

## **Death and Desire in Contemporary Japan**

Representing, Practicing, Performing

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# **The Magnified Body of Survival** Tracing Communication Paradigms in Hiroshima and Nagasaki's Storytelling

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**Abstract** This essay concerns a number of problematic aspects of literary communication within works of literature about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Specifically, it tries to compare and put into perspective the different approaches and motivations by authors who are also survivors and readers who are not into the literary text, when what is at stake is the knowledge of extremely violent experiences as Hiroshima and Nagasaki's bombings. After a partial survey of writings about the atomic bombings produced outside the two cities by non-survivors, the essay will focus on some characteristic traits of Hiroshima and Nagasaki's witness literature, in the light of which the paradigm of literary communication will be questioned and integrated to account also for the difficult relationship between the act of writing something that resists being put into words, and the attempt at participation that is the act of reading.

**Summary** 1 The Uninteresting Weapon. A Different approach to Hiroshima and Nagasaki's Bombings. – 3 Mushroom Clouds. A Look at Hiroshima and Nagasaki from Afar. – 4 Vulnerable Literature. Problematic Aspects in the Fruition of Literary Works about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. – 5 Conclusions.

**Keywords** Hiroshima. Nagasaki. Witness Literature. Atomic Bomb. Storytelling. Literary Theory.

## **1 The Uninteresting Weapon. A Different Approach to Hiroshima and Nagasaki's Bombings**

In 1946, responding to those asking what she thought of the atomic bomb, Gertrude Stein wrote a short reflection, which was opened by a seemingly dismissive statement: she "had not been able to take any interest in it".

I like to read detective and mystery stories, I never get enough of them but whenever one of them is or was about death rays and atomic bombs I never could read them. What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. (Stein 1973, 161)

The apocalyptic, end-of-the-world symbology surrounding the bomb is intentionally overturned by Stein: the atomic bomb is of the utmost unimportance to the human mind, exactly because it was conceived (and displayed) as the most destructive weapon known to humankind. She then proceeds remarking that a world where nobody survives is not even worthy of discussion:

I never could take any interest in the atomic bomb, I just couldn't any more than in everybody's secret weapon. That it has to be secret makes it dull and meaningless. Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. (161)

Here Stein defies the ominous commentary on the atomic bomb that had been so frequent at the time, only to point out a simple yet fundamental fact: a story is worthy of our interest insofar as it regards human survival, instead of mechanically wrought death and destruction.

Stein's take at the preoccupation with the nuclear weapons anticipates the inherent complexity of the act of looking from a distance at such disastrous events as Hiroshima and Nagasaki: it is necessary, she implies, to have 'stories' as points of observation, as well as the intention to step onto those standpoints and look at the scene. Stein noticeably uses the future tense when she speculates that the atomic bomb might "destroy a lot and kill a lot". The reference to fiction, together with the absence of any mention (at least explicit) to the two Japanese cities where the bombings were very real, past- and present-tense issues, suggests that she might have been referring to hypothetical future scenarios, rather than the reality of what had already happened. The atomic bomb as something conceptually surpassing human capabilities of imagination and understanding is what she refuses to be concerned with: her resistance to grant any special status to the bomb lies below the surface of the text, her attitude aimed at reducing the importance given to the atomic bombs in particular and the industry of death in general. Stein was clearly attempting to reverse the rhetoric through which the atomic bomb was often discussed at the time: the ultimate weapon of mass destruction, both terrifying option of future self-annihilation and present epitome of human technological development. The secrecy that Stein calls "dull and meaningless" hints at that ambivalence: what stirs both the fear for the survival of life on Planet Earth as well as the intoxication for the power gained through scientific knowledge retains so dangerous a contradiction, that humankind should know better than even entertaining with the thought of it. Nobody should think highly of the atomic bomb (and of himself through it) – a thought that stands in stark contrast, for example, with the verse from the *Bhagavad-Gita* that J. Robert Oppenheimer recalled coming to his mind right after conducting

the Trinity atomic bomb test in New Mexico in July 1945: "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds". Stein's stance is ethical: she intentionally looks away from the thing that in 1946 was the most dreaded means of mass murder and destruction, treating it as bad science fiction, in order to reinstate human existence at the centre of her discourse. Moreover, we can already infer from her words most of the questions underlying the discussion on the atomic bomb as a matter of human experience: why do we take interest in the atomic bomb? Where do we place ourselves confronting it? What do we do of stories, photographs, drawings, films and performances concerning the bomb? What are their mutual similarities, and how do they differ from each other? How differently are we affected by each one of them? And ultimately, what is there to know about the atomic bomb? If we were to follow Stein's suggestion and substituted the words 'atomic bomb' with 'the living' or 'human being', we would find out that these are possibly the most tantalising questions about our existence and how we shape it into communicative forms. In turn, we also could substitute 'atomic bomb' with other violent experiences of extreme proximity to death, only to realise that, before being allowed to approach any ground zero and the people who survived, we should develop an awareness of where and why we are going to do so.

## **2 Mushroom Clouds. A Look at Hiroshima and Nagasaki from Afar**

A considerable number of thinkers, writers and artists all around the world have been taking interest in the nuclear issue since the two bombs were dropped in 1945. For the most part, however, they do not seem to find it necessary to explain their reasons in addressing the atomic bomb, almost implying it to be an obvious continuation of their own concern for humanity; furthermore, they often cite Hiroshima and Nagasaki as mere place-names retaining all their exotic remoteness, used as objective correlates of the atomic bomb. One surprising example of this tendency is Elias Canetti: despite his thoughtful observations on Second World War's atrocities in Europe, he writes about the two atomic detonations in Japan in one entry of his notebooks, omitting both cities' names altogether and fitting the issue within his main discourse: his personal struggle to defeat death (Canetti 1978, 66-7).

