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The Light from Within and Without:
Ōe Kenzaburō's Hiroshima and Humanism

I

In the opening to the speech he delivered upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize for Literature in 1994 entitled "Japan, The Ambiguous and Myself" (あいまいな日本の私), Ōe Kenzaburō recounts his childhood enchantment with the Swedish fairy tale The Wonderful Adventures of Nils and his fascination with the Nils' rebirth by the end of the story as encapsulated in the line "I am a human being again."[1] Ōe's identification with Nils and his final declaration recalls the existential questions Ōe poses in his works about it means to be "human," and his desire to rationalize the shades of good and evil present in people and events throughout history. Having grown up under the specter of moral atrocity and ambiguity that characterized the aggressions of World War II and the atomic bomb, Ōe often tries to find beneath the immense destruction, uncompromising dogma and miserable suffering a glimmer of humanity and hope (希望[2]). A critical juncture (分岐点[3]) in Ōe's career as a writer and in his personal life came to inform his views on humanism; in 1963, he took on an assignment with the journal Sekai (世界 – The World) to cover the upcoming Ninth World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs in Hiroshima (the essay was later published as a part of the compilation Hiroshima Notes) and also saw the birth of his mentally handicapped son Hikari (光 meaning "light" in Japanese). As Ōe himself remarks, this confluence between the universal and the personal engendered a "determinative shift in [his] life"[4] and from this intermingling of his private life with the experience of Hiroshima,

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[1] Ōe, Kenzaburō, "Japan The Ambiguous, and Myself," Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures. Trans. Hisaaki Yamanouchi (Tōkyō: Kodansha International, 1995), 108.
[2] Ōe, Kenzaburō, 個人的な体験, 大江健三郎小説: Vol. 2. (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1996) 407
[3] Ibid., 332
[4] Ōe, Kenzaburō, Hiroshima Notes. Trans. David L. Swain and Toshi Yonezawa. (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 8.

an experience that that bears heavily on the definition of human existence, Ōe produced two of his most famous works, Hiroshima Notes (ヒロシマ・ノート, 1965) and A Personal Matter (個人的な体験, 1964).

Oe's preoccupation with his own life set in the context of the constant threat of nuclear war demonstrates his belief that rather than remaining to separate spheres, universal truths (人間一般にかかわる真実[5]) and personal matters (個人的な体験) necessarily and inexorably influence each other in an endless cycle. Reflecting upon his life and career in 1994, Ōe told the people in Stockholm that "the fundamental method of [his] writing has always been to start from the personal matters and then link them with society, the state, and the world in general."[6] Reading Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter as though they are part of the same project to construct a concept of humanism that recaptures a definition of "Hiroshima" which imparts lessons to Japan in the nuclear age, it is possible to also understand how Ōe perceives the unprecedented destruction of the atomic bomb and the "suffering towards a miserable death" (悲惨な死えの闘いをつづけている[7]) of the Hiroshima survivors (referred to in Japanese as *hibakusha*) as touching each and every human life as the post-nuclear world moves "toward an unknowable future"[8] (何とも知れない未来に[9]). This flow between the internal and the external, in turn, subsumes within itself themes about man's dual nature, one capable of deception(欺瞞), darkness (暗闇), evil (悪) and absurdity (不条理) as well as patience (忍耐), dignity (威厳), courage (勇気) and hope

[5] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 398
[6] . Ōe, "Japan The Ambiguous, and Myself", 109
[7] Ōe, Kenzaburō, ヒロシマ・ノーと、広島の光:大江健三郎同時代論集:Vol. 2, (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1980), 5.
[8] Ōe, Kenzaburō, "Introduction," David L. Swain, trans., The Crazy Iris and Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath,, Kenzaburō Ōe, ed., (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 9.
[9] Ōe, Kenzaburō, "対談解説," 何とも知れない未来に, Kenzaburō Ōe, ed., (To□kyo□ : Shu□eisha, 1983), 375.

(希望). In taking these terms (which appear frequently in both Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter) and the contrast born from them into consideration, Ōe's concept of humanism becomes clear, one in which "courage" springs from the "misery" of something as extreme as Hiroshima.[10] And for Japan – a nation that fell victim to the atomic bomb, but also willfully forgets its own wartime past – it means accepting responsibility (責任[11]) for its actions towards other Asian nations as well as for the *hibakusha* themselves, whose story is all too often obscured by the politics of the Peace Movement, the prejudice towards *hibakusha* illnesses, and the collective amnesia and self-deception toward the realities of Japan's wartime past.

