



Harriet Hustis

"The Only Survival, The Only Meaning":
The Structural Integrity of Thornton Wilder's
Bridge in John Hersey's *Hiroshima*

In his 1986 interview for “The Art of Fiction” series in *The Paris Review*, journalist John Hersey acknowledged that the textual model for his famous non-fiction essay, *Hiroshima* (1946) was both literary and—perhaps more surprisingly—fictional. While en route to Japan, Hersey contracted a case of the flu; during his recovery, he read Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927). According to Hersey, Wilder’s novel immediately presented him with “the possibility of a form for the Hiroshima piece” (226); he saw in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* “a possible way of dealing with this very complex story of Hiroshima; to take a number of people—half a dozen, as it turned out in the end—whose paths crossed each other and came to this moment of shared disaster” (226-227). Upon his arrival in Japan, with his reading of Wilder’s novel fresh in his mind, Hersey “began right away looking for the kinds of people who would fit into [the] pattern” he had chosen for his proposed essay about the United States’ use of the atomic bomb against Japan at the end of World War II (227).

Published in the August 31, 1946 issue of *The New Yorker* to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Hiroshima* and its famous “flat style” also represents, according to Hersey, a divergence from the stylistic model offered by *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (227). Unlike Wilder, Hersey claimed, he had opted “to be deliberately quiet in the piece,” to adopt a narrative perspective that remained detached from the emotionally-charged events that the essay describes

(228).¹ In his interview in *The Paris Review*, Hersey characterizes the distinction between fiction and journalism in general in terms of the writer's "quietness." According to Hersey, when reading a work of fiction, readers are typically conscious of the writer "behind the work"; by contrast, in journalism, readers are cognizant of "the person *in* the work, the person who's writing it and explaining to you what's taken place" (228). When considering "fiction and journalism as two possible ways of presenting realities of life, particularly...harsh ones," Hersey admits that he prefers fiction because "if a novelist succeeds he can enable the reader to identify with the characters of the story, to *become* the characters of the story, almost, in reading. Whereas in journalism, the writer is always mediating between the material and the reader" (228). Ultimately, Hersey acknowledges that, prior to writing his now-famous essay, he "experimented with the devices of fiction in doing journalism, in the hopes that [his] mediation would, ideally, disappear" (228).

In the more than seventy years since its publication, the absence of Hersey's mediating narrative presence in *Hiroshima* has been credited with its success in reshaping the American public's perception of what it meant to deploy an atomic bomb in an act of "total war" with Japan.² At the same time, however, critics have also begun to examine how Hersey's essay establishes the terms upon which readers are encouraged to "identify with" and "become, almost" the survivors of the atomic blast. According to Hersey's retrospective account, the writer and his editors at *The New Yorker* wanted to humanize the story of the bomb's use, to address "the impact on people rather than on buildings" (226). Consequently, as Christopher D. Craig has argued, *Hiroshima's* "truth claims attempt to humanize the hated Japanese of

¹ And yet, as Jonathan Yardley has pointed out, in the years following the publication of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Wilder frequently attributed the success of *his* novel to "the 'removed' tone, the classical, the faintly ironic distance from the impassioned actions"—as Martin Blank has noted, "Wilder's mastery of style," his blend of irony and "sparse, polished prose" was often regarded as "a refreshing corrective to the verbal excesses of the naturalists" (6).

² Michael J. Yavenditti and Steve Rothman have both offered an extensive summary and thoughtful commentary about the reception of Hersey's *Hiroshima*. See Yavenditti, "John Hersey and the American Conscience: The Reception of *Hiroshima*," and Rothman, "The Publication of 'Hiroshima.'"

wartime propaganda, along with the German Christians who aided them, and illuminate the extent of the bomb's destructive power" (1).

Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* offers a particularly useful "pattern" for such an effort: it is a novel that humanizes the victims of a disaster and connects the seemingly disparate lives of its fictional protagonists through overarching "truth claims." The focus of Wilder's novel is the sudden and inexplicable collapse of an eighteenth-century Peruvian bridge, "a mere ladder of thin slats swung out over [a] gorge" (3). When five travelers immediately plunge to their deaths, Brother Juniper, a "little red-haired Franciscan from Northern Italy" who "happen[s] to be in Peru converting the Indians," "happen[s] to witness the accident": "his glance fell upon the bridge, and at that moment a twanging noise filled the air, as when the string of some musical instrument snaps ... and he saw the bridge divide and fling five gesticulating ants into the valley below" (5). In the aftermath of this tragedy, Brother Juniper wonders

Why did this happen to *those* five? If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. And on that instant Brother Juniper made the resolve to inquire into the secret lives of those five persons, that moment falling through the air, and to surprise the reason of their taking off. (5)

Brother Juniper's quest leads him "to busy himself for six years, knocking at all the doors in Lima, asking thousands of questions, filling scores of notebooks"; the end result of his efforts is "an enormous book" (6-7). When this book is finally published, however, it is "suddenly pronounced heretical" (113) and Brother Juniper is burned at the stake, ironically and indirectly becoming the sixth victim of the collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey. The novel ends with the mental reflections of Madre Maria del Pilar, an abbess who was acquainted with two of the victims of the bridge's collapse and who consoles the surviving relatives of the other victims. In an effort to make sense of the fact that "soon we shall die and

all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten,” she concludes, “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning” (121).