It is true that the information available to Canetti at the time were scarce. By the end of 1946, John Hersey's reportage from Hiroshima, first published in *The New Yorker*, had already had wide circulation in the United States, the United Kingdom and France, displaying a completely different point of view to its readers: that of six Hiroshima citizens who had survived the blast and had been willing to share their testimonies. The

title itself, *Hiroshima*, left no doubt about the setting of the account: for the first time, the public outside Japan was allowed to look at the bomb from the ground up and have a better knowledge of the extent of the destruction and the suffering it had caused, instead of contemplating the gigantic mushroom cloud, in awe but unaffected, from the point of view of the crew members on board of the two B29 planes, Enola Gay and Necessary Evil, who had filmed and photographed it. The reasons for publishing it were also made clear by the editors:

The New Yorker this week devotes its entire editorial space to an article on the almost complete obliteration of a city by one atomic bomb, and what happened to the people of that city. It does so in the conviction that few of us have yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive power of this weapon, and that everyone might well take time to consider the terrible implications of its use. (*The New Yorker*, 31 August 1946)

Hersey's *Hiroshima* exerted a great influence on all the debates that henceforth ensued about the employment of nuclear power both for military and civilian purposes. The atomic bomb could no more be justified avoiding the victims' reality of pain and loss. After *Hiroshima*, which was itself an innovative example of journalism verging toward literature, a large amount of philosophical and artistic commentary spurred in the countries where Hersey's text was made available: an early example is Georges Bataille's essay "A propos de récits d'habitants d'Hiroshima", in which, upon reading Hersey's reportage, he interprets the bomb as the paradoxical product of a world based on the anxiety for everything that is unpredictable and unexpected, a world of human systems where every attempt at preventing future 'misfortune' turns right into what brings that same misfortune onto each individual, who is made unable to face it:

It is strange that concern for the future at the level of the State immediately diminishes the individual's security and chances of survival. But this is precisely the sign of human indifference toward the present instant - in which we suffer and in which we die - [an indifference] that leaves powerless the desire to live. The need to make life secure wins out over the need to live. (Bataille 1995, 229)

As a possible way to overcome this existential impasse, according to Bataille, a 'sovereign sensibility' should be embraced, a state of being "quite close to pure animal sensibility" that "does not see beyond the present moment" and that, in doing so, constitutes "an effort, based on evasion, that can only *reduce* the portion of misfortune". To him, Hiroshima is an experience that is "better to live up to" rather than "lament it, unable to bear the idea of it" (Bataille 1995, 232). Bataille encourages a confron-

tation with the atomic bomb as a moment of heightened awareness of our being in the present, recognising at the same time as counterproductive any dreadful projection into the future as well as any description of it in terms of unbearable horror or mournful tragedy. The instinctual heroism in the face of atrocity that Bataille calls up to, rich in Nietzschean overtones, is intended as a way of bringing the unprecedented scale of destruction caused by the atomic bomb back to the human measure, to its visceral and truest sensibility.

In the following years, while the Soviet Union developed its own nuclear program and the Korean War escalated to the point that U.S. President Harry J. Truman would not exclude the use of the atomic bomb in order to resolve the conflict, the list of people who addressed retrospectively the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or argued about future risks associated with the increase of nuclear arsenals, grew longer. The products originated from this new concern varied considerably, both in forms and assumptions: together with works of historical reconstruction and analysis, there were atomic bomb-themed narratives, films, art and music from several European and American countries. Authors who attempted to specifically portray Hiroshima and Nagasaki's ordeals constitute a minority: while Hersey's reportage stood unparalleled in terms of efficacy and popularity, works which enjoyed a certain attention from the public include Alain Resnais' film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, based on the original screenplay by Marguerite Duras; the philosophical and journalistic writings of German philosopher Günter Anders; *Children of the Ashes* by Austrian writer Robert Jungk; *The Flowers of Hiroshima* by Swedish-American writer Edita Morris; and two children books inspired by the life of atomic bomb child survivor Sasaki Sadako, *Sadako Will Live* by Austrian writer Karl Bruckner and *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by American writer Eleanor Coerr. Most of the authors listed above had visited Hiroshima city before writing about it, or had the chance to listen to witness accounts of what Hiroshima had been like in the aftermath of the bombing; many among them were also political activists, hence the distinctive anti-nuclear and pacifist undercurrent in their works. The majority of works related to Hiroshima and Nagasaki's bombings, on the other hand, are based on various conceptualizations of the real events, which were kept more often than not in the background: the rising fear of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, the nuclear tests, and the production of nuclear energy for civil purposes imbued post-apocalyptic novels like *On the Beach* by British-Australian writer Nevile Shute and science fiction thrillers about the outburst of nuclear war like *Red Alert* by British writer Peter George, which gave impulse to a subgenre in its own right. Existential reflections about the meaning of human survival in the nuclear age are well represented by Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, American Beat Generation

poet Gregory Corso's *Bomb* (an ironic ode to the atomic bomb composed as a calligram creating the shape of a mushroom cloud), and *Cat's Cradle* by American writer Kurt Vonnegut. In music, Polish classical musician Krzysztof Penderecki composed *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, a composition for strings which he dedicated to the enduring memory of the people who perished in Hiroshima's bombing.

Yet, for all the interest they were able to gather around the nuclear issues and the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, almost all these attempts at expressing the epoch-making appearance of the atomic bomb into the world share a common controversial trait. Authors who engage in the representation of the atomic bomb with indirect knowledge of it are focused on its totality: whether they evoke the scale of destruction in the event of a future nuclear conflict or recount the actual bombings through testimonies, they struggle for reliability and accuracy pursuing the total scope of the bomb. The disparate singularities of the survivors are in some cases put together and multiplied in order to gain a full view of the scene; otherwise, survivors are simply referred to by subtraction in the count of the hundreds of thousands of victims: Hersey opted for the former expedient, while figurative arts have usually recurred to the latter, allowing representations dominated by the silhouette of the mushroom cloud in which the living are missing (as in Janet Sobel's 1948 painting *Hiroshima*, Richard Pousette-Dart's 1948 *The Atom. One World*, Andy Warhol's 1965 montage *Atomic Bomb*). The public's expectation to be shown a total representation of the bomb is matched by the authors' concern to recreate it. This spiralling movement around the atomic bomb, in the attempt to wholly encompass it, points to the fact that both the source and the trajectory of the representations become absorbed with the bomb itself, which turns out to be the unidimensional point in space and time from where every representational effort seems to radiate and onto which the imaginative and hermeneutic process seems to collapse. The spectator's eyes and minds end up merging with the aerial picture of the mushroom cloud: its disproportionate size reduces to one single nothingness everything that one might have imagined to exist underneath. Consequently, interest in what is below the cloud seems to be aroused insofar as it gives information about the cloud itself towering above it. Both authors and the public appear to strive at the same time for the origin (the epicentre of the blast) and its maximum expansion in space (the farthest margins of destruction, i.e. the highest point of elevation reached by the cloud). Even when the descriptions of the blast borrow from the testimonies of the survivors, the atomic bomb is treated as a dreadful Big Bang, a cosmological event interpreted as a source of new knowledge and action, the outcome of which is again directed at knowing the source itself, instead of real people and places that were forced to endure the destruction. Most representations of the bomb from afar or, more precisely, from outside Hiroshima and Nagasaki, con-