II

In the same way that Ōe writes about the expansion from the personal into universal themes, by conceiving of his collection of works unbounded by time, experience, and narrative-style it is possible to observe how the ideas of one work manifest themselves in another, and build off each other to create ever-expanding meaning. As Dennis Washburn notes,

> … Ōe challenges us to read each work not only as the product of a particular time, but also as part of an ongoing literary and cultural project. In effect Ōe demands that we read each work as he himself reads it – on its own and simultaneously with all other works he has written and read. [12]

Bearing this concept of an "ongoing literary and cultural project" in mind, the themes, words, and ideas that recur in Hiroshima Notes, A Personal Matter, and Ōe's Nobel Peace Prize speech all weave together and by grasping their inextricable connection, a fuller definition of

[10] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 83.
[11] Ōe, 個人的な体験,436.
[12] Washburn, Dennis, "Ōe Kenzaburō," Modern Japanese Writers, Jay Rubin, ed., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 291.

Ōe's humanism and "Hiroshima" comes into view. In order to appreciate these traversing themes, it is important to first understand Ōe's place in Japan's social, economic and political evolution in the 20th century, and in the Japanese and Western intellectual tradition. The commingling of these experiences in Ōe's private world all play a part in the formation of the overarching ideas on Hiroshima and humanism he looks to project onto the outside world that are found in many of his works.

Ōe was born in 1935 in the small village of Ose in Ehime Prefecture on the island of Shikoku. As one of seven children, Ōe grew up in an environment emphasizing the importance of rural tradition, something Ōe notes in his Nobel Prize speech, as he recalls that at the time World War II was raging in the world outside, he as a little boy would take to the wooded mountain and found comfort in the childish fantasy he created for himself based on the stories like The Wonderful Adventures of Nils, and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.[13] "I found it gave me the conviction," Ōe states, "that this world and my way of life there offered me real freedom."[14] As Washburn notes, Ōe experienced a fundamental shift in his education once Japan lost the war, one in which the Emperor's declaration of his humanity negated his previous unquestioning reverence. The resultant disorientation and skepticism certainly helped to foster Ōe's later proclivity for questioning authority. Once he enrolled in the department of French Literature at the elite Tokyo University in 1954, Ōe was swept up into the volatile social climate of Japan after the Occupation. During the perpetual threat of nuclear attack of the Cold War, Ōe came under the influence of the French Left and existentialist thought.[15] Ōe's education at Tokyo University under Watanabe Kazuo (Ōe credits Watanabe with inspiring him with his interpretation of humanism) and his work

[13] Ibid., 277-293.
[14] Ōe, "Japan The Ambiguous, and Myself," 108-9.
[15] Washburn, "Ōe Kenzaburō," 279.

concerning French existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre served as a major influence on his writings both early on as well as after he became an established novelist.

"[Watanabe] hoped to teach the Japanese about humanism [人間的なユマニスム[16]]," Ōe said to the audience at Stockholm, "about the importance of tolerance, about man's vulnerability to his preconceptions and to the machinery of his own making."[17] In his works, Ōe often integrates themes of tolerance (寛容) and patience (忍耐), especially in reference to learning how to bear the unbearable, to shoulder the responsibility (責任) for all of our deeds and misdeeds, and to find the light (光) in even the most catastrophic and disorienting of experiences. Further, Ōe emphasizes the need to go beyond blind faith in impotent ideals, and here the word "machinery" (機械) serves the dual purpose of meaning a belief system as well as the ultimate product of man's trust in scientific progress: the atomic bomb. Tied into Ōe's definition of humanism is the education he received in French existentialism at Tokyo University; in his section on Ōe in Writing Ground Zero, John Treat gives an overview of the impact of Sartre's work on Ōe. The two met several years before Ōe began writing Hiroshima Notes, and Treat remarks on how Sartre's thoughts on absolute freedom, absurdity, and the multitude of relationships of the Self to the Other all interact in the space of Ōe's mind as he, "the unknown traveler" (見知らぬ他人の旅行者[18]), attempts to relate himself to the *hibakusha*'s stories of suffering and courage by recalling his own philosophical and existential debates. Treat details further the relationship between Ōe and Sartre, and ultimately an image of Ōe as a writer heavily influenced by Western philosophy on existence and morals emerges. Treat observes how Ōe's repeat use of the words authenticity (正統的),