At first glance, it seems paradoxical that Hersey would opt to model a non-fiction essay about the horrific consequences of “the first moment of the atomic age” (*Hiroshima* 16) after a fictional text that concludes with an endorsement of love as a source of human survival and meaning. By opting, in Russell Shorto’s words, “to report on individual victims, to follow the unfolding of their lives in minute detail from the moment the bomb fell and as they struggled to exist through the ensuing weeks,” it would appear that Hersey essentially replicated the quest of Wilder’s Brother Juniper. Moreover, in pursuing his own investigative effort, Hersey replicated Brother Juniper’s effort in another way: he sought to confirm what he appears to have been predisposed to believe. As Wilder points out in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Brother Juniper’s “resolve to inquire” and “surprise the reason” behind the bridge’s collapse is one in a series of efforts he has made in his life-long attempt to “prove” the existence of God’s divine intention: “to our Franciscan there was no element of doubt in the experiment. He knew the answer. He merely wanted to prove it, historically, mathematically, to his converts” (6).

It is therefore important to acknowledge that, if Hersey gave a “voice” to six of the survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima, he did so only after aligning their perspectives with the preexisting textual pattern of a very popular American novel of Christian humanism, Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.³ In opting to tell the story of what the atomic bomb did to “people rather than ... buildings,” Hersey became “the quiet American” in his essay, embedding a distinctly Christian, Anglo-American humanism in *Hiroshima* in a way that elides, omits, or significantly reframes cultural and historical specifics. Although it is true that “[b]y foregrounding the bomb’s victims, Hersey made it possible for Americans to

³ *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928. According to Ruth Collins, “The first edition sold 240,000 copies in its first year, becoming the #1 bestseller for fiction in 1928. It first appeared on the Publisher's Weekly fiction list on 4/21/28 at #1 and remained there for twelve weeks, spending a total of sixteen weeks on the list. By March 3, 1958, over two million copies had been sold. By 1981, Pocket Books sales alone ... had reached 1,189,764.”

think anew about their former enemy and the weapon that had ended the war” (Gerstle, 91), it is also true that Hersey couched that reconsideration in a deliberate restructuring of his readers’ perceptions of the Japanese; this reconstruction is particularly effective precisely because Hersey either erased or “quieted” the evidence of his own narrative mediation in *Hiroshima*.⁴

Some of the more effective instances of this quiet reshaping of readers’ perceptions involve, not *Hiroshima*’s six protagonists, but the various minor characters that appear briefly in Hersey’s text but who do not survive to tell their own stories. Tens of thousands died in the bombing of Hiroshima; many died instantly. While Hersey repeatedly mentions the overwhelming destruction, he also devotes narrative time and attention to the death of Mr. Fukai, the secretary of Father Kleinsorge’s diocese and a friend of Mr. Tanimoto. After the bomb explodes, Mr. Fukai refuses to evacuate the mission with Father Kleinsorge (one of *Hiroshima*’s protagonists). Mr. Fukai is described as “quite childlike”: “beat[ing] on Father Kleinsorge’s shoulders,” he must be picked “up pickaback” and carried away by the Jesuit priests. As they flee, Father Kleinsorge “irrelevantly” remarks, “We have lost all our possessions but not our sense of humor” (28).

Eventually, however, Hersey notes, “the little broken man got away from them” and ran “back toward the fire, never to be seen again” (29). Hersey will then describe how, when the priests return to Hiroshima two days later and begin looking for Mr. Fukai,

the theological student, who had been rooming with Mr. Fukai at the mission house, told the priests that the secretary [Mr. Fukai] had remarked to him, during an air-raid alarm one day not long before the bombing, “Japan is dying. If there is a real air raid here in Hiroshima, I want to die with our country.” The priests concluded that Mr.

⁴ As Craig argues, “Hersey’s approach to the bombing isolates the blast from America’s imperialist project. Its focus on the individual frees American imperialism from its own bloody history and prepares its readers to confront the bombing as the result of war rather than the culmination of a long and continuing history of aggression and domination” (4).

Fukai had run back to immolate himself in the flames. They never saw him again.