solidate the myth of unity underlying the human need for any event to be comprehensible and meaningful, even if that characterisation obliterates the multifaceted reality of something as plural and scattered as life before and after Hiroshima and Nagasaki's bombings. There is the expectation for a beginning to their stories, whereas the bombs were sources of nothing but loss of lives, devastation of the environment and eradication of cultural heritage. The idea of total destruction also reinforces the cathartic sense of both safety and of voyeuristic dominance on reality engendered in the beholder. A poignant representation of this paradoxical stance is given by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa in *Hachigatsu no rapusodī* (Rhapsody in August): when the elderly grandmother Kane shares with her grandsons and granddaughters the memory of the day when she saw the bombing of Nagasaki from her house behind the hills, she compares it to a giant demonic eye in the sky looking down on them; Kurosawa edits the portion of blue sky above the hills in the frame, covering it with red clouds ascending, among which two eyelids split horizontally revealing an enormous eye with an almost totally shrunken pupil and cold-coloured iris. Spectators, used to the mushroom-cloud imagery, unconsciously but relentlessly adhere to the point of view of the eye in the sky, standing metaphorically above the destruction, because that is the sight the public have come to expect to find in front of them when looking at the atomic bombs. That expectation grows along the iconic picture of the mushroom cloud: through its neat contours and its graphic stillness, it lures into thinking that one is grasping something that is finite and safe to look at. Through pictures, the observers might easily become convinced that they have a hold onto the enormity of the past event and use that sense of certainty to reflect on the present and fantasise about future bombs both in real life and fiction. Today's public's photographic mind conveniently subordinates the multitude of partial and unverifiable individual memories to the concise, ready-made format of pictures, facilitating the identification of the object as part of a common narrative, open to be brought forward. As Susan Sontag notes:

Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes [...] Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas 'memories', and that is, over the long run, a fiction. [...]

All memory is individual, unreproducible - it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. (Sontag 2004, 76-7)

It is the bomb, then, that attracts one's desire of knowledge and experience: the bomb becomes the source at the centre of creative processes

and imagination, obliterating the survivors and the dead by including them metonymically. Authors in Japan have followed a similar pattern: works like Honda Ishirō's film *Godzilla*, Ōtomo Katsuhiro's manga *Akira*, Buronson and Hara Tetsuo's manga *Hokuto no Ken* (Fist of the North Star), Murakami Takashi's pop teratology, among the others, articulate on the issues of the atomic bombs and the dangers of nuclear energy through imaginary radioactive monsters and post-apocalyptic worlds where human society starts anew in a primitive struggle for survival. Hardly discernible from the explicit elements of these representations, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are still behind it, legitimising representations of rebirth and second coming inspired by the bombings.

In the light of this hypothesis, it is striking how ethically aware was Gertrude Stein's choice to avoid any discussion about the bomb. As a stranger to the facts, taking active interest in the bomb retains the danger of imposing a second symbolical annihilation to those who survived it, denying each one of them the uniqueness of single experiences. Indeed, it has been less frequent that survivors from the two cities were heard as individuals, rather than under the collective name of *hibakusha*<sup>1</sup> whose presence have been often limited to the narrow compartments of commemorating events and promoting peace culture. This is especially true outside Japan: rarely *hibakusha* from Hiroshima and Nagasaki appear onto the scene in the works of European, American and Asiatic authors. The reasons for this fact are complex. Censorship in Japan under the U.S. Press Code during the Occupation, which lasted until 1952, certainly made it difficult for any material about the two bombings to spread beyond the local: Hara Tamiki's novel *Natsu no hana* (Summer Flower) was published in its uncensored form in 1953; Nagai Takashi's *Nagasaki no kane* (The Bells of Nagasaki) was granted publication in 1949 only upon the addition of an appendix, edited by the U.S. General Headquarters, about the massacres in Manila by the Japanese military, titled *Manila no higeki* (Manila's Tragedy); Hiroshima poet Shōda Shinoe published her collection of poems *Sange* (Penitence) in 1946 in secret, despite being told she could be put to death for it.

Moreover, each country cultivated its own prevalent interpretation of the bomb, which crystallised over time through their respective educative systems and public debates. Whereas in the United States the discussion explored war responsibilities and the rhetoric of necessary evil, in many European countries major attention was given to questioning the ethical premises of science and to voicing ecological concerns such as, for example, in the play *The Physicists* by Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt. In the Asian countries invaded by Japan, the accounts of slaughter and abuse

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1 Literally, the word *hibakusha* means "those who were hit by the bomb".



perpetrated by the Japanese military during the invasions and occupations throughout the first half of the twentieth century mostly overshadowed the interest for the atomic bombings (a tendency well documented by South Korean writer Pak Kyongni's epic novel *The Land*).

Similarly, in Japan, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been usually associated with pleas for world peace and dismantlement of nuclear arsenals. In the common debate, the 6th and the 9th of August 1945 are more often cited in connection with Japan's surrender on the 15th of the same month, rather than the exceptional hardships and despair of the life in the two cities after the war. The laconic ending of "Otona ni narenakatta otōtotachi ni..." (To Our Younger Brothers Who Could Never Grow Up...), a short autobiographical story by Yonekura Masakane about war seen through the eyes of a child that has become a standard in the educational curriculum of Japanese students, sums up this perception very well: "on the sixth of August, nine days after my little brother died, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Three days later, on Nagasaki... And then, after six more days, on the fifteenth of July the war ended" (Yonekura 2013, 107; Author's transl.). In school textbooks very few works of literature by authors who survived either Hiroshima or Nagasaki have been included<sup>2</sup> – a fact that, in turn, had a negative impact on their availability to the Japanese public in bookstores and libraries.