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[16] Ōe, Kenzaburō, あいまいな日本の私, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), 15.
[17] Ōe, "Japan The Ambiguous, and Myself," 126.
[18] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 42.

dignity(威厳), and shame(屈辱) in Hiroshima Notes incorporates key ideas from existentialist discourse, adding a further layer to the idea of the outside world in this work.[19]

In his epilogue to Hiroshima Notes, Ōe declares that in taking on the project of constructing an image of Hiroshima and its people, he is "above all, a Japanese writer."[20] Ōe's need to confirm his status as a Japanese writer/novelist (日本人の小説家[21]) implicitly acknowledges the fact that he is a product of both East and West; that he is a synthesis of his upbringing in the woods of Shikoku, the Western fairytales of his childhood, the social and political tumult of the immediate postwar period in Japan, and of his education in French literature. Indeed, this seems almost a defense against those who might charge Ōe with lacking the certain "Japanese-ness" necessary in writing judiciously about so Japanese an experience as with the bomb: an almost double marginalization as even a normal (正常) Japanese still remains outside what is essentially "Hiroshima." Ultimately however, Ōe's unique position as a man of letters makes him a keen observer of the greater implications of the Hiroshima experience; as Ōe states, he begins from the personal (個人的) and then in ever-expanding spirals, moves outward towards the lessons on humanism for Japan and the rest of the world. Through humanism, Ōe seeks to resist the monster (怪物[22]) of deception (欺瞞[23]) and the ability to forget (忘れていることができる[24]), one which would see to it that the whole of Japan would take on the false mantle of victimhood as a way to sweep beneath it the truth of *hibakusha* suffering as well as the responsibility Japan bears in its aggressions during WWII.

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[19] Treat, John Whittier, Writing Ground Zero, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 232-4.
[20] Ōe. Hiroshima Notes, 180.
[21] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 159.
[22] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 436.
[23] Ibid., 437.
[24] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 94 .

To examine the duality of man's nature is to accept man's capacity for both good and evil, and all the shades of grey in between. Ōe finds it intolerable for the Japanese to put such a gloss on WWII that it becomes possible to simultaneously embrace a narrative of victimhood, the American leaders who decided to drop the bomb, and also the potential for rearming the Japanese military. In his education and throughout his career as a writer, Ōe is often cited as a member of the Far Left, and indeed his liberal personal politics regarding the preservation of Article 9's anti-war clause of the Japanese Constitution, his advocacy for peace and for nuclear disarmament inform both Ōe's fiction and nonfiction works. However, it is important also to note that Ōe is just as quick to criticize the infighting and incoherence of the Japanese Left as he is the conservative establishment; he finds that the bureaucratic red tape, egos and ideological differences between members of the Left and the Peace Movement (for example, the Japanese Communist Party, the Japanese Socialist Party, and student groups) end up overpowering the true message that should emerge from Hiroshima, one which remembers *hibakusha* suffering in addition to Japan's wartime guilt. In Ōe's perspective, Japan's self-victimization and deception, the frightening pace of the arms race as well as Japan's overtures toward reestablishing its military are all a mark of disrespect toward the real people of Hiroshima (真に広島的なる人々[25]) and seek to blur the the lines between true evil (絶対的な悪[26]) of the atomic bomb and its corresponding absolute good (善[27]) of the brave efforts in Hiroshima at "recovery and restoration."[28] Forgetting Hiroshima and overlooking the emanating lessons of humanism creates a muddle from the moral issues that surround the atomic bomb.

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[25] Ibid., 10.
[26] Ibid., 98.
[27] Ibid., 98.
[28] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 115.

In the spectrum of atomic bomb writers, Ōe's views on Japanese war responsibility (important also is his equally critical stance on American war guilt) places him in the second-generation of this movement. Treat notes that other writers in Ōe's vein were able to build on the works of previous writers who made "the violence itself… [a] comprehensible fact" in way that turned the Hiroshima experience to a "social or individual inner problem [that] often [touched] on broader political or social issues."[29] Ōe also belongs to yet another subgroup of atomic bomb writers, that of the non-*hibakusha*, and along with Ibuse Masuji, Ōe has garnered more attention and critical acclaim than those who actually lived through the bombs.[30] But whose approval is more important to Ōe? Ōe seems particularly vulnerable to criticisms from the *hibakusha* themselves and he gives considerable voice to one *hibakusha* critic in the prologue to Hiroshima Notes in addition to constantly reminding the reader that he is but a traveler – an outsider – attempting to create and develop the "Hiroshima within [him]" (僕自身の内なる広島[31]).