(55-56)

In Hersey's description of the evacuation itself, however, the theological student who will eventually explain Mr. Fukai's behavior is described as simply helping Father Kleinsorge carry the secretary out of the mission: "the theological student came up and grabbed Mr. Fukai's feet, and Father Kleinsorge took his shoulders, and together they carried him downstairs and outdoors" (28). Hersey refrains from offering the theological student's explanation of Mr. Fukai's behavior at the narrative moment when it is particularly relevant, focusing instead on describing the man's reaction as "childlike" and amusing. This narrative strategy leads the reader to initially conclude that the secretary of the diocese is simply a victim of trauma-induced panic: someone who must be helped in spite of himself. By postponing the theological student's explanation of Mr. Fukai's reaction, Hersey not only delays the reader's understanding of it, but also ensures that when Mr. Fukai's behavior is finally explained, readers are already predisposed to view him as a "broken" and foolish "little" man.

Hersey's decision to withhold the theological student's explanation of Mr. Fukai's behavior stands in direct contrast to the moments in *Hiroshima* when the writer uses parenthetical statements to provide explanatory context for survivors' misperceptions. When Mr. Tanimoto witnesses "huge drops of water the size of marbles" and assumes "they must be coming from the hoses of firemen fighting the blazes," Hersey parenthetically notes "(They were actually drops of condensed moisture falling from the turbulent tower of dust, heat, and fission fragments that had already risen miles into the sky above Hiroshima)" (18). Similarly, Hersey parenthetically clarifies the source of the fires that Mrs. Nakamura witnesses, noting that "(except at the very center, where the bomb itself ignited some fires, most of Hiroshima's citywide conflagration was caused by inflammable wreckage falling on cookstoves and live wires)" (20). One could argue that Hersey prefers to incorporate only factual information in parentheses; as Yavenditti has

observed, in *Hiroshima* Hersey is inclined to refute false claims about the nature of the atomic bomb and its effects (37).

But although Hersey remains initially “quiet” on the subject of Mr. Fukai’s behavior, he repeatedly takes pains to describe Reverend Tanimoto, a Methodist minister educated in the United States and one of the protagonists of *Hiroshima*, as behaving in ways that are characteristic of a “good Japanese” (4). Hersey notes that most of the survivors “could not comprehend or tolerate a wider circle of misery” and thus “assisted only their relatives or immediate neighbors” (29), but Hersey deliberately distinguishes Mr. Tanimoto from his Japanese compatriots. Although Tanimoto also “ran past” wounded survivors, Hersey describes how “[a]s a Christian he was filled with compassion for those who were trapped, and as a Japanese he was overwhelmed by the shame of being unhurt, and he prayed as he ran, ‘God help them and take them out of the fire’” (29-30).

The narrative mention of Mr. Tanimoto’s praying is repeated in *Hiroshima*. At the outset of Hersey’s essay, the reader learns that one “Mr. Tanaka, a retired officer of the Toyo Kisen Kaisha steamship line, an anti-Christian, a man famous in Hiroshima for his showy philanthropies and notorious for his personal tyrannies, had been telling people that Tanimoto should not be trusted” (4). In the aftermath of the bombing, however, Mr. Tanaka’s daughter visits Reverend Tanimoto because “her father had been asking to see him” (61). Hersey then reminds the reader that it was Mr. Tanaka who “had said openly to several people that Mr. Tanimoto was a spy for the Americans” (60). When Mr. Tanimoto charitably visits the “tomblike shelter” where the anti-Christian philanthropist lies dying, he sees “Mr. Tanaka, his face and arms puffed up and covered with pus and blood, and his eyes swollen shut. The old man smelled very bad, and he moaned constantly” (61). Prior to the bombing, Tanaka “had derided Christianity and called it un-Japanese,” but in the aftermath of the explosion, he is “willing to be comforted by any religion” and sets aside his animosity towards the (American-educated) Reverend Tanimoto and Christianity (60). In Hersey’s account, as Mr. Tanimoto reads from the Bible, Mr. Tanaka

dies in agony. Although unstated, Hersey's repeated mention of Mr. Tanaka's pro-Japanese, anti-Christian, anti-American, "showy" philanthropy and "personal tyrannies" works to suggest that his death might be divine retribution for a misspent life. Mr. Tanaka's insincere charity and nationalist animosity, coupled with the image of his swollen, bloody, pus-covered body create a stark contrast with the surprisingly uninjured body of the "good Japanese," good Christian, and pro-American Mr. Tanimoto.

