

Reading Atomic Bomb Literature as a Source of Truth

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Abstract

Although it could be argued that the work of the politician, the historian or the activist is totally divorced from that of the writer of literature, the diverse nature of modern criticism has shown us that the numerous problems which may orbit a controversial historical issue are routinely and legitimately considered as interconnected parts of a whole. The difficult alloy of subjective histories, memories and personal beliefs with which we are faced can obscure or exclude the original fact of the bomb. Thus, when we recall that Hiroshima and Nagasaki are first and foremost human tragedies, the importance and relevance of atomic bomb literature becomes clear.

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Many have noted the importance of eyewitness testimony, particularly in relation to the holocaust:

Eyewitness accounts of decisive events may be as valuable as official dispatches and reports. It is in such versions especially that the human element becomes manifest, affording insights not to be found in documents (Hovannissian, 1974 quoted in Totten, Parsons, Charny (eds.) 1997, xxvi).

It has already been suggested that it is the purpose of "war literature" to provide us with information from a human perspective. That such literature has "value" is beyond question. Writing of his interviews with survivors of Hiroshima, the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1971, 10) notes:

...nuclear weapons left a powerful imprint upon the Japanese which continues to be transmitted, historically and psychologically, through the generations. But I could not begin to understand the complexities of this imprint until I embarked upon my work with Hiroshima victims themselves.

The study of books written by those who were actually present should provide us with an authentic view of the bomb "experience" as it was on that day in history. However, if such works are to be considered as an alternative but valid historical source, then they must be subject to the same types of questions and analysis which we have already discussed.

Hara Tamiki 1905–1951

Hara Tamiki was a born of a prosperous Hiroshima family. He had the advantage of a good education, and had already been published by the time he witnessed the bomb in 1945. Here I wish to discuss the first two parts of Hara's triptych which deal with the Hiroshima episode. The first, *Summer Flowers* begins with the bomb and its immediate aftermath. The second, *From the Ruins*, sees Hara's evacuation to the country. Both short stories are written in the first person, and are basically two parts of a continuous narrative.

Like many writers of the day, Hara had had

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contact with politics: this interest coincided with the rise of the "proletarian literature" movement, and the debate over the importance of "personal truth" in the literature of the 20s and 30s (Mostow (ed.) 2003, 15). Activism during this period was obviously dangerous, and Hara was first arrested in 1931 (Minear (ed.) 1990, 25). That he harboured political views at the time was undeniable, although accounts of the slogans scribbled in his diary; "long live the Communist Party" and "workers of the world unite" (Kawanishi, Hitotsu no unmei, 20, quoted in Minear (ed.) 1990, 25) smack more of a cursory commitment to a cause than of any deep seated ideology. His subsequent "abandonment" of politics (Kawanishi, Hitotsu no unmei, 27, quoted in Minear (ed.) 1990, 25) and louche lifestyle would seem to confirm this.

What is certain, is that Hara was psychologically delicate. He had already attempted suicide once, and death was a constant presence in his life. Seven members of his immediate family had perished before he was forty (Minear (ed.) 1990, 23), and a further arrest, combined with the death of his wife in 1944 were to have a profound effect upon him. In *Writing Ground Zero* (1995, 126), J.W. Treat highlights Hara's possible suitability to his later theme:

Hara's disposition perhaps naturally inclined him to regard, and dwell within, the darker side of human existence with an insight more perceptive than most.

Importantly, the "Summer Flowers" of his atomic bomb triptych were flowers destined for the grave of his recently dead wife. Hara's instability, separation, and his familiarity with bereavement will be important factors in examining his work. His biographer Kawanishi Masaki noted that his pre-war experiences may have been positive influences on his writing:

Precisely because he had cut off the avenues leading to society...he was able better than

anyone else to see the human condition clear-eyed amid the unprecedented experience of the atomic bomb (Kawanishi, Hitotsu no unmei, 39, quoted in Minear (ed.) 1990, 29).

Certainly Hara seemed keen to report the experience, apparently prey to few of the qualms which delayed others who struggled with their memories of wartime destruction:

I wanted to try writing about it with every ounce of power that was in me (Minear (ed.) 1990, 68).

He is concerned to write of his experience as quickly as possible:

I planned to describe in detail the tragedy of what I had personally experienced on August 6th as calmly as I could before it got distorted by time (Hara, *Genbaku wo yomu*, 39, quoted in Mizuta Kuwajiro, quoted in Treat, 1995, 136).

