Roy Starrs

# Understanding Modern Japan

Through Its Literature

## The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

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5. 'Nation and Tradition in Postwar Shōwa Fiction (1945–1970)', in *The New Zealand Journal of East Asian Studies*. June (1997).
6. 'Between Greece and India: Mishima as Cultural Pilgrim', in *Nostalgic Journeys: Literary Pilgrimages Between Japan and the West*, Susan Fisher, ed., Vancouver: U.B.C. Institute of Asian Research, 2001.

7. 'The Novelist as Grand Architect: Yukio Mishima's *Sea of Fertility* and Robertson Davies' *Deptford Trilogy*', in *Nature and Identity in Canadian and Japanese Literature*. K. Tsuruta and T. Goosen, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto-York University Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, 1988.
8. 'Nietzschean Dialectics in the Novels of Mishima Yukio', in *Nachrichten Der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 149–150 (1991).
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# Introduction

## A Defence of the Humanities

In this age of so many impressive and useful advances in science and technology, the humanities seem in danger of being viewed as the poor relation in the family of academic disciplines—rather like a once-distinguished uncle now reduced to living as an unwelcome houseguest, perhaps even regarded as something of a freeloader. It is true, of course, that the humanities do not attract the kind of substantial research grants that keep universities in clover and help pay the outsized salaries of an increasingly bloated managerial bureaucracy. Consequently, the goal of many university administrators of late seems to be to cut down the humanities to a bare-bones, purely symbolic, absolutely minimal level, just enough to allow them to retain the high-cultural status of the name 'university' as opposed to the less culturally prestigious 'institute of science and technology'. Unfortunately, not only university bureaucrats but also government ministers seem to share this current scepticism about the value of the humanities. Recently, for instance, the New Zealand government announced that it will henceforth provide grants only for 'practical' research in science and technology—no more taxpayers' money will be 'wasted' on humanities research, which presumably is now officially dismissed by our government as 'impractical'. Remarkably, this applies even to the social sciences.

If one looks around the Western world today, the dire consequence of these short-sighted attitudes is obvious: humanities programs are steadily shrinking at many institutions, sometimes to the point where they disappear altogether. Needless to say, this new species of late-capitalist, techno-bureaucratic philistinism did not spring up overnight. It has been growing over the past few decades slowly

but surely, like a metastasizing intellectual cancer. Nor is it restricted to the domain of the famously philistine 'Anglo-Saxon' countries. In my own experience, one particular memory stands out: from 2011, when I was invited to give a talk at one of Germany's most venerable academic institutions, the University of Tübingen. Tübingen, of course, has a remarkably distinguished history in the humanities (as well as in the sciences), counting among its alumni major philosophers, poets, theologians, and novelists—world-renowned figures such as Hegel, Hölderlin, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and, more recently, Martin Walser. Few other universities in the world could boast such a stellar cast of humanities alumni. One would expect that Tübingen, at least, would remain a proud bastion of humanities scholarship, impervious to the worldwide attacks from short-sighted university bureaucrats and government policy-makers. Sadly, I found that such was not the case: here too humanities scholars were voicing the familiar complaints about ever-diminishing support—both moral and financial—from the powers that be, in stark contrast to the ever-increasing support for science and technology.

In collegial response, though the hour was late, I tried to 'restructure' my talk somewhat as a 'defence of the humanities'. My preannounced topic was 'religiopolitical terrorism in late 20th century Japan'. By an almost eerie coincidence, a few days before, Europe had experienced its worst terrorist incident in many years: Anders Breivik, the anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic, far-right terrorist, had massacred over seventy people, many of them children, associated with a left-wing political party he blamed for allowing Moslem migrants into Norway. I remember thinking at the time that this tragic incident was also a brutal reminder that critical thinking and humanistic debate remain of crucial importance even—perhaps especially—in an age of science and technology, which

not only bring many benefits but also enable lone-wolf terrorists to cause such unprecedented mayhem. More specifically, at a time when the problems we face, as fellow residents on this small planet, are inescapably global, Breivik's twisted ideology proved the importance of arguing the case for open-hearted 'global thinking' as opposed to mean-spirited and narrow-minded nationalism or nativism. In other words, his act of mass murder, inspired by a familiar far-right Weltanschauung—and Weltschmerz—demonstrated, albeit in a disastrously negative way, that thought matters, because perverse, hateful, or inadequate thinking can lead to the kind of massive human catastrophe that this one man caused. As the old saying goes: ideas have consequences. And thought of this kind, of course, is very much the domain of the humanities. As often after such incidents of mass murder, a haunting question remained: would all those innocents still be alive if only this one man's thinking had been corrected, either by himself or by some other influential person in his life? Was that at all possible, given his cold-heartedness, peculiar psychology, and politically extremist tendencies? Would it have made any difference, for instance, if he had been exposed more to humanistic values that teach the common humanity of all peoples?

My talk focussed on a rather more civilized far-right figure, the leading postwar Japanese writer Yukio Mishima—who, in fact, specifically condemned the killing of women and children by a Japanese far-right terrorist in 1960. Nonetheless, despite all his great achievements as the author of brilliant novels, short stories, plays, and essays, Mishima ended his life, on November 25, 1970, by launching a terrorist attack against the Japanese army headquarters in Tokyo. Dressed up in a faux-military uniform and accompanied by members of his own private army, he tried to inspire the actual Japanese military to rise up against their civilian government and overturn what Mishima considered to be its

emasculating, American-imposed 'peace constitution' of 1947.

Despite the obvious moral and intellectual gulf between Mishima and Breivik, I argued that they had enough in common to make a comparison instructive—in particular, a general affinity between the ideas that motivated them to resort to terrorist violence. Towards the end of my talk, I showed a picture of Breivik, also dressed in a faux-military uniform, looking for all the world like a wannabe Mishima—that parody of Mishima, of course, who by now has become an icon of sorts in international far-right circles. Although no comparison can be made between the intellectual power or mental clarity of the two men, nonetheless both, in the end, were inspired to commit perverse acts of violence—Mishima as much on himself as on others—because they became entrapped in the emotional and intellectual snares of an extremist far-right ideology. From a larger historical perspective, that ideology is the product of an international Blut-und-Boden 'nativist' reaction against late twentieth and early twenty-first century globalization, which is seen as a threat to 'traditional' albeit newly imagined national cultures and identities. For Mishima, this threat came in the form of the Westernization, and especially 'Coca-Colanization', of Japan after its defeat in the Second World War, turning his country into a pacifist liberal democracy and thereby, in his view, robbing it of its 'samurai spirit' and its emperor-centred *kokutai* (national polity). For Breivik, of course, the perceived threat was the influx of non-European, non-Christian migrants, perniciously undermining, in his view, the supposed ethnic and cultural homogeneity of his homeland.

This begs the question: what defence can the humanities mount against this rising tide of far-right nativism, which has become so dominant at this historical moment that it even controls the executive power of the United States, and is also on the rise across Europe? The answer, I would say,