In the same narrative vein, although Hersey briefly notes that his protagonist Dr. Sasaki, like "[m]any citizens of Hiroshima" "continued to feel a hatred for Americans which nothing could possibly erase," the writer opts instead to amplify the perspective of Father Kleinsorge. After devoting only two sentences to a description of Dr. Sasaki's anti-American prejudice (a mindset admittedly shared by "many" others in Hiroshima after the bombing), Hersey cites Father Siemes' report to the Holy See at length, arguing that "Father Kleinsorge and the other German Jesuit priests ... often discussed the ethics of using the bomb" and that "as foreigners, could be expected to take a relatively detached view" (89)—as if German priests have no inherent bias in their assessment of the conclusion of the war between the United States and Japan, simply because they are (Western, Christian) "foreigners" in Japan at the time of the nuclear attack.

When asked in his interview for *The Paris Review* what "tricks of fiction" he "tried to employ" in writing *Hiroshima*, Hersey openly acknowledged,

the whole issue of point of view, presenting each of the characters from his viewpoint. There are six points of view in the book, and each section ... enters into each survivor's state of mind without representing his thoughts—it's all done in terms of action, of what happened to them, what they saw, heard, and did. The reader looks at what is happening through the eyes of each of these characters, as he would in reading through a point of view in fiction. (228-229)

Hersey's decision to narratively enter into the survivor's "state of mind" "without representing his thoughts," to examine the event of the bombing solely "in terms of action, of what happened to them, what they saw, heard, and did," represents the practice of what Juan Ramón Múnoz-Torres has called "value-free facticity." Premised on positivist ideology, value-free facticity assumes that facts can be collected by researchers who behave "as if they were entomologists who capture insects"—they presumably never succumb to the structuring or mediating presence of "theoretical concepts and practical values" when assembling facts (572). The concept of value-free facticity argues that accurate documentation is—and can be—the neutral collection of factual information; when applied to journalism, it leads to what Robert Hackett has identified as "the ideal of objectivity." This ideal assumes that "journalists can stand apart from the real-world events whose truth or meaning they transfer to the news audience by means of neutral language and competent reporting techniques" (232). In short, the ideal of objective journalism, with its endorsement of value-free facticity, depends on the belief that "facts can be separated from opinion or value judgements" (232).

To the extent that the ideal of objectivity represents, in Múnoz-Torres' words, a "cornerstone principle" of American journalism (566), it is possible to view Hersey's decision to opt for a detached, "flat style" in his account of the bombing of Hiroshima as a specifically American response to the cataclysm.⁵ Hersey's decision to "ideally, disappear"—to stand "*behind* the work" rather than "*in*" it in order to reduce the emotional distance between the survivors of Hiroshima and the readers of his essay—does not (contrary to popular belief) simply establish his narrative account as a neutral or value-free instance of journalistic "objectivity." Instead, in recent years, scholars have acknowledged that, as Múnoz-Torres points out, "facts are not mere pre-conceptual data, but interpretations of perceptions" (572). As a result, "there is no such thing as a pure perception of facts, bereft of any previous concepts" because trying "to

⁵ More broadly, Jay Rosen has noted that "[o]bjectivity is one of the identifying features of journalism in the United States and perhaps the major contribution American journalism has made to the rest of the world" (48). Similarly, Michael Schudson claims, "'Objectivity' is the chief occupational value of American journalism and the norm that historically and still today distinguishes US journalism from the dominant model of continental European journalism" (149).

achieve an objective knowledge about reality would necessarily require choosing” between the available facts in order to determine which ones are relevant (569, 573). Such decisions about relevance in turn depend upon “the point of view from which it is observed and the aims in mind”: it is a selection process that “involves a whole set of explicit or implicit values subjectively accepted by the individual making a selection” (573). Consequently, Múnoz-Torres argues, “the supposed neutrality of knowledge in general ... is just an illusion” (573).

Hersey’s *Hiroshima* works to sustain this illusion through the “quietness” of its writer’s narrative voice and the “flatness” of the essay’s style. By looking more closely at what remains unspoken in Hersey’s account—the moments when the text stays “quiet” in contrast to points that are reiterated or emphasized—readers begin to see signs of soft-spoken subjectivity both shaping the framework of Hersey’s account and contributing to its overarching effects. As Jay Rosen has argued, “objectivity” can function as “a technique of persuasion, a rhetorical strategy” (50); it can serve as “a way of generating authority in the culture” (51). Even more important, Rosen suggests, is the need to remember “journalists are people who make things,” not simply “people who *find* things—stories, facts, news” (53).

This distinction between “finding” and “making” can be seen in the fact that, in Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, the only mention made of the use of an atomic bomb a second time, on the city of Nagasaki, appears midway through the text. After describing Father Kleinsorge’s uneasy exhaustion and his inability to “comprehend what he had been through” (57), the essay abruptly announces, “At two minutes after eleven o’clock on the morning of August 9th, the second atomic bomb was dropped, on Nagasaki” (57). The only commentary that Hersey offers on the bombing of Nagasaki is to note that, for “several days,” “the survivors of Hiroshima” remained unaware of the fact that “they had company” (57). The bombing of Nagasaki is never mentioned again.

