contemporaries in Japan. This censure is most vividly described in "The World without Falsehood." "The best aspect of boxing lies in that no form of hypocrisy or compromise exists in the sport," Mishima says. "The sport arouses the fighting instinct in its purest aspect within the acceptable range of a civilized society: a boxer fights until the other party loses consciousness. It is embodiment of the streak of wildness that modern people have lost." Mishima continues, "A boxer, of course, uses physical as well as mental powers. This is true of other sports as well, but only boxing has the aspect of real blood" (p. 168). Also, Mishima respects a boxer as a person of action, comparing this type of athlete to common people who, according to him, never take any action but just think in complex ways about this world. Thus, Mishima says, "beauty except the one embodied in boxing looks false in this world," and he concludes "A good match of boxing makes me feel that civilization has spoiled a human being" (p. 169).

Mishima continues his disapproval of civilized Japanese society from the viewpoint of a "world without falsehood." In "Victory of Youth and Physical Powers," for instance, he rejects the notion of self-defense as an unavoidable way to lose. He condemns the mask or the double mind of the Japanese who, in his view, like rooting for the underdog and are jealous of glory in "What is Beautiful" and in the reviews of boxing matches between Harada, a Japanese champion, and foreign boxers Mishima denigrates the civilized and westernized Japanese. In "Cool Japanese," Mishima confesses his disappointment in watching a match fought by Sakurai, a Japanese boxer, because in Mishima's mind Sakurai

does not possess the requisite wildness and the spirit of honorable death of a wandering Japanese warrior. Mishima complains that like Sakurai, the modern Japanese is "skilled, reasonable, modernized, impassive, calculating and smart" and even a boxer "will be soon become like an engineer who competes in a hyper-technological society" (p. 185). A similar criticism is repeated in reviews of boxing matches fought by a young Japanese boxer Saijo. Mishima cannot accept the lack of the traditional Japanese spirit in modern Japanese athletes. According to him, the Japanese character is typified by a sense of honor, the spirit of honorable death, a pure mind without calculation, and the wildness of a *samurai*, a warrior of a past glorious era.

The last portion of the volume presents "The Sun and Iron." Mishima compares his body to an orchard in his homeland and relates the shaping of his body to the cultivation of the orchard under the sun with a hoe and a plow made of iron. The sun reminds Mishima of the war, and therefore death. Mishima's writings are thus, according to him, "dominated by nocturnal thought" (p. 212). Besides, familiar with writing but not with sport, Mishima would understand and express his own body with words. Hence, he could not develop a consciousness of it as substance. That is why he decided to shape his body with iron tools, or to cultivate his orchard with an iron hoe and plow under the sun in order to wrest his body back from the territory of ideas. This decision contributed to the amendment of his recognition of the order of the falsely created world of words and ideas. However, as he built his muscles, he gradually found that his body was fated to decline and to confront the final moment. He also realized that he could not feel physical strength and hence could not conceive of a body as a substance without other existences. Such a thought led Mishima to the practice of boxing and *kendō* and subsequently even to the view that he needed physical pain in order to feel his body as substance. The supreme moment is death, or the moment when he is stabbed with a knife. All things considered, the moment when he can vividly and tangibly recognize his existence is, for Mishima, the instant of death.

Mishima paradoxically alters his idea of sports and martial arts from the position of building a body to vividly feel his existence to the obliteration of a body, or death. His philosophy of sport is like the philosophy of "*tao*" in *Laozi*, as elucidated in chapter 40: "Turning back is the way the *tao* moves" (trans. by Zhang Longxi, in *From Comparison to World Literature*, New York, NY: SUNY, 2015, p. 137). Also, Mishima's philosophy of sport could be likened to the actions of Icarus, Daedalus' son who dies as he approaches the sun with his artificial wings of wax on his body. In fact, "The Sun and Iron" and *The*

Collection of Yukio Mishima's Short Essays and Reviews on Sports ends with a poem entitled "Icarus." Thus, Mishima also finally becomes Icarus. It is well known that Mishima's final practice was *hara-kiri* in the Ichigaya Station of the Japan Self-Defense Forces. Hideaki Satō's skillful editing impressively represents Mishima's philosophy from the perspective of sport and grants the reader a fresh look at his literary oeuvre.

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