This eagerness is sharply at odds with sentiments expressed by other commentators of tragedy. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winning poet, and survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, wrote of the impossibility of depiction, and the meaninglessness of mere words:

I write to denounce writing. I tell of the impossibility one stumbles upon in trying to tell the tale (Wiesel, *New York Times*, 16 April, 1978, quoted in Marrus, 1993, 3).

Many, like Wiesel, believed that "between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend" (Wiesel, *New York Times*, 17 April, 1973, quoted in Marrus, 1993, 2). Must the difficulty of portrayal therefore invalidate all such endeavours? This has been a major question surrounding atomic bomb literature; one which also raises complex problems of distance, timing, and the issues of "literary" versus "documentary" representation in any work. Yet the attempt to relate, successful or not, is also an important factor. The fact that writers are trying to transmit an experience should not be underestimated. As Lifton (1971, 418) writes:

Artistic recreation of an overwhelming historical experience has much to do with the question of mastery... In Hiroshima and elsewhere the relationship between the quality or popularity of artistic works and the degree of collective mastery is imprecise and difficult to evaluate.

Every author is subject to their own feelings and motivations. To establish standards and thereby judge any work would necessitate much inaccuracy. To negate the possibility of any valid literary report is to ignore the human need to relate; a need which may be urgent and necessary. As Richard Poirier observed:

to write at all is to salvage, however reluctantly, some part of the existent humanity...even if your writing is an invitation to reject and disperse it (Poirier, *Writing Off the Self*, 216, quoted in Treat, 1995, 28).

Moreover, Hara's experiences are far from isolated or unusual. His writing necessarily contains elements of the universal:

For these works are special distillations of group psychic response, and in their accomplishments and failures can both reflect that response and profoundly influence it (Lifton, 1971, 418).

It would therefore be wrong to dismiss A-bomb literature simply because it is attempting to report an extreme event. A "story" which takes the atomic bomb as its foundation will be personal, but it will also closely echo a thousand comparable experiences which may never be told.

The first two parts of Hara's triptych, *From the Ruins* and *Summer Flowers* both appeared in 1947, just two years after the event. Considering the repressive atmosphere of the time, the transition from conception to publication was fast, and perhaps significant. Consider that America had 8,734 staff working in its censorship department alone (Hein, Selden (eds.) 1997, 9), and that the first detailed photo showing atomic survivors was not to appear in

Japanese newspapers for another twenty years (Hein, Selden (eds.) 1997, 26). Despite an authoritarian concern to limit information, and an awareness of the danger of counter-propaganda, Hara's work was nevertheless one of the first pieces of A-bomb writing to be made available.

In the area of war literature, there has been a debate on the question of the timing of any work. Many, Hara included, felt impelled to write, believing speed to be essential to a faithful account. Writing of his experiences of the Somme and Passchendaele, Charles Carrington concluded that "no war book written now, ten or fifteen years after the event, can secure the authenticity of these two stories" (Lengyel, Jozsef, 1966, 292, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 132). Others agreed that, given the intervention of time, "...the shells fall closer, the actions are enormously exaggerated, the periods of waiting lose their length..." (Monelli, 1930, 220, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 133). In this way, the speed of delivery of any war story, the minimisation of the distance between experience and creation would seem to be important. However an entirely opposing view: the idea of delay as essential to clarity, has also been put forward. Ernst Junger's memoirs of the First World War were published in 1920, although this, he felt, was too soon:

...it required a longer and harder labour for us to become clear about the meaning of events (Junger, 1926, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 127).

Hugh MacDiarmid concurs with this, stating in 1923 that "...the real literature of the war could not possibly be written for a few years-possibly for a good few years - if ever..." (MacDiarmid, 1923, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 127).

Both views have significance, and both have been applied to discussions of A-bomb literature. Ultimately however, everything must depend upon the writer in question, and the "special" circumstances which the bomb created. Taking

Hara as a highly sensitive individual, perhaps it is not surprising that he hastened to write. Firstly, he is a man who has accidentally survived a catastrophe and recognises his relative fortune:

I too had survived only by chance. The young man on the second floor next door had been killed instantly, and he was only the width of a single fence from where I was (Minear (ed.) 1990, 63).