In Hersey’s account, the two bombings are narratively made into one event: *Hiroshima* implicitly frames the bombing of Nagasaki as if it is simply a repetition of what happened in Hiroshima. By

contrast, official reports suggest that investigators found significant differences between the two cities after the bombings. In August 1945, just days after the respective bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American military organized an effort “to secure scientific, technical and medical intelligence in the atomic bomb field from within Japan” (1). Known collectively as “The Manhattan Project Investigating Group,” its mission was twofold: “[t]o make certain that no unusual hazards were present in the bombed cities” and “[t]o secure all possible information concerning the effects of the bombs, both usual and unusual” (1). The report produced by The Manhattan Project Investigating Group in June of 1946, entitled “The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” describes many of the same phenomena as Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, and like *Hiroshima*, its underlying premise is to offer a detached and objectively factual account of the respective bombings and their consequences.

As “The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” makes clear, the American military made specific, strategic decisions when choosing which Japanese cities to target: there were distinct differences between Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and these differences in turn contributed to the overarching effect of the bomb’s blast at each location. In contrast to Hiroshima, which was “fully exposed to the bomb” (16), in Nagasaki, “[t]wo rivers divided by a mountain spur form the two main valleys in which the city lies” (18). As a result, the Investigating Group’s report notes, “[t]his mountain spur and the irregular layout of the city tremendously reduced the area of destruction, so that at first glance Nagasaki appeared to have been less devastated than Hiroshima” (18). In particular, “The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” notes that “An observer could stand in the center of Hiroshima and get a view of the most of the city; the hills prevented a similar overall view in Nagasaki. Hiroshima impressed itself on one’s mind as a vast expanse of desolation; but nothing as vivid was left in one’s memory of Nagasaki” (27). Nevertheless, despite this visual impression, based on physical evidence, “it was soon evident that the Nagasaki bomb had been much more effective than the Hiroshima bomb... the radius for the amount of

damage was greater in Nagasaki than Hiroshima” (27). Ultimately, “the cities’ differences in shape and topography resulted in great differences in the damages” caused by the bomb (29).

When Hersey devotes narrative attention to the geography and topography of Hiroshima in his essay, the bomb—rather than the city—is the focal point. In Hersey’s account, the damage to the respective buildings where the six survivors are located is catalogued with a parenthetical reference to the number of yards between the victims’ location and the hypocenter of the bomb’s detonation; descriptions of neighborhoods and the bridges of Hiroshima work to create a “vivid” sense of a “vast expanse of desolation”—a city ravaged by fire and the chaotic weather patterns generated in the wake of the blast.⁶ In particular, Asano Park, or *Shukkei-en*, as it is more commonly known, is described in *Hiroshima* as “an estate, by the Kyo River ... belonging to the wealthy Asano family, who once owned the Toyo Kisen Kaisha steamship line” (20) and then characterized as a “green place” that “invited refugees” in the wake of the explosion “partly because the foliage seemed a center of coolness and life, and the estate’s exquisitely precise rock gardens, with their quiet pools and arching bridges, were very Japanese, normal, secure; and also partly (according to some who were there) because of an irresistible, atavistic urge to hide under leaves” (35).

In addition to describing the Asano family solely in terms of their twentieth-century connection to transpacific trade, Hersey characterizes the “very Japanese” nature of *Shukkei-en*, the site where many of the bombing victims congregate, as stemming from the “quiet” and “exquisite” “precision” that mark it as both “normal” and “secure”—a “security” that is then highlighted as irresistibly “atavistic.” What Hersey does not mention is the fact that *Shukkei-en* had been in the possession of the Asano family for over 300 years; it played a significant role in Japanese military history prior to the bombing of Hiroshima. Constructed in the early 17th century by order of the Japanese samurai Asano Nagaakira, the villa at

⁶ Patrick Sharp notes, “Throughout ‘Hiroshima,’ Hersey juxtaposes images of fire, death, and desolation with images of water and rebirth” and “appropriates the imagery of literary modernism” to describe “the landscape of the devastated city” (447).

Shukkei-en was at one point the lodging for the Emperor Meiji. *Shukkei-en*'s historical significance, coupled with the fact that the site had been officially "designated as an evacuation area" (20), suggests that the decision to hide there might have been motivated by cultural impulses rather than an "atavistic" desire to hide under (well-manicured, "very Japanese") greenery.