Only few works that dealt with the aftermath of the bombings have enjoyed steady popularity and gained visibility outside Japan: Shindō Kaneto's film *Hiroshima no ko* (Children of Hiroshima), Ibuse Masuji's novel *Kuroi ame* (Black Rain), together with the film adaption by Imamura Shōhei, doctor Hachiya Michihiko's *Hiroshima nikki* (Hiroshima Diary), Nagai's novel *The Bells of Nagasaki*, and Nakazawa Keiji's manga *Hadashi no Gen* (Barefoot Gen) are some of the most notable examples.

This long list of examples, albeit partial and in no way exhaustive, hints at the recurrent antagonism within the creative effort to portray and tell the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: that is, the struggle between trying to grasp the total scope of the event and to account for the singular, local experiences of it. It is a conflict that can also be found in the monumental topography of the two cities. In the Peace Park at the centre of

2 According to Tōsho Bunko Textbook Library Search Engine, Hara Tamiki appeared only in textbooks published by Kyōiku Shuppan and Mitsumura Toshō Shuppan between 1978 and 2002; Tōge Sankichi only in textbooks by Sanseidō between 1978 and 2002; Nagai Takashi in textbooks by various publishing houses between 1950 and 1962; Kurihara Sadako only in two textbooks by Kyōiku Shuppan, in 1987 and 1990; Takenishi Hiroko only in one textbook by Kyōiku Shuppan in 1981 and one by Sanseidō in 1990; Hayashi Kyōko only in textbooks by Kyōiku Shuppan and Sanseidō between 1981 and 2012, being the most enduring presence in school textbooks among *hibakusha* authors. Ōta Yōko, Shōda Shinōe, Yoneda Eisaku, Yamada Kan and others have never appeared in any. URL <http://www.toshobunko.jp/search/> (2017-03-10).

Hiroshima, for instance, there are two main commemorative buildings: the older one is the Peace Memorial Museum, built in 1955; the other is the National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims, built in 2002, both based on projects by Tange Kenzō. The older of the two is a conventionally structured museum, organised in two parts: one historical, where the facts leading to the atomic bombing and the aftermath are presented along with information about the risks of nuclear weapons; and one displaying how the atomic bomb affected the environment and the human body, where melted glass bottles, piles of coins fused together, clocks with the arms stopped at 8:15 am and stone slabs with human shadows impressed on them are on display along with human nails, hair and surgically removed scar tissues. The memorial hall of the newer construction is an underground cylindrical building: from the outside it looks like a small hill covered with rubble, with a clock that signs 8:15 am on top; after going in from the entrance, which is on the right side of the structure, there is a narrow corridor going down in a spiral, encased between the sidewall of the building on the right and another, concentric inner wall on the left. While the path slowly descends in the half-light toward the bottom of the cylinder, the only audible noise is the sound of water. At the end of it, it is finally possible to access the inside of the circle: from a small light blue fountain shaped as a 8:15-signing clock at the centre of the room, water flows constantly; on the circular walls, a 360°-view of Hiroshima shortly after the bombing is engraved in black and white; a leaflet both in Japanese and English with a detailed list of the names of the city districts at the time allows to establish their location within the scenery. In the adjacent room, a touchscreen computer system gives access to the database of the deceased in the bombings, with names and photographic portraits when available. The two buildings complete each other, linking the two perspectives on the bombing: the older museum stands for the foreign gaze at the terrifying destruction, while the memorial hall stands for the survivors who tried to trace back their homes, relatives and acquaintances, and then struggled to live on. Interestingly, the latter hall is much less visited than the main museum, and was opened to the public only in 2002, forty-seven years after the bombing. They both are within the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, a space that was intentionally devised to be the hollow centre of the city: as much as a beautiful and quiet place right in the middle of a bustling city, it also represents the irreparable loss it suffered. As a symbolic space, it is not a place where to live or stage stories about surviving. Indeed, the stories of survivors, which revolve more around the hardships of living in the aftermath of the bomb, often take place in the slums along the river where many *hibakusha* lived in poverty, or at the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC)'s research facilities where they went to receive check-ups and ask about what little was known about the consequences of radiation exposure. These places appear mostly in narratives, rather than in other art forms. They refer to a

wider collective narrative: the local history of reconstruction, which is more difficult to access from the outside. The predominant interest for the atomic bomb as the magnetic pole of attraction of many representations leads to overlooking the lingering human aspect to the survival experiences in the two cities. The large scale project by Metabolist architect Ōtaka Masato for the high-density housing estate in the Hiroshima districts of Motomachi and Chōjuen, west of the Hiroshima castle, where the slums hitherto existed, is usually ignored as a site of interest with regards to the atomic bombing's history. In Nagasaki, it is possible to find a similar contraposition between the Atomic Bomb Museum and the cathedral in Urakami district.

It seems that the neatly defined spaces of the museums summarising the atomic bombings, in spite of the horrors shown there, have been taken in more easily than other places standing for the rebuilding of the community, which require not only major linguistic and cultural mediation to access, but also the intention to obtain information and stories beyond the two circumscribed events. Having a deeper comprehension of the lives of people and the history of the land requires a much greater effort, because it implies the building of closer communicative relationships with their experiences. However, engaging in this kind of dialogue, be it face to face or mediated by artistic, narrative or performative vehicles, places the spectator in an extremely weak, vulnerable position: while there is little room to question what words and images are given about the facts, one is also repeatedly told that ultimately comprehension will not be possible, that what is being shown and shared is not at all what it was to be there. Even the instinctive realisation that to be forever excluded by the experience of the bombs is for everybody's own good does not prevent the frustrating feeling inherent to such a contradictory communication: as the receiving end of the process, the spectator is induced to realise not to be entitled to participation nor interpretation, since the outcome would be inevitably fallacious.