The strength of Ōe's Hiroshima and *hibakusha* writing, in the end, lies in his ability to engage the reader in his debates on humanism, the true meaning of "Hiroshima" and what it is to be "human." Just as Ōe cultivates within himself his own Hiroshima, so too must the reader discover what such an unparalleled event as Hiroshima means for their own life and the world around them. Necessarily, the experience of Hiroshima cannot remain in isolation from the world just as the world cannot isolate Hiroshima to avoid facing the evils of nuclear war it has unleashed upon itself. Washburn's description of Ōe's works as an "ongoing literary and cultural project" lays bare the dynamic interplay between Ōe as a writer, an intellectual, a philosopher, a student, and above all, as a man. On this last point, Ōe as a

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[29] Treat, Writing Ground Zero, 2.
[30] Thornber, Karen L., "Atomic Bomb Writers," Modern Japanese Writers, Jay Rubin, ed. (New York: Charles Scribern's Sons, 2001), 50.
[31] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 15.

"man" (人間) brings his own unique experience as the father of a mentally handicapped son, one which forever changed the way in which he viewed the world around him and is inextricably linked to his writings on Hiroshima, humanism, and the *hibakusha*.

III

The pivotal year of 1963 came as quite a shock to Ōe, who as he ventured to Hiroshima to report for Seikai on the Ninth World Conference in Hiroshima, writes that never before had he "experience so exhausting, depressing, and suffocating a journey."[32] An unexpected collision of events shook Ōe to the core, for the image of his first son Hikari (afflicted with a brain hernia) barely clinging to life in an incubator weighed heavily on Ōe's mind as he listened to the vague statements that the Conference would go ahead as planned despite behind-the-scenes scuffles between the JCP and JSP. To Ōe, these skirmishes threatened to drown out the hopeful voices of *hibakusha* who believed in the purpose of the Conference and came out to tell their story despite their precarious health. Writing in 1995, Ōe recalls this period as the time when his "whole life… [was] decided by the events of a few days."[33] Against the advice of doctors (whose "expertise" and adherence to protocol Ōe dryly mocks in A Personal Matter), Ōe insisted on the surgery that meant Hikari's survival despite the dim hopes his son would grow up normally (正常に育つ希望[34]). Ōe's life raising and caring for Hikari forever changed the way he viewed the world and wrote about what he saw. The influence of his experience with Hikari is undeniable; beginning with A Personal Matter published in 1964, the mentally handicapped child became a recurring character and narrative device in much of Ōe's fiction. Even naming his son Hikari (meaning

[32] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 17.
[33] Ibid., 7.
[34] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 308.

"light" 光 in Japanese) was no accident, and Hikari's eventual development into a musical composer despite his handicap became a source of inspiration for Ōe.[35] In Hikari's ability to produce music that "cures and restores… [its] listeners," Ōe expressed in his Nobel Peace Prize Speech, "[he found] grounds for believing in the wondrous healing power of art."[36] By considering how Ōe himself used the written word to exorcise his own personal demons as well as to try to rationalize the evil in the world around him, it is clear that the blank page is a space wherein Ōe can begin to heal old wounds through his twin concepts of humanism and "Hiroshima."

Understanding how important Hikari is in Ōe's work helps to illuminate his admission in his Nobel Peace Prize Speech,

> …the fundamental method of my writing has always been to start from personal matters and then link them with society, the state, and the world in general.[37]
>
> …私の文学の根本的なスタイルが、個人的な具体性に出発して、それを社会、国家、世界につなごうとするものなのです。[38]

The connection between the personal and the world lay bares the direct correlation between Hikari's birth in 1963 and his sojourn to Hiroshima, and it is possible to perceive the flow of influence in Ōe's life and work moving freely between the private and the universal: that the causal arrow moves not unilaterally, but in a cycle of ambiguous origin. For out of the tumultuous period and the critical juncture (分岐点) immediately following Hikari's birth Ōe produced two works, Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter, which are defined by their

[35] Cameron, Lindsley, The Music of Light: The Extraordinary Story of Hikari and Kenzaburo Oe, (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 9-10.
[36] Ōe Kenzaburō, "Japan The Ambiguous, and Myself," 128
[37] Ibid., 109.
[38] Ōe, あいまいな日本の私, 3.

intertwining of Ōe's private reflections, the larger implications of nuclear arms and war, and all encompassing questions about what it is to be human (人間[39]) and finding the courage (威厳) to face an uncertain future.