In crafting his representation of the city of Hiroshima in this way, Hersey once again borrows from the approach taken in Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Although the novel is ostensibly set in early eighteenth-century Peru, after the publication of his novel, Wilder stated that the text's setting "merely supplied the background of the story. It could have been placed in any other country just as well" (Konkle, 82). As Martin Blank has observed, "Wilder frequently built his works on moral, religious, and metaphysical ideas, rather than focusing on social and psychological complexities"; the writer "portrayed characters behaving in ways to suggest ... universality of all times and all places" (2).

Although Hersey cannot utilize the same degree of imaginative flexibility in crafting his account of the bombing of Hiroshima that Wilder does in his novel, he can cast specifics in a way that heightens the essay's underlying sense of human interconnection and universality. As Bret Schulte has argued, "Mediation occurs with every editorial choice the writer makes: the selection of facts, details, and quotes, by bringing one character to life and by leaving another in obscurity" (9). In *Hiroshima*'s description of each of the six survivors' locations at the moment of the bomb's detonation, the individual's distance from the bomb's point of impact is specifically noted in a parenthetical statement. Parentheses are typically used to incorporate clarifying, but not necessarily essential, information; as Schall points out, they "identify material that acts as an aside" or "add incidental information." The center of the blast at Hiroshima occurred in the sky above Shima Hospital, at 29-2 Saikumachi: the building was instantly destroyed, and no trace was ever found of the approximately eighty people presumed to be in the hospital at the time of the explosion. In "The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," a table listing "Per-Cent Mortality at Various Distances" indicates that, in the city of Nagasaki, the estimated mortality rate was over 90% for

those located less than 2000 feet from the bomb's hypocenter (44-45). Thus, a person's relative distance from ground zero was not a peripheral consideration in determining survival, but Hersey's choice of punctuation seems to suggest that the information is not essential to the essay's consideration of his chosen survivors' experience.

The significance of distance is further "flattened" in Hersey's description of *Shukkei-en*. The park is introduced to the reader as "far enough away from the explosion so that its bamboos, pines, laurel, and maples were still alive" (35). *Shukkei-en* was roughly 6000 feet (or about 1968 yards) from the bomb's hypocenter, but Hersey opts not to include this detail at all, simply identifying the site as "far enough away" to ensure a measure of survival. Moreover, by characterizing the site as a "green place that invited refugees," Hersey subtly personifies the park as a survivor not unlike the protagonists of Hersey's narrative—one that is inclined to support and comfort others.

Hiroshima's emphasis on Christian charity and human interconnection is perhaps its most obvious borrowing from the pattern of Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. As Hersey acknowledges in his 1986 interview, upon arriving in Japan, he "went first to some German priests" because he'd "read a report to the Holy See on the bombing by a German Jesuit who had been there" (227). Hersey's visit with the German Jesuits in Hiroshima led to an acquaintance with Father Kleinsorge. Father Kleinsorge "spoke some English" and "began to introduce [Hersey] to others": thus, Hersey notes, "Through him I met the Protestant minister, Tanimoto, who spoke very good English, having studied at Emory University before the war" (227). Ultimately, Hersey reflected, "I must have talked to forty or fifty people, trying to find the ones that would work for what I wanted to do. I narrowed it down to the six I finally wrote about, and got their stories" (227).

Hersey's decision to use "a number of people—half a dozen, as it turned out in the end" "whose paths crossed each other" in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 directly replicates both the number and the

situation of the fictional protagonists of Wilder's novel. Like Wilder's novel, Hersey's subsequent documentation of the experiences of six survivors of the atomic blast—a German Jesuit priest (Father Kleinsorge), an American-educated minister (Reverend Tanimoto), a tailor's widow (Mrs. Nakamura), two doctors (Dr. Fujii, Dr. Sasaki), and an office clerk (Miss Sasaki)—embeds a pattern of interconnection between the characters of his account. In Hersey's essay, as in Wilder's novel, the role that coincidence plays in an individual's survival is implicitly linked to the possibility of a divine order: in both texts, the writers want their readers to reflect upon the possibility that there may be an intention behind events that seem inexplicable and/or accidental. Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* begins with a section entitled "Perhaps an Accident" and concludes with a section entitled "Perhaps an Intention"; ultimately, Wilder's novel bridges these two philosophical possibilities, never fully committing to either. Although Brother Juniper is determined to discover the divine "plan" or "pattern" behind the bridge's collapse—his research is thus devoted to "establishing the fact that each of the five lost lives was a perfect whole" (7)—the novel's narrator offers no definitive conclusion about whether the collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey was a random event or an act of divine intention. Instead, the narrator simply asserts, "[t]here are a hundred ways of wondering at circumstance" (109).

