

# INTRODUCING A WRITER IN A FOREIGN CULTURAL SPACE THROUGH THE PARATEXT: FUNCTIONS OF THE BACK-COVER BLURBS IN THE ROMANIAN EDITIONS OF MISHIMA YUKIO'S NOVELS

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**Abstract.** In the case of literary translations from Japanese into Western languages, paratextual elements such as book blurbs are one of the tools through which the contact between the target-culture readers and the literary work is mediated. The purpose of this study is to determine the role of back-cover blurbs in the process of introducing and promoting a foreign author in a new culture – in our case, the Japanese writer Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) in Romania. Throughout this article, I will present six functions of blurbs which contribute to creating a specific image of a foreign writer and his work in the target cultural space: 1. (re)confirming his literary value and including him in a literary canon; 2. presenting the book-to-screen adaptations of his novels; 3. illustrating similarities between Mishima's style and the style of some famous authors from the European cultural space; 4. marking the cultural difference; 5. referring to other valences of Mishima Yukio's literary works; 6. exposing the universal character of Mishima Yukio's literary work.

**Keywords:** Japanese literature, Mishima Yukio, paratext, literary translation, book covers, book blurbs

## 1. Introduction

The first contact of the reader with a new literary work is often made through the book covers that attire the pages which contain the text itself. In the case of books translated from a foreign language and originating in a completely different cultural space, the cover frequently

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has the role of presenting the Other's world from a certain perspective (especially the publisher's perspective). Additionally, not only the cover design – the chosen pictures, the fonts, the colours, and other graphical characteristics – but also the back-cover blurbs introduce the literary work in the target cultural space, all of them being parts that reveal some interpretations and opinions about the literary work. In this context, they represent a means of introducing the target-culture reader to the literature of a foreign writer and can influence the way he/she perceives it.

In this paper, I will explore the functions of back-cover blurbs in the Romanian editions of Mishima Yukio's novels. First, I will present their structure and various roles, and then will turn my attention to the way the Japanese writer was introduced in Romania. Next, I will propose six other functions of back-cover blurbs and examine how they contribute to the construction of a certain image of Mishima Yukio's literary figure and work in the Romanian cultural space. Finally, I will formulate conclusions regarding the paratext as a means of introducing and promoting a foreign author.

## **2. The Roles and Structure of Book Blurbs**

The paratext is, as Genette puts it, "what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (Genette 2001: 1) and, in addition, "[...] – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (Genette 2001: 2). Furthermore, Basturkmen refers to the promotional function of the blurb: "The blurb on the back cover of a book has a strong promotional function aiming to entice readers to select the book in question" (Basturkmen 2009: 68). At the same time, Sapiro highlights the following aspect regarding blurbs: "Operation of transfer of symbolic capital from a well-known to an unknown author" (Sapiro 2016: 399). In our case, blurbs, which are a paratextual component, determine the reader to either (buy and) read the book or not. Besides, as Sapiro notes (2016: 399), by incorporating the positive evaluation of a famous writer, the

other writer benefits from recognition in the literary world. By including, for instance, compliments on the writer's style or statements made by some renowned writers about that author's writings, or by mentioning the literary awards he/she has won, they may influence the potential reader to purchase and read the book. What is more, blurbs mediate the contact between the reader and the literary work, transforming the texts – in our case, Mishima Yukio's novels - into intellectually attractive cultural products that are addressed to the target audience; they resize and rearrange the text, that is, they offer explanations concerning that literary work and position it in "The World Republic of Letters" (Casanova 2004), for instance, by including clarifications of the concepts that appear in the novel or words that belong to other literary personalities. Additionally, blurbs provide the first image of that text by sometimes offering its summary and some interpretations concerning the ideas that are present in the novel, thus being able to influence the way the text is perceived by the target-culture readers.