This hermeneutical conundrum seems to have specifically undermined the reception of the works of literature written about the bombings. In fact, as a representational theme, Hiroshima and Nagasaki do not necessarily compromise the success of any work created about them. Adding to the above-mentioned films and novels, other acclaimed artists took interest in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: photographer Hosoe Eikō, painter Okamoto Tarō (whose gigantic panels inspired by the atomic bombings entitled *Ashita no shinwa* – The Myth of Tomorrow – have been installed in Shibuya train station since 2008), singer and songwriter Katō Tokiko, playwright Inoue Hisashi, with his play *Chichi to kuraseba* (literally “If I lived with my father”; English translation *The face of Jizo*), also adapted for the screen in 2004. Yet, it is difficult to draw up a similar list of names in literature. Figurative and performing arts seem to encounter the public's favour more easily: a disadvantage for literature that somehow parallels the tendency to overlook the local previously discussed.

### 3 Vulnerable Literature. Problematic Aspects in the Fruition of Literary Works about Hiroshima and Nagasaki

On the one hand, it is true that works of literature (being them autobiographical or fictional) about Hiroshima and Nagasaki bear strong marks of their original environment, therefore resulting into difficult reads to approach even for mother-tongue readers: the heavy rely on dialogues in Hiroshima and Nagasaki dialects, as well as the profusion of place-names of quarters and streets of the two cities, leave the impression that those texts were intended for local readers in the first place. At the same time, this same local character has been used as the main argument in frequent criticism by the literary establishment based in Tokyo. Its main content is summed up best by Kin Kokubo:

When we publish magazines in Hiroshima, people from Tokyo and other places criticize us whether we write about the A-bomb or not. If we write about the A-bomb, they say “You write about nothing but the A-bomb”; and if we don’t, they say, “You neglect the A-bomb”. This sort of thing is very harmful to young writers like myself. Suppose someone lived near Auschwitz and had seen the slaughter there. You wouldn’t necessarily ask them to write about it. In the same way, even though we live in Hiroshima, it is not just *our* obligation to write about it – *everyone* should write about it. (Kokubo quoted in Lifton 1991, 439)

In other cases, criticism has not been limited to the double-faced dissatisfaction toward writers who were found to be either neglecting or obsessed with the atomic bomb as a literary theme. One of the most notable examples of how harsh the dismissal of authors’ writing about Hiroshima and Nagasaki could become is Nakagami Kenji’s comment on Nagasaki author and A-bomb survivor Hayashi Kyōko, upon discussing her work with Karatani Kōjin and Kawamura Jirō in 1982:

I have never, even once, recognized as fiction anything that Hayashi has written. [...] Basically she believes that merely writing about atomic bombings achieve something literary, but [...] if she thinks the atomic bomb automatically equals literature by making a text out of it, then I guess we’ve got to conclude that the A-bomb has finally shown us how literature is to be done, don’t we? (Nakagami quoted in Treat 1995, 109)

Leaving aside disqualifying verbal assaults as when Nakagami calls Hayashi a “literary fascist” and a “fetishist” of the bomb, his criticism strikes a chord. Is the atomic bomb the ultimate literary theme, one that only by being mentioned is capable of branding any writing as literature? Answering such a question is not easy. The unprecedented nature of the

two bombings as well as their magnitude motivated many writers to take on the responsibility of writing about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet, when the preoccupation with the scale and the novelty of the two bombings underlies a work of literature, it seems to often engender controversy, criticism or underestimation, especially if it attempts to feature the total scope of the event. This is true for survivor as well as non-survivor writers: notable examples include Ōta Yōko's *Ningen ranru* (Human Rags),<sup>3</sup> Ibuse Masuji's *Kuroi ame* (Black Rain)<sup>4</sup> and Ōe Kenzaburō's *Hiroshima nōto* (Hiroshima Notes).<sup>5</sup>

The controversial implications of any kind of striving for totality are multiple. One is, of course, the risk of shifting the point of view from the living, walking on the grounds of the two cities, to the weapon itself and its distant onlookers, as Stein's words already implied. Another one is the tendency to superlative characterisation of the events as the 'most' destructive, deadly, terrifying. As Todorov suggests, ranking any violent event at the top of a chart is a frequent symptom of "sacralization" (Todorov 2000, 177-9). In trying to draw the attention to the atrocity, the writer ends up isolating it and alienating the reader by hindering the only thing that a stranger to the facts could possibly do: to take interest in it and try to empathise.

Another form of totality is found in the consideration of the entire body of works about Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a source of collective memory or, as Tachibana puts it, as counter-memory (Tachibana 1998, 6). Not only does it blur the line between testimonial accounts as historical documents and literature even more, but the concern with the truth of what really happened is a never-ending controversy in itself, from which any writing generally comes out defeated either on the grounds of its reliability or its literariness, or both. A possible way out of this theoretical dead end is offered by Horace Engdahl. In his essay "Philomela's Tongue", he first underlines the inner difficulty in testimonial writings that posit themselves as literary works:

There is a clear objection to coupling testimony with literature. What we normally require of true evidence is the opposite at every point of what we usually allow in a literary work, since literature enjoys the privilege of talking about reality as it is not, without being accused of lying. (Engdahl 2002, 6)

3 See Nagaoka Hiroyoshi's criticism in his foreword to the second volume of Ōta's collected works. Nagaoka 2001, 351-3.

4 For an exhaustive review of the critical reception and controversial aspects surrounding *Kuroi ame*, see Treat 1995, 265-77, and Kuroko 1993, 48-59.

5 See Treat's pointed criticism to Ōe's *Hiroshima Notes* in Treat 1995, 255-6, as well as Yoshimoto Takaaki's, quoted in Kuroko 1993, 78.