Hersey's *Hiroshima* also begins by "wondering at circumstance": "A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors. They still wonder why they lived when so many others died" (2). Hersey implicitly embeds Brother Juniper's reflection—"Why did this happen to them?"—at the outset of his narrative. However, because Hersey opts to "disappear" from his text—to become the writer "behind" his work rather than the journalist "in" it—*Hiroshima* encourages readers to believe that the six individual survivors encounter one another more or less coincidentally on August 6, 1945. Although the text occasionally references the fact that the survivors of Hersey's account knew one another prior to the bombing, what readers remain unaware of (because Hersey avoids mediating his

account and establishing his role as the writer “in” the work) is that they are only reading about these six individuals precisely *because* the survivors knew one another prior to the disaster.

For Wilder, the use of apparent coincidence to connect characters and endorse a larger claim about the value of human existence is well within his purview as an author of fiction. By representing this interconnection as the result of Brother Juniper’s subsequent research—by suggesting that the monk just “happens” to uncover interconnections in the victims’ lives in much the same way that he just “happens” to be in Peru and when he witnesses an accident for which there is, to his mind at least, “perhaps an intention”—Wilder can insinuate far more than he states. Moreover, because Wilder sets the novel up in such a way as to avoid, as David Castronovo puts it, “having to examine his observer/narrator” (43), he can avoid openly endorsing Brother Juniper’s spiritually motivated desire for a conclusive pattern that “proves” the existence of divine intention. Ultimately, readers of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* are left to wonder, are the interconnections “proof” of a divine intention, or are they simply what Brother Juniper found because he believed that this is what he would find? In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the narrator claims that Brother Juniper’s presence at the scene of the bridge’s sudden collapse is the result of “a series of coincidences so extraordinary that one almost suspects the presence of some Intention” (4). Wilder’s use of the phrase “one *almost* suspects” in conjunction with the description of not one, but “a series” of very “extraordinary” coincidences suggests that Brother Juniper’s desire to find “mysteriously latent” indications of the divine in the circumstances of his life and the world around him may or may not be wishful thinking.

In *Hiroshima*, Hersey evinces a similar predilection for representing extraordinary coincidences. Thus, after the bomb’s explosion, Father Lasalle recommends that Father Schiffer be taken to Dr. Fujii, “about six blocks away” (21); later, in Asano Park, Rev. Tanimoto bumps into “many acquaintances, among them Father Kleinsorge” (32), and when Miss Sasaki is eventually rescued, she is not only treated by Dr. Sasaki but also benefits from the coincidence of having the same last name as her physician (Dr. Sasaki

arranges to “put her on a mat in a semi-private room” “perhaps, he afterward admitted, just a little bit because she was named Sasaki too” [70]). Uninformed readers of Hersey’s narrative might be inclined to perceive these incidents as highly suggestive coincidences, particularly if they are unaware of the fact that Hersey selected his protagonists’ stories in accordance with a predetermined “pattern,” one drawn from a novel that speculates about the possibility of divine intention in an instance of disaster. In both *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *Hiroshima*, the ordering principle behind the text is the author’s. But because these authors “disappear” “behind” their texts, readers remain uninformed of this fact with respect to Hersey’s non-fiction account.

The significance of coincidence is figured most prominently in *Hiroshima* in the detail of Father Kleinsorge’s briefcase. After the bomb’s blast, as Mrs. Nakamura heads to Asano Park, she passes the Jesuit mission and sees “Father Kleinsorge, in bloody underwear, running out of the house with a small suitcase in his hand” (21). Hersey’s inclusion of this glimpse of Father Kleinsorge is a particularly suggestive coincidence, given the symbolic value that the priest subsequently accords to his “small suitcase.” When Father Kleinsorge returns to his room before evacuating the mission, he notices that “[h]is desk was in splinters all over the room, but a mere papier-mâché suitcase, which he had hidden under the desk, stood handle-side up, without a scratch on it, in the doorway of the room, where he could not miss it” (22). Hersey then notes that “Father Kleinsorge later came to regard this as a bit of Providential interference, inasmuch as the suitcase contained his breviary, the account books for the whole diocese, and a considerable amount of paper money belonging to the mission, for which he was responsible” (22). This “mere papier-mâché suitcase” is not only noticed by Mrs. Nakamura in the immediate aftermath of the bombing but also mentioned several more times in *Hiroshima*. The suitcase thus becomes a subtle but persistent reminder of the possibility of “a bit of Providential interference” in the midst of the essay’s description of widespread destruction and chaos. When Hersey selects individual stories of survivors on the basis of whether or not they fit the pattern suggested by Wilder’s *The Bridge of*

San Luis Rey and then erases his act of narrative selection, he implicitly constructs this pattern as if it was (somehow) present on the day of the bombing itself.