As regards the structure of blurbs, Gea-Valor states that they "may be considered as a genre, characterised by its own communicative purpose, rhetorical organisation and linguistic conventions" (2005: 48). Indeed, they can be seen as a distinct text type, since they accomplish more roles (we refer only to books that originated in other cultures): to introduce an author's personality and works into a foreign cultural space, to promote the literary value of his writings (at the same time in order to influence the book sales), to impact the reader as regards that author's views and ideas. This distinctiveness is also upheld by the functions performed by blurbs. "The discourse of advertising is characterised by two main communicative elements: information and persuasion" (Gea-Valor 2005: 43), and their structure additionally attributes an "affective function" to Move 2 (Gea-Valor 2005: 52). The rhetorical structure of blurbs consists of three main moves, each one performing a specific function:

Move 1. Description;

Move 2. Evaluation;

Move 3. About the author. (Gea-Valor 2005: 48)

What is more, the structure of blurbs can take other forms, as Cacchiani suggests: “Move 1, *Identification*, Move 2, *Establishing credentials*, Move 3, *Highlighting parts of the book*, Move 4, *Appraising the book: quotations/endorsements*” (2007: 4-5). Önder refers to online fiction books and proposes the following classification: “Move 1 – complimenting the author, Move 2 – book description, Move 3 – justifying the book by establishing a niche, Move 4 – book promotion, Move 5 – author’s background and Move 6 – author’s website/blog” (2013: 178).

In the following two parts of this article, I will describe how Mishima Yukio’s literature was introduced in Romania and propose six functions that illustrate how back-cover blurbs contributed to promoting his image and works in the Romanian cultural space.

### 3. Mishima Yukio’s Novels in Romania

Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), a Japanese author considered for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963, 1964, and 1965, is one of Japan’s most famous writers in the Western cultural space. His writings are multifaceted, as Gheorghe writes, “some of his works being inspired by *Kojiki* and *Ise Monogatari*. He was also interested in Western literature, especially admiring Oscar Wilde’s essays” (2008: 181). In order to reveal how Mishima was introduced in Romania, I will take into consideration Tobias’ explanations concerning the introduction of Japanese literature in the American space. Tobias is a scholar who presents the following phenomenon which illustrates the activity of American publishing houses: the 1950s and 1960s were marked by the fact that many of them dealt with the publication of Japanese literature, but they did not focus on a large number of authors and, as Tobias states, the selected ones made up “the canon of Japanese literature for Western readers. Among them are, for example, Mishima Yukio, Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886-1965) (Tobias 2006: 33). Many of their works were later translated into Romanian, and one may say that they also form “the canon of Japanese literature for Romanian readers” as well. In addition, Fowler argues that post-war translations of Japanese literature have played an important role in creating a post-war image of

Japan in the American cultural space, with Japan being portrayed through the cultural difference and the exotic character (Fowler 1992: 3); what is more, as Fowler writes, this image is “aestheticized” (Fowler 1992: 3). As I mentioned in another article, this image is present in Romania as well (Alexandrescu 2022: 14).

Mishima Yukio’s novels (1925-1970) translated from Japanese into Romanian provide the appropriate framework for an analysis of book blurbs; as a matter of fact, a relatively large number of novels written by him have appeared in a Romanian edition in recent years at Humanitas Publishing House: 金閣寺 *Kinkaku-ji* (English version: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*,<sup>1</sup> Romanian version: *Templul de aur*, translated by Angela Hondru (2000, 2013b)); 宴のあと *Utage no Ato* (English version: *After the Banquet*, Romanian version: *După banchet*, translated by Stanca Cionca (2004, 2015b)); 仮面の告白 *Kamen no Kokuhaku* (English version: *Confessions of a Mask*, Romanian version: *Confesiunile unei măști*, translated by Emil Eugen Pop (2003, 2015a)); 春の雪 *Haru no Yuki* (English version: *Spring Snow*, Romanian version: *Zăpada de primăvară*, translated by Angela Hondru (2012b)); 潮騒 *Shiosai* (English version: *The Sound of Waves*, Romanian version: *Tumultul valurilor*, translated by Andreea Sion (2010)); 奔馬 *Honba* (English version: *Runaway Horses*, Romanian version: *Cai în galop*, translated by Andreea Sion (2014b)); 天人五衰 *Tennin Gosui* (English version: *The Decay of the Angel*, Romanian version: *Îngerul decăzut*, translated by Andreea Sion (2012a)); 暁の寺 *Akatsuki no Tera* (English version: *The Temple of Dawn*, Romanian version: *Templul Zorilor*, translated by Mihaela Merlan (2011)); 愛の渇き *Ai no Kawaki* (English version: *Thirst for Love*, Romanian version: *Sete de iubire*, translated by Iuliana Oprina (2013a)); 午後の曳航 *Gogo no Eikō* (English version: *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, Romanian version: *Amurgul marinarului*, translated by Andreea Sion (2017a)); 命売ります *Inochi Urimasu* (English version: *Life for Sale*, Romanian version: *Viață de vânzare*, translated by Andreea Sion (2018b)). Moreover, the volume 朝の純愛 *Asa no Jun'ai* (English version: *A Morning of Pure Love*, Romanian version: *O dimineață de iubire pură*, translated by Andreea Sion