Hiroshima Notes was first published in 1965 as a compilation of essays on Hiroshima Ōe wrote for Sekai from that first fateful summer in 1963 through the end of 1964. Through his career, Ōe has defended Hiroshima Notes as a work of literature due to its ultimate concern with the question of what it is to be human.[40] Further, the 1995 edition includes an introduction wherein Ōe recasts his original observations through the lens of his thoughts on the nature of Japan's wartime guilt and responsibility toward other Asian nations as captured in his 1994 Nobel Peace Prize Speech. Ōe cites the moral ruin (道徳的な荒廃[41]) of Japan in the original text of Hiroshima Notes as directly related to its decoration of General Curtis E. LeMay (one of the atomic bomb decision-makers), but in the larger context of Ōe's views such a statement stands as an implicit condemnation of Japan's overtures toward remilitarization. In 1965, Ōe believes a renunciation of the anti-war clause contained in Article 9 is a "betrayal [裏切り[42]] of [*hibakusha*] suffering,"[43] an idea Ōe expands beyond just Japan's experience in 1994: "…to remove the principle of permanent peace would be an act of betrayal [裏切る[44]] toward the people of Asia and the victims of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki."[45] It is important here to recognize the recurrence of themes and words in Ōe's works; recalling Washburn's idea of Ōe's "ongoing literary and cultural

[39] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 81.
[40] Treat, Writing Ground Zero, 230.
[41] Ibid., 139.
[42] Ibid., 139.
[43] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 158.
[44] Ōe, あいまいな日本と私, 10.
[45] Ōe, "Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself," 120.

project,"[46] this repetition inextricably links his writings together and marks the development of Ōe's ideas, with concepts of deception(欺瞞[47]), darkness (暗闇[48]), evil (悪[49]) and absurdity (不条理[50]) as well as patience (忍耐[51]), dignity (威厳[52]), courage (勇気[53]) and hope (希望[54]) moving in a feedback loops across time, personal and universal experience, and Ōe's canon to create a fuller definition of the lessons on humanism and morality he learns from Hiroshima.

A Personal Matter (often cited as one of Ōe's greatest novels) flows into this spiral of themes, diction, and experience, and further adds to Ōe's ambiguous line drawn between fiction and nonfiction. The story follows the moral crisis and transformation of the young father Bird after the birth of his son afflicted with a brain hernia. The parallel between Ōe's own life with Hikari is apparent, and from this personal matter (個人的な体験) Ōe draws connections between Bird's moral debate to the ideas about responsibility (責任), patience (忍耐) and hope (希望) that are key elements in Ōe's humanistic interpretation of Hiroshima. From such an unexpected tragedy, Bird learns that no matter how he tries to run he is ultimately responsible for the life he has brought into the world and must find it within himself to overcome his desire to surrender (屈伏しない[55]) to moral degradation. In many ways, A Personal Matter can be read as a loose allegory for the Hiroshima experience, with

[46] Washburn, "Ōe Kenzaburō," 291.
[47] Ōe,個人的な体験, 436.
[48] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 410.
[49] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 98.
[50] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 108.
[51] Ōe,, 個人的な体験, 439.
[52] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 81.
[53] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 79.
[54] Ōe, 個人的な体験,407.
[55] Ibid., 98

Bird representing Japan and his "monster baby" (怪物の赤ちゃんぼう[56]) symbolizing the *hibakusha* and even further, the entirety of Hiroshima's (and if Ōe's Nobel Peace Prize speech has bearing, Asia's) suffering. Many of the words Ōe uses to depict Bird's child – monster (怪物), grotesque (奇怪) and abnormal (異常) – appear in Hiroshima Notes as descriptors for *hibakusha*. By synthesizing A Personal Matter with Hiroshima Notes, Ōe's "literary and cultural project" takes on even further meaning, and Ōe consistently moves between the permeable, ambiguous lines between time, space, experience and literature/non-fiction to create an idea of humanism meant to teach Japan the nature of its past and the hopes he has for the future.