He is also an experienced writer. The contemplation of his work gives him a "sense of elation" (Minear (ed.) 1990, 68), and he evidently wants to relate the experience. Most importantly perhaps, let us remember that like thousands of others, Hara was already beginning to suffer the effects of radiation sickness. His resolve to write may have been spurred by the deterioration of his health:

...there was nothing I could do to halt the weakening of my body. My hair, too, got conspicuously thinner (Minear (ed.) 1990, 68).

All around him, people were dying in similar ways. There is a feeling of overwhelming strangeness, and myths and rumours are already beginning to circulate amongst the people portrayed in his narrative. Many who appear uninjured suddenly weaken, vomit gouts of blood and die. Seemingly doomed individuals are seen to recover at the last moment. Living in an environment so cruelly and bafflingly capricious, where "each face was the very picture of suffering" (Minear (ed.) 1990, 60), it is not surprising that Hara felt compelled to write. He was an author, but he was also a survivor who could never be sure when their time would come. Under such circumstances, Hara's urgency is understandable.

The relative ease with which Hara's writing passed into print may also be significant. Despite two previous arrests, his work was published when other pieces on the bomb were still being

suppressed. Considering Hara's previous Communist sympathies, and America's concern to "limit" information, this is interesting. It could be that *Summer Flowers* and *From the Ruins* were too insignificant to attract notice; the journal in which they appeared, *Mita Bungaku*, was of a very limited circulation. Alternately, maybe these short stories were sufficiently "objective" (Rubin, *From Wholesomeness to Decadence*, 88, quoted in Treat, 1995, 90) to pass muster. Certainly the authorities seemed to find little that was "dangerous" in Hara's work.

Having the advantage of already being an experienced author, perhaps Hara had the literary agility to avoid the phrasing and attitudes which he knew would incur censorship. Some of Hara's detractors have levelled similar criticism at his work, claiming that it leaves the "faintest impression" (Hirano, *Nihon no Genbaku Bungaku*, 319, quoted in Minear (ed.) 1990, 40), failing to strike the correct note of outrage. Others have questioned the validity of his writing as a "documentary" of the Hiroshima experience. Comparison has been made between the spare urgent tone of his initial *Notes on the Atomic Destruction*, and the quieter and more mannered *Summer Flowers* (Treat, 1995, 135) which it subsequently became. Hara's work here is notable for its subdued tone, and although there is no evidence to show that he employed stylistic artifice in order to "dodge" censorship, the question of the intervention of the artistic voice remains. John W. Treat (1995, 135) writes that:

Each subsequent elaboration would entail a distancing, a rhetoricization, of the original text. Each re-presentation would alter as well as accommodate the confusion of an atomic attack... Hara has indeed applied narrative skills to his writing. Consider this passage, just one of many which describes the ruined cityscape through which he must pass:

Here everything human had been obliterated-the expressions on the faces of the corpses had been replaced by something model-like, automaton-like. The limbs had a sort of bewitching rhythm, as if rigor mortis had frozen them even as they thrashed about in agony. With the electric wires, jumbled and fallen, and the countless splinters and fragments, one sensed a spastic design against the nothingness (Minear (ed.) 1990, 58).

Such writing is forceful, compelling, and considered. But does this "literary mediation" have to compromise the "facts", and the honesty of the person who presents them? If it does, then writing in anything other than a clipped, spur of the moment style will be an exercise in futility, with the impossibility of telling standing as the only truth. Treat demonstrates the circularity of such a possibility:

Documentary hopes to gain immediate and unmediated access to "truth", to dispense with style and proceed directly, urgently to substance. Unfortunately, that hope seems continually frustrated. Words, when robbed of their right to be words, leave nothing behind. How are we, the readers, to recognize the "reality" behind the victim's account without recourse to what obfuscates it, namely the translation of experience into signs (Treat, 1995, 137).

The complexity of the debates which attend history and memory is reflected and amplified in our treatment of A-bomb literature. Yet when we talk about facts in the context of nuclear aftermath, is there really any concrete way to gauge veracity or failure? Robert Graves states: I would paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities (Graves, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 June 1930, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 137).