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<sup>1</sup> The English versions of the titles mentioned throughout this article represent the titles of the English translations of Mishima Yukio’s literary works.

(2019)), which contains seven short stories, Mishima's essay 太陽と鉄 *Taiyō to Tetsu* (English version: *Sun and Steel*, Romanian version: *Soare și oțel*, translated by George Șipoș (2008)) and 葉隠入門 *Hagakure Nyūmon* (English version: *The Way of the Samurai*, Romanian version: *Calea samuraiului astăzi*, translated from the English by Iuliu Rațiu (2007, 2014b)) appeared at Humanitas Publishing House. The last one is also present in Romanian in the form of an audiobook narrated by the actor Constantin Codrescu (2009). Furthermore, the Romanian version of *Inochi urimasu* is the first translation of the novel in the world. Besides, texts written by Mishima Yukio were also published in Romanian magazines, as is the case of *Lucefărul de dimineață* and *Neuma*, in which two of Mishima's plays appeared (also directly translated from the Japanese by Ana Laura Cocora), namely *Hanjo* (Mishima 2017b) (in *Lucefărul de dimineață*, no. 11-12, November-December, 2017) and *Seijo* (Mishima 2018a) (in *Neuma*, no. 1-2 (3-4), January-February, 2018). What is more, as Gheorghe points out with regard to the literary translations that appeared in communist Romania,

as far as Romania is concerned, it is in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that one sees an increase in the interest in the Japanese literary tradition [...] Although the number of translations of Japanese literary texts did not increase much due to Communist censorship and the fact that Japan was a monarchy and a successful Capitalist state (which was anathema for the leftists in Bucharest), modern Japanese literary translations started being published in greater numbers than before the Second World War. (2018 [2021]: 141)

Concerning Mishima's literature, some of his novels were also published during the communist era by Univers Publishing House, which may be regarded as the publisher that contributed to the introduction of the flavour of Mishima's literature into Romania by publishing the novels 宴のあと *Utage no ato* (English version: *After the Banquet*, Romanian version: *După banchet*, translated by Stanca Cionca) in 1979 and 金閣寺 *Kinkaku-ji* (English version: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Romanian version: *Templul de aur*, translated by Angela Hondru) in 1985. During that era, other literary works that belong to Mishima Yukio were

translated into Romanian, but these were cases of indirect translation, since they were not directly translated from the Japanese; for instance, Univers Publishing House published Ana Maria Năvodaru's 1975 translation from French into Romanian of Mishima's novel 潮騒 *Shiosai* (English version: *The Sound of Waves*, Romanian version: *Tumulțul valurilor*), whose first translated version from Japanese into Romanian by Andreea Sion appeared in 2010. According to the data, the first presence of Mishima's texts in the Romanian language was the following: "Yukio Mishima already appeared in a Romanian translation with *Tărâmul durerii* [The land of pain], in 1971, in *România literară* (no. 15, translated by Narcis Zărnescu)" (Frențiu et al. 2020: 157).

One can infer that numerous editions of Mishima's works have appeared in Romanian translation, an aspect which underlines the fact that he belongs to the canon of Japanese literature. In order to explain how back-cover blurbs contributed to introducing and promoting his literary figure in Romania, I will further display six functions they perform.