Since testimony cannot rely on fiction's characteristic way of inventing the truth, it appeals to the listener's disposition of tying a bond of trust: bearing witness requires the public to deem trustworthy the words they are being told. When this necessary bond is translated into literature in order to validate the communicative process underlying the testimony, what comes into play is a feature that usually characterises autobiographies, defined by Lejeune as the "autobiographical pact" (see Lejeune 1989, 15-9). It is a commitment on both parties involved in communication: the writer will be as honest and truthful as possible; the reader will welcome the effort. Yet, this pact is compromised by the aporetic nature of testimonial literature: in most narratives, the reader is being told through intelligible words of facts that the writer declares unspeakable, beyond human comprehension. The writer's statement that a fracture separates language from experience can be seen as a mere figure of speech, but a particularly detrimental one for testimonial literature, since it encodes any utterance in a language that - according to the speaker - does not say what it says, or at least cannot express more than a small fraction of what it should. Articulating on this problematic aspect, Engdahl draws from Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub's ground-breaking work to suggest a solution:

To testify, one must understand the logic in the course of events one is describing. The difficulty in communicating is therefore not only due to the audience's lack of experience of the kind of privation represented, but also to the witness's inability to bring coherence to what he has experienced. In some sense, the speaker and the listener are equally foreign to the event. The difference is that the former has been subjected to its violence and therefore in spite of everything bears a physical knowledge of it. [...]

For a tie to be re-established between the victim and humanity, perhaps they have to meet in this very lack of understanding of what happened. (Engdahl 2002, 9)

Whereas survivors and witnesses (or anyone who decides to speak out for them) are moved by an ethical obligation to elaborate the testimony in the form of literary narratives, the readers have to embrace the ethical obligation to accept the vulnerable, unstable and contradictory nature of those literary efforts. As a matter of fact, it is in this particular fracture that a communicative pattern specific to testimonial literature can be found. It is in this paradoxical functioning that a suggestion of what survivors live in their flesh can be traced, a key to decipher the 'strange murmur' of the body that bears witness to the extreme violence it suffered.



Figure 1. Diagram showing the unfolding of the imagery in the description of the wounded body in Hara's poem

Hiroshima poet and atomic bomb survivor Hara Tamiki encapsulated in his poem *KORE GA NINGEN NA NO DESU* (These are Human Beings) the complex entwining of traumatised body, survival, bearing eyewitness, voicing of the experience and search for a friendly listener.

THESE ARE HUMAN BEINGS  
 PLEASE LOOK AT THE CHANGES THE ATOMIC BOMB HAS CAUSED  
 BODIES HORRIBLY SWOLLEN  
 MEN AND WOMEN ALL TURNED INTO ONE SINGLE FORM  
 OH THOSE CHARRED, DEVASTATED,  
 SMOLDERED FACES, FROM WHOSE BLOATED LIPS A VOICE EXHALES  
 "PLEASE HELP ME"  
 FEEBLE QUIET WORDS  
 THESE THESE ARE HUMAN BEINGS  
 THE FACES OF HUMAN BEINGS.  
 (Hara 1983, 233)<sup>6</sup>

In the attempt to redefine what a human being is while observing the atrociously mutilated yet living bodies, Hara reconnects the dots of human beings whose constituents have been scattered by the atomic bomb, and restores the unity between a person's integrity (the body), identity (face), ability to communicate (voice) and consciousness (words) (fig. 1).

Hara leads the reader's attention onto the bodies, describing them, interpreting their words, and translating them into a domesticated definition of human being even when what is commonly considered human

6 The translation of the poem is made by the Author. The choice of using capital letters reflects the Author's intention to convey Hara's use of *katakana* syllabary in the original text.

is no longer recognisable. This mediation performed by authors of testimonial literature is of crucial importance: the place where they stand is a dangerous border, near which the reader-spectator is allowed as long as the writer-witness feels it safe to be there, for the both of them. There is no turning back from so gruesome and deadly sights: in the Armenian poet Siamant'ō's poem "The Dance", the German woman who is about to recount a scene of slaughter perpetrated by the Turkish gendarmes starts with an invocation similar to Hara's:

This thing I'm telling you about,  
I saw with my own two eyes. [...]  
Don't be afraid. I must tell you what I saw,  
so people will understand  
the crimes men do to men.  
(Siamant'ō 1996, 41)

Significantly, she concludes her testimony with a desperate rhetorical question, making it clear that a witness's sanity is never spared by the horror he or she sees: "How can I dig out my eyes?" (Siamant'ō 1996, 43). Japanese author and Hiroshima witness Ōba Minako also expresses a similar feeling, when she explains that her imaginative process forever bears the marks of the horrific sight of Hiroshima after the bombing, whatever she is writing about. It is especially true in her poetry, as in the following poem titled "Kuroi shimi" (The Black Stain):

The Earth is a burning Technicolor film  
People have no time to stare at  
the fishes shedding tears as they float on the waves.  
Through their eyelashes, lovers  
have no time to lament the ripples on their lips.  
Nervously they rub their tired bodies against each other  
They writhe over the film  
where fire has already spread.  
Since the bells are tolling madly,  
as their breasts are seared black,  
as their hair burn noisily like torches,  
they believe their love is passionate and wild  
while the Atom has gained the status of Creator.  
Since over the Sun, a black stain  
is spreading day by day.  
(Ōba 2005, 64; Author's transl.)

Ōba talks about romance in the time of the atomic bomb: every image is scorched by fire and radiations, on the backdrop of an ever looming



nuclear shadow. A consistent segment of Ōba's oeuvre is devoted to the description of human relationships, sex and love in the post-atomic era. Hiroshima's aftermath, in Ōba's view, does not coincide with a new beginning; on the contrary, she finds continuity in the bombings, as she interprets them as the ultimate expressions of the humankind's primeval desire. It is a core human drive that is translated into survival instinct as well as lust for self-annihilation. To better account for it, she sets out to write an updated *makura e*, a pillow book for the nuclear age, in which men and women express their desire through contorted sexual acts, betrayal, mutilation and murder in the desperate attempt to find companionship and survive. The imagery traces back to the days the young Ōba spent in Hiroshima immediately after the bombing, surrounded by debris and corpses, assisting the dying in their last hours. By Ōba's self admission, everything that she experienced afterward was affected by the trauma of witnessing a massacre of such extreme proportions. As the Japanese word for the act of witnessing suggests, the witness's eyes are stricken (*mokugeki*): as a consequence, his or her sight splits permanently into a double-layered vision, in which the layer of the atrocity keeps superimposing on everyday life's scenery.