In these accounts, demonstrating the accuracy

or otherwise of the "facts", is practically impossible. Perhaps what is at issue here, is the question of atomic bomb literature as Art. Should any work purporting to deal with the reality of a shocking experience be permitted license and lyricism, or should it mortify itself with a metaphorical hair shirt of spare, chopped prose and puritanical purpose? Of the literary works concerning Hiroshima or Nagasaki that I have read, none falls completely into this latter category. Hachiya Michihiko's *Hiroshima Diary* for example, is just what it purports to be, but it is well written enough to engage the reader. The presence and imagination of the author in *Summer Flowers* is palpable, and this can contextualize the experience, and involve the reader still further.

In *Writing Ground Zero* (1995, 36), John W. Treat presents this dilemma:

If we are Aristotelian, we hold that poetic truth is superior to the historical because the imagination is the faculty that idealizes and thus perfects. If Kantian, then we accept the imagination as a necessary and intentional premise of how a subjective consciousness perceives phenomena and thus gains understanding.

Though different, the fact remains that both views admit the necessity of imagination to some degree. The purpose of a book, particularly a book which deals with catastrophe, is to transmit knowledge and experience. In the case of A-bomb literature, an element of human mediation is practically unavoidable. To deliberately represent the facts in their barest form is likely to go against the writer's inclination. To consciously struggle to corral one's writing for documentary effect may also represent an artificial intervention of the same magnitude as overt lyricism or imaginative freedom. Oe Kenzaburo takes a more pragmatic view of this question:

We have no choice but to use daily our powers of imagination in considering just how catastrophic nuclear war is (Oe, *Kaku Jidai e no Sozoryoku*, 107, quoted in Treat (1995, 37).

Imagination and style do have a purpose, in that they permit a person to sympathise and reason. Factionalism and selfishness have been cited as prime factors in ongoing controversy: elements which spring from a lack of empathy, and an inability to see a problem in wider terms. The "readability" of a work therefore, need not be inversely proportional to authenticity or value.

Whilst not couched in diary form, Hara's story is a personal experience, involving real people, family and friends. That his tone is subdued, even distant, is undeniable. Yet it is always human and credible, and the writer makes no attempt to cover his own frailties:

At first sight, rather than pity, I felt my hair stand on end (Minear (ed.) 1990, 52).

Hara's reaction to the sight of mutilated victims is totally believable, but his sympathy is also implicit:

It was as if unbearable resentment against this absurdity bound us together; we needed no words (Minear (ed.) 1990, 52).

Summer Flowers and *From the Ruins* contain all the tragic elements which characterize A-bomb literature: the impact, the aimless wandering through a blasted cityscape, the horrific sights, bizarre vignettes, and the often hopeless search for succor and relief for family and loved ones. The delivery is quiet, but matter of fact. This dazed feeling of detachment, and the absence of definitive outrage seem reminiscent of the psychological effects which R. J. Lifton (1971, 96) noted amongst the Hiroshima victims:

Conditions like the "vacuum state"... may be thought of as apathy, but they are also profound expressions of despair: a form of severe and prolonged psychic numbing in which the survivor's responses to his environment are

reduced to a minimum...

Hara was obviously profoundly affected by his experience, although his writing shows little sign of developing into activism. The focus of the work throughout is upon Hara and his immediate family: he reports the events and the thoughts that occur to him as he navigates the aftermath. Yet this is not to say that Hara's work lacks commitment or power. The critic, Yamamoto Kenkichi takes this view of his writing:

Amid the frenzied noise of the postwar era, he speaks to us in a faint, soft voice, as if whispering directly, soul to soul; and even though it originates in the single earthshaking experience, his voice is so pure that only those who listen intently can hear it (Yamamoto, "Hara Tamiki", 160, quoted in Minear (ed.) 1990, 40).

There is no shortage of horror or tragedy here, but it is carefully portrayed, and emotion is more implicit than explicit. Despite Hara's eagerness to recount the event, the work deals with a subject which he himself admits to be "beyond tears" (Minear (ed.) 1990, 57), and the general impression is of the absurdity of it all. Comparable sentiments have been expressed by war writers of all nations and generations. For many who have experienced battle, there is a strong sense of the complete lack of any meaning. In the words of J.B Priestley:

...I did not discover any deeper reality in war...Its obvious one-sidedness soon made it seem to me a vast piece of imbecility (Priestley, 1962, 89, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 128).

The tone of Hara's writing leaves the formation of opinion very much to the reader. As a straight, eloquently written account of a survivor and his family in a devastated Hiroshima, the reactions it will provoke are assured. There is therefore little need to heighten the emotional pressure or explain right from wrong. Hara's output of bomb literature was very small, and though it is well written, the

overriding feeling one gets from his work is its simplicity.