Before making a close examination of both Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter, it is vital to understand other themes that serve as a bridge between each work. In addition to the concept of humanism grounded in a rebirth from great misery and suffering (大きい悲惨と苦しみのなかから再出発しました[57]), Ōe embeds within his interpretation of "Hiroshima" an analysis of Japan's modernization project since the Meiji Restoration in 1868 that came to an abrupt halt with wartime defeat in 1945. Ōe seems to ask what lessons from the war Japan has learned, as it is a country ambiguous (あいまいな[58]) relationships to the West it emulates, the traditional Asia it tries to remain a part of but at the same time attempted to dominate, and the *hibakusha* – its own citizens – that it simultaneously holds as a symbol of Japan's victimization while trying to forget the true nature of their suffering. How can Japan find its place in the modern world if it still has not resolved the content of its wartime narrative? To Ōe it speaks volumes that Japan would even reconsider remilitarizing

[56] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 307.
[57] Ōe, あいまいな日本の私, 9.
[58] Ibid., 7.

after it was afforded the opportunity to create new "moral props [根本のモラル[59]] for a nation aspiring to… the idea of democracy and the determination never to wage war again."[60] Has Japan learned nothing from the bomb and the persistent threat of nuclear war? Ōe examines these issues related to Japan's modernization and its collective amnesia towards its own history in the 20th century in both Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter, and from the flow of influence moving between the universal and the personal comes an image of Ōe's humanism, and his recapturing of the definition of "Hiroshima" through the presentation of what he refers to as "The Hiroshima Man" (広島的な人間[61]).

IV

In constructing the image of "The Hiroshima Man," Ōe augments the abstract descriptors he provides with concrete examples of people he met in his journeys to the city as a way to demonstrate how their actions fit with the humanism born out of Hiroshima's suffering. Throughout Hiroshima Notes, Ōe elaborates on the distinct, humanistic characteristics he sees as composing "The Hiroshima Man," beginning with "authenticity" (正統的な[62]) with its prime example being Dr. Shigeto Fumio (Chapter Six "An Authentic Man" is entirely about him). Dr. Shigeto was a *hibakusha* himself that worked tirelessly to save lives in the immediate aftermath of August 6th and was serving as director at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital when Ōe first met him in 1963. Dr. Shigeto arrived at the Red Cross Hospital in 1945 only one week before the bomb fell, and sustaining only light injuries due to the blast, ran to the Hospital to help save as many of the injured and comfort as many of the dying as he could. Upon first meeting Dr. Shigeto in 1963, Ōe presents him as "a big-

[59] Ibid., 9.
[60] Ōe, "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself," 118-9.
[61] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 37.
[62] Ibid., 116.

hearted man of action"[63] (おおらかな行動家タイプの人間[64]), high praise which sets him in contrast to the ineffectual and squabbling organizers of the Ninth World Conference whose mantra "action more than argument"[65] (議会より行動[66]) Ōe finds bitterly ironic. Writing about Dr. Shigeto in 1964, Ōe observes his patience (忍耐[67]) and how he took on the responsibility (責任) for "the miseries of Hiroshima"[68] (広島の悲惨[69]) without at any time having the comfort of knowing that he could ever overcome the evil of the atomic bomb. From this Ōe derives his idea of an "authentic man," whose dedicated struggle to "survive all that Hiroshima means"[70] helps to shape a "new nationalism" that does not forget the past, acts upon the present, and pushes forward into the future.

On his first assignment for Sekai in 1963, Ōe often calls attention to the contrast between men like Dr. Shigeto, the marchers and the *hibakusha* that came out in support with their stories and messages of peace, and the Conference organizers (such as Chairman Yasui who repeated the "action over argument" refrain). Ōe grows increasingly frustrated with the JSP, JCP, General Council of Trade Unions and various student groups, as their clashes of ego, ideology and piousness ultimately leaves others like Ōe to fall into a "dark and dreary silence"[71] at a time when lively discussion of the bomb and the future of a non-nuclear world should have been the timbre of the day. Reflecting on his experience that year in 1965, Ōe expresses his disappointment with the organizers for obscuring what should have been the

[63] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 45.
[64] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 34.
[65] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 40.
[66] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 29.
[67] Ibid., 117.
[68] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 134.
[69] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 116.
[70] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 148.
[71] Ibid., 18.