As with his use of parenthetical remarks, Hersey stylistically embeds this mediation in *Hiroshima's* opening paragraph, where he overtly adopts a phrasing patterned after the opening sentence of Wilder's novel. Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* begins with a simple statement of fact: "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below" (3). Similarly, *Hiroshima* begins, "At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima..." (1). Like Wilder, Hersey begins with the time of the incident ("exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning" vs. "Friday noon") and proceeds to indicate the date ("August 6, 1945" vs. "July the twentieth, 1714"). While Wilder then describes the event itself, ("the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below"), Hersey inserts the phrase "Japanese time" and focuses instead on Miss Sasaki, who "had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk." The connection between Miss Sasaki and the other survivors is established in the description of their respective gestures at the moment of the atomic explosion: "[a]t that same moment, Dr. Masakazu Fujii was settling down cross-legged to read," "Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura, a tailor's widow, stood by the window of her kitchen, watching a neighbor tearing down his house," "Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge ... reclined in his underwear on a cot," Dr. Terufumi Sasaki "walked along" a hospital corridor, and "the Reverend Mr. Kiyoshi Tanimoto ... paused at the door of a rich man's house in Koi" (1-2).

In the opening sentence of *Hiroshima*, Miss Sasaki is deliberately set apart from the other survivors who appear in *Hiroshima*, in a stylistic choice that enables Hersey to directly echo the opening sentence of Wilder's *Bridge*. Hersey's description of the respective locations and positions of the other survivors at the moment of the bomb's blast are all encompassed in a second sentence that includes four semicolons. Once again, Hersey's use of punctuation is significant: by employing the use of semicolons, the second

sentence asserts the interdependency of the individuals and experiences described.⁷ Hersey's use of a lengthy second sentence punctuated by semicolons connects the independent events experienced by each of the selected five survivors, while nevertheless erasing the writer's mediating presence as the source of that interconnection. Readers are led to believe that the survivors are connected by their experiences at the moment of the bomb's detonation; the fact that those experiences fit a predetermined "pattern" established by the writer's reading of a work of fiction is almost entirely erased from the account, evident only in the narrative echo created by Hersey's phrasing.

Ultimately, the opening sentence's narrative distinction between Toshiko Sasaki and the other survivors of *Hiroshima* marks a purpose specific to the writer himself. Miss Sasaki is one of the few non-Christian survivors included in Hersey's account; however, she converts to Catholicism in the aftermath of the bombing, after speaking with Father Kleinsorge. While Miss Sasaki is receiving medical care for her extensive injuries, a friend "called on Father Kleinsorge and asked him to visit her in the hospital" (83). When he does, Hersey describes how Miss Sasaki "asked bluntly, 'If your God is so good and kind, how can he let people suffer like this?'" and "made a gesture which took in her shrunken leg, the other patients in her room, and Hiroshima as a whole" (83). In response, Father Kleinsorge "went on to explain all the reasons for everything" (83). As Hersey notes, "[w]hether or not Father Kleinsorge's answers ... were final and absolute truths, [Miss Sasaki] seemed quickly to draw physical strength from them" (85) and as a result, she "prepared herself for conversion to Catholicism" (86). Miss Sasaki's symbolic significance is further emphasized at the end of the first chapter of *Hiroshima* when, "after all the bookcases right behind her swooped forward and the contents threw her down," Hersey notes, "There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books" (16). Hersey's summary of Miss Sasaki's situation in the aftermath of the blast implicitly invokes the fate that befalls Brother Juniper in

⁷ Grammatically, the semicolon almost always functions as an equal sign; it says that the two parts being joined are relatively equal in their length and have the same grammatical structure. ... the semicolon helps ... link two things whose interdependency [sic] you wish to establish. The sentence parts on either side of the semicolon tend to 'depend on each other' for complete meaning" (Schall, Chapter 2: Punctuation, Mechanics, Capitalization, and Spelling)

Wilder's *Bridge*: one could argue that Brother Juniper also wonders "If ... God is so good and kind, how can he let people suffer like this?" and that in the end, he too is "crushed" by a book.

John Hersey went to Japan in 1945 to "make" a story about what it meant for people to survive a sudden nuclear disaster: Thornton Wilder's novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* seemed like a viable "pattern" for that story. In the more than seventy years since its publication, however, *Hiroshima* has come to be read almost exclusively as an "objective" statement of what Hersey "found," rather than as a rhetorically persuasive account of what the writer "made." Without detracting from the well-deserved praise that has been awarded Hersey's landmark essay, a comparative analysis of the intersections between John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* serves to remind us of the significant difference between "finding" and "making," between journalism and literature, and alerts us to the many ways in which meaning and value can be both constructed and found in the writing of literary non-fiction.

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