#### **4. The Functions of Back-Cover Blurbs in the Romanian Editions of Mishima Yukio's Novels**

In what follows, I will present six functions of back-cover blurbs that appear in the Romanian editions of Mishima Yukio's literary works: 1. (re)confirming his literary value and including him in the canon of Japanese literature; 2. presenting the book-to-screen adaptations of his novels; 3. illustrating similarities between Mishima's style and the style of some famous authors from the European cultural space; 4. marking the cultural difference; 5. referring to other valences of Mishima Yukio's literary works; 6. exposing the universal character of Mishima Yukio's literary work. Additionally, I will mention the Romanian edition in parentheses and the source of the excerpts in italics. If not mentioned in italics, that part belongs to the publisher.

*a. (Re)confirming the literary value and including Mishima in the canon of Japanese literature*

By performing this function, the blurbs promote the literary value of Mishima's novels and thus influence the potential reader to purchase and read the book as a book characterized by literary value. As Casanova notes, "another characteristic of literary capital is that it rests on judgments and reputations" (Casanova 2004: 16). In our case, these "judgments and reputations" belong to either a Japanese voice (the Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), the Japanese newspaper *Asahi*) or a Western one (the American writer Paul Edward Theroux (b. 1941), the periodicals *National Review*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The New Yorker*):

- (1) ... of the most talented and spiritual of the postwar Japanese novelists<sup>2</sup> (Mishima 1985)
- (2) *Mishima is one of those geniuses who are born every three hundred years. In terms of talent, he is far superior to me.* (statement belonging to Kawabata Yasunari, Nobel Laureate of Literature, mentioned in Mishima 2010; Mishima 2012b; Mishima 2014a; Mishima 2015a)
- (3) *The tetralogy The Sea of Fertility is Mishima's great literary testament.* (Mishima 2014a) *National Review*
- (4) *Considered Yukio Mishima's masterpiece, the tetralogy The Sea of Fertility [...]* (Mishima 2012a)
- (5) *Considered one of Yukio Mishima's best novels, After the Banquet [...]* (Mishima 2015b)
- (6) *After the Banquet is the book with the most pronounced novel-like character of Mishima [...]* (Mishima 2015b) *New York Times*
- (7) *Kazu, the female character in After the Banquet, is the most important and deepest achievement in Mishima's entire prose-writing career.* (Mishima 2015b) *The New Yorker*
- (8) *The tetralogy The Sea of Fertility is the most complex image of twentieth-century Japan.* (Mishima 2011) Paul Edward Theroux
- (9) *Life for Sale is undoubtedly a masterpiece [...]* (Mishima 2018b) *Asahi*

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all (re)translations from Romanian into English are by the author of this article.



- (10) *Through Confessions of a Mask (1949), the Japanese public discovers the literary resources of the novel written in first person, and the Europeans discover a great Japanese writer.* (Mishima 2003)
- (11) *A great literary work [...]* (Mishima 2013b) *Chicago Tribune*

As can be noticed, the selected examples refer to Mishima's talent ((1), (2)), the idea of a distinguished literary work ((4), (5), (9), (11)), the place a specific work occupies in Mishima's literature and at the same time its importance ((3)), a feature of the novel ((6)), the place a character occupies in Mishima's literature ((7)), the society depicted in the novel and the value of this depiction ((8)), a comparison between what the Japanese and the European audiences' experience and a positive evaluation of Mishima ((10)). What also contributes to consecrating Mishima Yukio in the Romanian cultural space is the use of a quote about a Buddhist legend extracted from the volume *Mishima: A Vision of the Void*, written by Marguerite Yourcenar (in Mishima 2012a), as well as the following statement, which belongs to Yourcenar as well: "[...] beyond the psychological or metaphysical value, it (the idea of reincarnation – AN) allows Mishima to portray Japan from 1912-1970 from a whole new perspective" (qtd. in Mishima 2011).

By including components like the above-mentioned ones, the back-cover blurbs emphasize Mishima's literary value both in the Japanese and in the Western cultural space and aim at transferring it into the Romanian one. Thus, the blurbs fulfil the role of recreating Mishima Yukio's fame in Romania and recommending him as one of Japan's talented writers.