This coexistence of separate sights and moments in time, as well as the ominous feeling that everything might quickly turn into something dangerous and terrifying, has a lot to do with the definition of a better paradigm to approach the testimonial literature in general, and literature on Hiroshima and Nagasaki's bombings in particular. What happens to the body and psyche of the witness closely parallels the sudden and violent transformation caused by the atomic bomb to the human environment, from a safe space devised for the living to one saturated with brutality and murder. Overturning the situation back to one that favours the living is a hard task for the witness, on a primary psychosomatic level. This dynamic translates into one of the specific traits to the works of literature about surviving Hiroshima and Nagasaki: one's own body becomes a fractured entity, in which life is so entangled with death that leaving the place where trauma is continuously reenacted becomes more and more difficult. This state of being is best exemplified by Ōta Yōko's *Shikabane no machi* (City of Corpses) very first chapter, in which Ōta describes herself as she obsessively scrutinises her body in search for the deadly marks that forebear its decease:

Nor do I know when death will come to me. Any number of times each day I tug at my hair and count the strands that pull out. Terrified of the spots that may appear suddenly, at any moment, I examine the skin of my arms and legs dozens of times, squinting with the effort. Small red mosquito bites I mark with ink; when, with time, the red bites fade, I am relieved they were bites and not spots.

Atomic bomb sickness inflicts strange, idiotic bodily harm: you remain fully conscious, yet no matter how dreadful the symptoms that appear, you are aware of neither pain nor numbness. For those suffering from it, atomic bomb sickness represents the discovery of a new hell.

Incomprehensible terror when death beckons and anger at the war (the war itself, not the defeat) intertwine like serpents and even on the most listless of days throb violently. (Ōta 1990, 153)

Ōta chooses to focus the opening of her recount onto her own body, which she describes both as something fragile she desperately clings to as well as a scary object: the endangered body of the writer is the unsettling premise to the narrative, acting as the basis upon which the very existence of any writing depends, while also being a menacing, time-ridden thing that threatens to turn into the threshold to a 'new hell'. Readers who approach Ōta's writing find out that what occupies the narrative scene is less the mushroom cloud than the inscrutable entity the body has become for the survivor; that the survivor's body dominates the scene as macroscopically as the erased city does. The survivor's body is the paradigm to any attempt at comprehending the experience of the atomic bombings: while scientific data constitute abstract descriptions of the event, being often outside the scale of what a human being could possibly register with perception alone, it is the survivor's body, as repository of words, the only measure non-survivor spectators could refer to as they try to imagine what the bombings *felt like*. Yet, that same body sets apart those who experienced from those who did not: far from being a fetish for truthfulness, it hinders participation and isolates the one who bears it; having the manifestations of its physiology become unfathomable and it is perceived as working against bearing testimony. Here lies a key component to the communicative status of survival: the body that suffered might be expected to incarnate a tale of survival by itself, as clear and self-explanatory as its resilience might suggest. It turns out that is not the case: the traumatised body seems to become a magnified presence over which the survivor obsesses, while also rendering every word more opaque rather than clearer, insufficient in the face of the full extent of the experience. It is this magnified body that is of hindrance to the communication, by casting a shadow on the usual words' efficacy (or, more precisely, on the accord over the words' efficacy between the parties involved in the communication). The author's body – implicit premise to any communicative act about anything the author intends to discuss – erupts onto the scene as the toxic concretion of the author's violent experience: instead of testifying for the facts put into words, the body ends up obscuring them while threatening the very sustenance of the storytelling. The author-survivor is coerced into a state where the body of evidence proves to be a dramatic distraction from the viability of the utterance – a

subversion of the ontological relationship between the body and the act of writing as it is eloquently put by Jean-Luc Nancy:

The body's no place for writing [...] That we write, no doubt, is the body, but absolutely not where we write, nor is a body what we write – but a body is always what writing exscribes.

There is only exscription through writing, but what's exscribed remains this other edge that inscription, though signifying on an edge, obstinately continues to indicate as its own-other edge. Thus, for every writing, a body is the own-other edge: a body [...] is therefore also the traced, the tracing, and the trace [...] In all writing a body is the letter, yet never the letter, or else, more remotely, more deconstructed than any literality, it's a 'letricity' no longer meant to be read. What in a writing, and properly so, is not to be read – that's what a body is. (Nancy 2008, 87)

Nancy's remark that "a body is the letter, yet never the letter" well resonates with Hara's lyric attempt at reinstating words at the core of the act of writing about the traumatised body, as well as with Ōta's struggling against her own body to create a *good work of literature* about Hiroshima's atomic bombing (Ōta 1995, 228). These authors' works are permeated with the intuition that an epistemic precariousness has infiltrated the foundation of their literary expression – a sense of extreme discrepancy between the experience and the writing, the body and the words – the theorization of which pertains more to the meta-textual level than the intra-textual one. The problem is not the text as a string of words onto which the author-survivor hesitantly rely, while simultaneously denying its efficacy: readers are free to ignore the declared disproportion between words and their message, or also to reduce it to a mere figure of speech. Yet, dismissing it as a nonsensical statement would erase that magnified body pressing onto the scene from beyond the borders of the text, the same body the author-survivor is keenly aware to be writing *against*.<sup>7</sup> Attempting a theorization of this magnified body as a semiotic function is crucial to validate a form of communication as vulnerable as the authors-survivors' attempts at turning their experiences of extreme violence into works of art open to other people's aesthetic fruition. Many works, especially works of literature, would benefit from this revised communication paradigm, which acknowledges its own unbalance and turns it into a meaningful experience.

A helpful starting point is found in the description of literary communication given by Cesare Segre as a "double dyad": expanding on Jakobson's

7 A powerful example of the conflicting interaction between a traumatised body and writing is found in Shōda Shinōe's collection of poetry *Miminari* (The Ringing in the Ears) especially in its sixth section titled "Nikutai o mushibamu genbaku" (The atomic bomb as it consumes our flesh).

