

Salvador Dali on the nature of genius, in contrast with Yukio Mishima

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Abstract. This paper tries to capture Salvador Dali's conception of a genius in his *Diary of a Genius*. The Japanese writer Mishima strikes me as of a comparable level, but if so it seems he either does not think of himself as a genius or he has a different conception of genius.

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"Both a fool and a king

Find a rule a lovely thing."

The purpose of this paper is to contrast the conception of a genius in Salvador Dali's *Diary of a Genius* with information about Mishima and what it entails on the topic, as well as to make a suggestion. I start with the former.

Salvador Dali. Dali writes:

Ever since the French revolution there has been growing up a vicious, cretinising tendency to consider a genius as a human being more or less the same in every respect (apart from his work) as ordinary mortals... This book will prove that the daily life of a genius, his sleep, his digestion, his ecstasies, his nails, his colds, his blood, his life and death are essentially different from those of the rest of mankind. (1966: 15)

To this end, he even describes such things as his excrement. Who would do such a thing?! He writes:

This morning an exceptional defecation: two small turds in the shape of rhinoceros horns. (1966: 59)

Dali is probably using “exceptional” with multiple meanings here. Anyway, we can summarize Dali on genius in bullet points for any browsing readers:

- Geniuses are a rare kind of human being: they are different in kind from the rest.
- This difference is in all aspects of their being, not just their work, such as digestion, nails and their reactions to ordinary accidents, such as spilling coffee (1966: 15, 207).
- The difference is scientifically provable without too much difficulty. It is not so subtle that it cannot be detected by scientific standards of proof or that proof is very difficult.
- Salvador Dali is a good example of a genius.

That is the Dali exposition over.

Mishima. The cover blurb of Mishima’s *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* tells us:

He graduated from Tokyo Imperial University School of Jurisprudence in 1947; his first novel was published in 1948. Since then he has been writing constantly: nine novels, four successful plays for the Kabuki Theatre, and a travel book. He writes that his “lesser” writings include fifty short stories, ten one-act plays, and several volumes of essays. (1959)

Mishima seems a comparable level to Dali in the arts, to me anyway. But he writes of his lesser writings, according to the blurb. That seems to leave two options:

(A) He shares Dali’s conception of genius, but does not take himself to be a genius, because everything a genius does is exceptional.

(B) Or he has a different conception of genius.

Is there a third option? How can we reconcile the perspectives of the two creators? Does “lesser” just mean briefer? Perhaps we need to see more of these lesser writings, especially essays.



References

Dali, S. 1966. *Diary of a Genius*. London: Hutchinson.

Mishima, Y. (translated by I. Morris), 1959. *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. London: Secker and Warburg.