Rupert Brooke, remembering the battle of Antwerp, recalled feelings which chime with the tone of Hara's writing:

...most of the time I was thinking of food, or marching straight, or what to say to the men, or, mostly, not thinking at all (Keynes (ed.) 1968, 654, quoted in Harvey, 1998, 88-89).

In just this way, Hara's narrative is driven by feeling rather than thought, and reads like a loosely connected string of impressions and encounters. There is a resigned, dreamlike quality, and though life goes on, it is not as before:

...the people carried the festival palanquin along the embankment. Stomachs empty, we stared after them in a daze. One morning word came that my brother in law in Funairi Kawaguchi-cho had died (Minear (ed.) 1990, 75). Death is always present, but rather than dissecting the experience, Hara assimilates the aftermath almost unquestioningly. His lack of outrage and concrete "opinion" is striking, though powerful in itself. It may have been a result of psychological numbing, or a consequence of the "naturalistic" style which had always been a part of Hara's work:

...the naturalistic, broadly defined as the depiction of people and events as phenomena, i.e., as manifestations rather than origins (Treat, 1995, 128).

Yet whatever blend of environment and nature influenced Hara's writing, his narrative does not feel forced in any way: the style suits both the experience, and the nature of the man who passed through it.

Whether Hara's experience was expressible or not, as a writer, he was well qualified to make the attempt. His writing maintains a poise which is remarkable when we consider the immediacy of the event, and the author's personal

involvement.

In his *Essay on Man*, contained in *Requiem*, Hara writes: "Balance: my goddess is balance" (Minear (ed.) 1990, 33), and later includes the same sentiment within a prayer:

That passion not bewilder, that madness not be too tearing. That they be blessed with balance and dreams (Minear (ed.) 1990, 34).

This respect for reason and balance is reflected in *Summer Flowers* and *From the Ruins*. Hara was one of the first to portray the bomb, and the images of death must have been violently fresh at the time of writing. A wider audience knew little of the human side, and had yet to become jaded by a stream of victim commentary. Under these circumstances, a writer could be forgiven for presenting their audience with a heavily weighted and lurid account. This is one argument in favor of allowing a distance between the event and its portrayal, but Hara maintains his cool. It is interesting that a man, so mentally troubled by death, and the idea of death; a man who would ultimately take his own life, should maintain such detachment. Perhaps the manner of his suicide- calmly lying on the tracks and waiting for a train- goes some way to explaining the mixture of extreme vulnerability and steely resolve within Hara. In a letter to his friend, Sasaki Kiichi, He wrote:

My one wish now is to take leave of everything without fuss. Each of my works since the time I lost my wife has been in its own way, I feel, a will (Oe (ed.) 1985, 62).

This is particularly poignant when read with the knowledge of his impending death, but nevertheless in tune with the impressions which his later life and work provide. Hara is a man who has been inspired and partially undone by death, yet someone who is trying to relate the experience without undue fuss.

Hara writes of cosmic destruction on the human scale, and in *Summer Flowers* and *From*

the Ruins this is always his perspective. In the same way, A. Malraux, another writer of the Second World War, wrote that, "fundamentally, our art is a humanisation of the world" (Malreux, 1952, 97, quoted in Bevan (ed.) 1990, 109). Like Hara, Malreux attempted to write at a comprehensible level, believing that "the mere fact of being able to represent it, conceive it...reduces it to the human scale" (Malreux, 1952, 96-97, quoted in Bevan (ed.) 1990, 111).

Hara's work must, by its very nature, be anti-war. However it is we as readers, who make that decision. His message is clear but in no way sensationalist or contrived. To detect devices which invalidate the hopeless and tragic destruction which Hara's writing portrays, would be to ransack an essentially simple piece of literature. In these works, brief as they may be, Hara has successfully represented a human perspective, without descending into stridency or sophistry. We may question the validity of memory, or recoil from the limited viewpoint which any given piece of literature presents. However, the writer's own stated intention to "set these things down in writing" (Minear (ed.) 1990, 49) has been achieved, and achieved in a way which can leave little real room for doubt or misuse. The story of one man's Hiroshima experience is ultimately as sad and simple as it is incorruptible.

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