### ***b. Presenting the book-to-screen adaptations of Mishima Yukio's novels***

In addition, some of the blurbs present the book-to-screen adaptations of Mishima's novels, which is an aspect that has the role of highlighting his fame, as well as the place of his works in Japanese cinema and popular culture:

- (1) [...] *the novel The Sound of Waves (Shiosai) has been adapted in Japan five times.* (Mishima 2010)
- (2) *Adapted in 2005 under the direction of Isao Yukisada, Spring Snow is part of the tetralogy The Sea of Fertility, Yukio Mishima's masterpiece.* (Mishima 2012b)

- (3) *Runaway Horses* [...] was adapted in 1985 in an episode of the film inspired by the biography and work of the Japanese writer Mishima: *A Life in Four Chapters*, directed by Paul Schrader, with Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas among the producers. (Mishima 2014a)
- (4) Cult novel, originally serialized in the magazine *Shūkan Playboy* in 1968, *Life for Sale* was relaunched in 2015 [...] The new edition, published in a volume, was a great success, in less than two months reaching the first place in the tops of book sales, and in January 2018 the television channel BS Japan started broadcasting a series inspired by the novel. The world's first translation of this recently rediscovered masterpiece appears in the collection "*Denisa's Shelf*." (Mishima 2018b)
- (5) One of Mishima's best-known novels, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* has been adapted three times [...] (Mishima 2013b)

While the large number of the adaptations of a single literary work ((1), (5)) may positively impress the potential reader, who will probably reflect on the versatility of the text and its artistic value, the names of the American film directors George Lucas (b. 1944) and Francis Ford Coppola (b. 1939), and the screenwriter Paul Schrader (b. 1946) are mentioned with the aim of artistically legitimating the Japanese author in the Western cultural space. Moreover, not only Western voices from the world of cinematography but also Japanese ones – Yukisada Isao (example (2)), Ichikawa Kon (1915-2008) (in Mishima 2013b), and Takabayashi Yōichi (1931-2012) (in Mishima 2013b) – appear in these blurbs, thus illustrating Mishima's place in the Japanese cultural space as well. Interestingly, by indicating the series in example (4), which is broadcast by a Japanese television channel, the blurbs underline the existence of a relationship between Mishima's writings and popular culture, which may attract contemporary readers.

*c. Illustrating similarities between Mishima's style and the style of some famous authors from the European cultural space*

Another aspect observed in the blurbs is the tendency to exhibit similarities between Mishima's style and the style of some famous authors from the European cultural space. For instance, as regards the

psychological analysis of the characters, the Japanese writer is compared to Stendhal (*Christian Science Monitor*, in Mishima 2012b). The publishing house thus tries to enclose Mishima in a literary canon, to consecrate him, to “domesticate” his style – to use Venuti’s concept (1995), to expose his view, which is based on the Japanese world through a European frame of reference, in this case presenting the perception of the Other with the help of the Self:

- (1) *echoes of Shakespearean drama* (Mishima 2012b)
- (2) *Mishima resembles [...] Dostoevsky in exploring enigmatic destructive personalities.* (Mishima 2012b) *Christian Science Monitor*
- (3) *Mishima recreates Kyōto, starting from the image of the temple, as Victor Hugo rebuilt medieval Paris starting from Notre-Dame Cathedral.* (Mishima 2013b) *The Nation*

By including excerpts in which only the names of renowned authors (and not of lesser-known writers) are mentioned, i.e. Dostoevsky, Hugo, Stendhal, and Shakespeare, the publisher intends to canonize Mishima, thus impacting the reader. Besides, the points of comparison (for instance, “enigmatic destructive personalities” in (2)) clearly show the aspects which attest to the literary value of Mishima’s works.

***d. Marking the cultural difference, referring to other valences of Mishima Yukio’s novels, and exposing the universal character of his literary work***

Moreover, some of the quotations in the blurbs emphasize the fact that his works belong to Japanese literature, thus marking the cultural difference. Mishima is reconstructed as an author who includes in his writings elements that are specific to the Japanese world, sometimes displaying images that have the role of “aestheticizing” (Fowler 1992: 3) (or even exoticizing), for example, the comparison with a Japanese garden (in (1)). In addition, the words “the essence of the Japanese soul” (in (2)) are used to stress the difference between the Self and the Other; “the Japanese soul” is perceived as something mysterious to Western readers. Furthermore, we also observe in the third example the comparison with

a French writer, but this time it refers to the Japanese equivalent of the respective author, which is also a form of reconstruction of the Other with the help of Western resources. In this case, the cultural difference is strengthened by the sequences “a very Japanese Mishima” and “His book [...] made me understand a little of how it feels to be Japanese”, which lay emphasis on the fact that Mishima belongs to a particular cultural space and that his work illustrates the Japanese world:

- (1) *An archetypal love story that captures at the same time the essence of the Japanese soul.* (Mishima 2010)
- (2) *A novel of impeccable beauty, like a Japanese garden.* (Mishima 2012b) *Chicago Sun-Time*
- (3) *One might say, “Here is a Japanese Gide,” [...] But no, Mishima is himself – a very Japanese Mishima; lucid in the midst of emotional confusion, funny in the midst of despair, quite without pomposity, sentimentality or self-pity. His book, like no other, has made me understand a little of how it feels to be Japanese.\*<sup>3</sup>* (Mishima 2015a)  
Christopher Isherwood

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the blurbs refer to other valences of Mishima’s literary works, which demonstrates that his image in the Romanian cultural space includes not only the exotic character often existing in the case of presentations about Japanese literature. For instance, other facets of Mishima’s work appear, which illustrate his style and view. Such an excerpt depicts not only the different approaches that appear in his works as regards the construction of his characters, but also the fact that, despite these striking differences, there is a unity in his literature (“depth”):

*Life for Sale left me with a completely different impression from Mishima’s other novels [...] The characters are multicolored and caricatured like you never thought you could meet at Mishima. But the novel does not lack the elements of depth [...]* (Mishima 2018b) Katō Shigeaki

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<sup>3</sup> “Confessions Of A Mask” (<https://paperbackbooks.com.au/p/fiction-confessions-of-a-mask--10>, accessed June 24, 2022, 19:42).

Besides, as can be inferred from the following excerpts, Mishima's image in the Romanian cultural space includes not only the exotic character often existing in the case of presentations about Japanese literature, but is also related to universal forms of essential aspects of human life such as love. What is more, this character contributes to consecrating Mishima Yukio in the Western space, since his work encompasses such universal themes:

- (1) *Like pearl fishers, readers will discover in this novel, beyond the exoticism of the Orient, the gentle and timeless charm of one's first love.* (Mishima 2010) *Kirkus Reviews*
- (2) *A love story so universal that it could happen anytime, anywhere.* (Mishima 2010) *San Francisco Chronicle*

The book blurbs can also contain a specific discourse on the Other, nuancing its Alterity, as is the case of the ones presenting cultural dissimilarities. What is more, some blurbs fulfil the role of presenting other facets of Mishima's literature, thus contributing to expanding the reader's view of the literary works belonging to the Japanese writer. Additionally, some of them depict his novels as works that are not only characterized by culturally specific elements, but also by universality as well, which is an aspect that may impact the reader who is not familiar with Japanese literature.

## 5. Concluding remarks

To sum up, the blurbs introduce Mishima Yukio's personality in the Romanian cultural space; they contain various elements that build the portrait of one of the most important Japanese literary figures, comparable in terms of style, view, and especially literary value with the Western ones. Furthermore, some excerpts reconstruct his portrait from a Western perspective; as already observed, sometimes there is a tendency to present and promote Mishima according to a Western perspective. In addition, we notice Yourcenar's words, as well as various statements that appeared in famous Western periodicals, such as *Christian Science Monitor*, *The New*

*Yorker*, *New York Times*, and *Chicago Sun-Time*. They have a certain density in terms of the reconstruction of Mishima's fame in Romania and are examples for the transfer of symbolic capital (Sapiro 2016: 399). At the same time, the blurbs include excerpts from the well-known Japanese newspaper *Asahi*, as well as statements belonging to Japanese voices – Kawabata Yasunari and Katō Shigeaki, although their frequency is not high in comparison with the excerpts of Western origin. Consequently, one can talk about a relatively low representation of the Japanese voice in the case of the excerpts that compose the blurbs, the voice that consecrates Mishima in the case of the Romanian editions of his novels being prevalently the Western one.

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