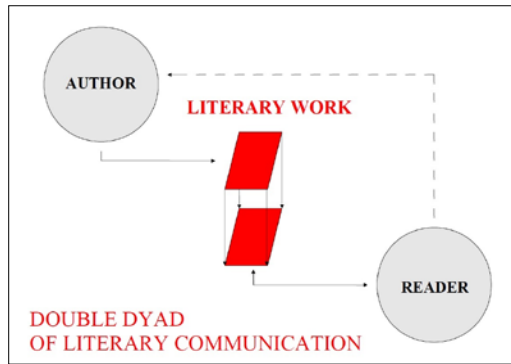


Figure 2. Graphic representation of the double dyad of literary communication according to Segre

classic communication pattern, Segre points out the unstable nature of literary communication, in which the reader (the *addressee*) has the unilateral role of bringing the literary message to its realisation, by choosing it out of personal interest and engaging in its interpretation. Only through this interplay between an object (the literary text) that stands both for the addresser and the message, and a subject who becomes the second maker of it, does a work of literature come into existence (fig. 2):

in literary communication the addresser and the addressee are not co-present; indeed, in general they belong to different periods of time. It is exactly as if literary communication worked not with the addresser-message-addressee triad but with two dyads instead: addresser-message and message-addressee. It follows that communication is all one-way; there is no possibility, as there is in conversation, either of the addressee's checking his understanding [...] or of any adjustment of the communication to accord with his reactions. In consequence, the contact itself is a fairly unstable one. To begin with, it involves only the message-addressee dyad; it is also entrusted entirely to the addressee's interest in the message. The addresser, absent or no longer alive, enjoys at most the possibility of concentrating within his message incentives toward its utilization. (Segre 1988, 4)

The fact that literary communication implies an inevitable blurring of the message along the line connecting the writer-addresser to the reader-addressee is acknowledged as one of its intrinsic features: the literary text, as long as it is physically and linguistically accessible, is open to fruition out of readers' pure volition and subject to multiple interpretations. It is this openness that constitutes the enjoyment every reader experiences approaching it.

Literary works on the atomic bombings challenge this pattern. The author-survivor undermines it in many ways: by refusing to be a faceless

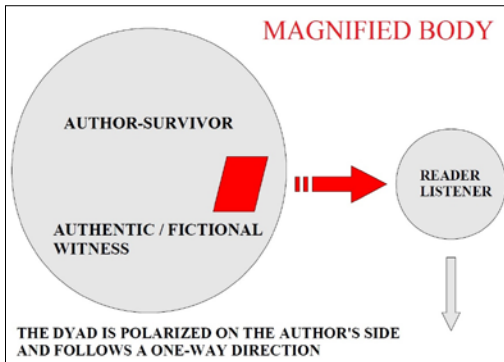


Figure 3. Altered pattern of literary communication in the atomic bomb literature

addresser, not being prone to disappear into the message's texture; by declaring the inefficacy of the message, therefore narrowing the reader's path to interpretation; by splitting his or her very presence within the text as both the subject that emits words of testimony and the object that dooms to failure its chances to survival and sharing of the violent experience. It is this strong perturbation of the communicative pattern, which readers might interpret as an obtrusive presence of the author-survivor in their own range of action, that can be called 'magnified body' (fig. 3).

It is ultimately an open wound in the surface of communication: through it, readers are forced to peer through the cut into the traumatised flesh of the survival, only to be told that they are actually seeing nothing, that what they are looking at is nothing like the real thing. The frustrating experience of being refused access not only stresses the temporary experience of impotence on the reader's side, but it accounts also for what could be considered the most ethical trait to literary works about survival: to deny a sense of communion in sharing violent experiences is to protect from their reiteration, even if by words that are as commanding as much as they are ultimately powerless.

## 4 Conclusions

Adopting a semiotic pattern of literary communication not only turns the aporetic declaration that words are failing to mean what they mean into an empowering communicative function on the author-survivor's side. It also indicates a different and more poignant way of interaction for the reader: diverted from the voyeuristic strive for totality induced by the mushroom cloud imagery, the reader is led to experience what Hiroshima and Nagasaki's bombings have been through the mediation of the author-survivor's body – a body transformed into a literary figure that overwhelms

its spectator and invades the communicative space usually allowed to the reader. It is important to notice that this is actually a vantage point of access: allowing the single body of survival, that is the author-survivor's tale, to become the total scape of storytelling, the reader is made aware that welcoming both the uncertainty around the meaning of words and the obstruction to the message's interpretation is the best attempt at possibly understanding any narrative about surviving to such traumatic experiences in such extreme circumstances.

On the basis of this communicative awareness, also an important feature of literary works that sets them apart from written or spoken accounts by Hiroshima and Nagasaki's witnesses becomes clearer. Also the semiotic function that here has been called 'magnified body' is translated into the impression that, whatever narrator was devised into the text, the storyteller is present to the communicative act and asks the reader to take in the tale and find a way to perform it. It is through this act of performance that the author-survivor is effectively rescued from the isolation of survival (which in Hiroshima and Nagasaki's aftermath also translated into frightful forms of discrimination.) The analysis of what kind of characteristics this performance might actually show will require further study, but a clear suggestion is given, for instance, by the works of Inoue Mitsuharu: his literature about Nagasaki's bombing as well as the dangers in the use of nuclear power is pervaded by the conviction that the reality of the victims ought to be addressed as a "personal problem", that welcoming their feeling inside him is "the first step on the path toward a life of authentic solidarity" with them. Since the atomic bombs were dropped not only on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but "on all Japanese's heads, on every human being around the world", it is only by taking in the victims' bodies and psyches in pain that humankind will be able to heal them as well as overthrow the very possibility that an atomic bomb will be used again (Inoue 1983, 292; Author's transl.). Inoue sets out to do so by climbing into the victims' reality, using his imagination (Inoue 1988, 77). Literary imagination, as Inoue suggests, does not contradict the truthfulness of the storytelling, but actually amplifies it and invites readers to participate in a way that is political as well as ethical. Through literary reenactment (although, at this point, the scope could widen to include other forms of performing art), the author-survivor's writing is delivered from its constraints and finally safe to be made one's own.

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