real message of the Conference, that being the "truly human character of Hiroshima."[72] In his writings from 1963, Ōe is impressed by the *hibakusha* dignity (威厳[73]) and how they waved to the marchers as though they "were their only hope"[74] (唯一希望[75]). By the time Ōe composes his next essay one year later in August 1964, he notes that forty-seven of the patients at the A-Bomb hospital have died, which only makes their willingness to endure that hot, humid Hiroshima summer day in 1963 all the more remarkable. Certainly the authenticity of their feeling stands in stark contrast to the motives of the Conference organizers who were too preoccupied with advancing their own cause rather than advocating for peace and an end to nuclear war. Ōe finds hope in the human quality exhibited by Dr. Shigeto and the *hibakusha* he met that fateful summer, and further, says he felt compelled to "examine [his] inner condition and to measure it by the yardstick of Hiroshima and its people." Observing their bravery (勇気[76]) in the face of such adversity forced Ōe (albeit uncomfortably) to face his own "neurosis and decadence that stemmed from the suffering caused by the thoughts of [his] own son in the incubator."[77] Here Ōe moves from the universal lessons he learned from the strength of the people of Hiroshima back to his own personal matters, and his awe at their ability to struggle forward informs the lessons he draws from his Hiroshima experience, and circles to influence the creation of his definition of humanism.

This idea the *hibakusha* "struggle" ties in close with another defining feature of the Hiroshima Man: the fact he did not and do not surrender (屈伏しない[78]). Ōe sometimes uses

[72] Ibid., 18.
[73] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 27.
[74] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 38.
[75] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 27.
[76] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 10.
[77] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 18.
[78] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 98.

this phrase interchangeably with "those that did not commit suicide"[79] (それでもなお自殺しない人々[80]), but he is quick to explain that he does not mean this as a condemnation of those *hibakusha* who could not bear the "struggling toward a miserable death"[81] (悲惨な死えの闘いをつづけている[82]); on the contrary, he completely understands suicide as a "normal" (正常) response to the extreme or "abnormal" (異常) circumstances of the bomb. As a point of comparison for his analysis of Dr. Shigeto, Ōe recounts the story of a young dentist Dr. Shigeto worked with in the immediately atomic aftermath who suffered a mental breakdown and ultimately hung himself due to the sheer weight of his situation. Ōe asks, "was this not a normal condition [正常な心理状態[83]], given his experience [in decimated Hiroshima] and exhaustion?"[84] Two implications can be drawn from Ōe's section on the young dentist; on the one hand, he questions whether or not an event as abnormal or absurd as the atomic bomb does not invert the definition of "normal" and it becomes possible for a complete mental breakdown to be a "normal" state of mind. In addition, the comparison with the young dentist further sets Dr. Shigeto and others like him as something beyond what is normal, a true exemplar of the Hiroshima Man: one who springs to action, never surrenders, and patiently accepts his role in an insurmountable battle against unprecedented destruction. On this last point on facing the indomitable evil of the bomb, Ōe draws a parallel with phrase "struggling toward a miserable death"[85] as stated by *hibakusha* Miyamoto Sadao; Ōe takes some pains to breakdown Miyamoto's expression, as he feels Miyamoto worded it deliberately so as to not convey the idea of a to struggle in order to die, or to attempt to keep

[79] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 94.
[80] Ibid., 78.
[81] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 95.
[82] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 80.
[83] Ibid., 107.
[84] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 124.
[85] Ibid., 95.

from dying, or even trying to discover a type of rebirth. Instead, Ōe perceives in this as an ultimate expression of humanism, as in the struggle toward an inevitable and miserable death Miyamoto and other *hibakusha* never lost courage or the ability to interpret human nature and confront difficult moral questions.

However, in contemplating the American decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima and its moral implications, Ōe articulates his ambivalent feelings toward trusting so wholeheartedly in human strength to recover and rebuild after a catastrophic event. Ōe never enters into the debate about the different forces at work in determining whether or not the bomb was a wartime necessity, and instead argues from the strictly moral standpoint that the atomic bomb was an "absolute evil[86]" (絶対的な悪[87]), an abnormality, and an absurdity (不条理[88]). Ōe worries that in resolving to drop Little Boy over Hiroshima on August 6th, the Americans were also relying on the strength of the people to cope with the hell of the bomb as a way of absolving themselves of their guilt. So long as there are people who "will make the hell as humane as possible"[89] (その地獄をもっと人間的な地獄を変えるべく働く人間がいる[90]), the *hibakusha* – in salvaging their own lives – also redeem the souls of those who decided to bring about the "worst deluge of the twentieth century"[91] (a reference to the biblical story of Noah, whom Ōe believes God must have depended upon to rebuild the world after the flood). And even more so than the immediate destruction brought about by the atomic bomb, Ōe is troubled by the persistent threat of nuclear war since August 1945 and dismisses as a fairy tale the conclusion that to increase a country's arsenal of nuclear arms

[86] Ibid., 114.
[87] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 98.
[88] Ibid., 108.
[89] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 115-6.
[90] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 100.
[91] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 118.

acts as a deterrent against another nation's use of its stockpiles.[92] Ōe emphasizes that people during the Cold War are more apt to remember the power of the bomb rather than the suffering it caused and continues to cause for *hibakusha*, for it is much easier on the conscience to forget "Hiroshima as the extremity of human misery" (人間の悲惨のきわみである広島[93]). But it is from the people of Hiroshima, from their stories, from their memories, and from their ability to maintain courage, dignity and patience as they struggle towards certain death, but an uncertain future regarding nuclear war that Ōe finds the ultimate definition of "Hiroshima" and humanism.

In the epilogue to Hiroshima Notes written in 1965, Ōe lists the other titles –those distillations of ideas that course through a narrative – he considered for his compilation:

Thinking of the People in Hiroshima	広島で人間を考える
The Hiroshima Within Us	われらの内なる広島
How Shall We Survive Hiroshima?[94]	いかにして広島を生きのびるか[95]

And certainly the title of the 1980 Japanese volume of Ōe's "nonfiction" (Ōe himself would argue with the application of this word, however) essays containing Hiroshima Notes, ヒロシマの光 or Light of Hiroshima, also brings much to bear on Ōe's view of humanism and also his belief in working from the personal and expanding outward to make universal conclusions. Compared to the more staid, journalistic tone of a title like Hiroshima Notes, the alternates portray something more personal with their emphasis on the people, self-discovery, the wider implications of Hiroshima for Japan and the rest of the world. But of course, ヒロシマの光, is the most personal of all to Ōe and can be read to mean either the

[92] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 109.
[93] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 94.
[94] Ōe, Hiroshima Notes, 180.
[95] Ōe, ヒロシマ・ノート, 158.

Light of Hiroshima or Hikari [Ōe's son] of Hiroshima, of authenticity, bravery, dignity, and all the other ideals Ōe's interpretation of "Hiroshima" entails. Ōe furthers this concept in possibly his greatest works of fiction, A Personal Matter (個人的な体験), a story born out of the crucible of personal and universal experiences of Ōe's life in 1963.

V

A Personal Matter has been able to maintain its level of acclaim and popularity since its first publication in 1964 because of the textured themes Ōe intricately weaves together and the dense thirteen chapters that reward repeating readings. Overall, those ideas of humanism, responsibility, patience, and dignity that Ōe cultured within the confines of his mind and his existential crisis in 1963 came to have universal resonance, as the moral transformation of the main character Bird (a name that recalls Ōe's fascination with Nils regaining his humanity through his adventures with a flock of geese) instills the hope that even as mankind moves toward an unknowable future (何とも知れない未来に[96]), people will still have the courage (勇気) to accept all that comes to pass, no matter how absurd or unbearable. Bird's flaws make him relatable and his failures as a man understandable. To some, Bird's redemption at the end of the novel comes a bit too suddenly and seems a convenient didactic device. However, in taking the lens of "Hiroshima" and humanism Ōe first developed in Hiroshima Notes and that also provides the foundational elements to his "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself" speech, Bird's personal growth comes as a logical progression; that his anxieties at the start of the novel and in his attempts to morally degrade himself to the point he is able to believe he can completely disown and even kill his child by taking him to an unscrupulous abortion doctor, are symptomatic of seeing past the deception that he owes nothing to his

[96] Ōe, "対談解説," 375.

child and taking on the burden of responsibility of defining his own existence through rearing his son.

Though the basic premise of A Personal Matter about a young father and his mentally handicapped son echoes Ōe's experience with Hikari, the characterization of Bird and the actual events of the story are fictional. It is through this ability to use the creative space of the novel to elaborate on and attempt to resolve moral questions surrounding his personal experiences with Hikari and in Hiroshima that Ōe expands upon the importance of accepting responsibility for our lives and determining the nature of our own existence. Ōe traces Bird's transformation, beginning with his apprehension while he waits for his son's birth, to his disquiet at learning his son has a rare brain hernia that means either death or an abnormal life. Bird tries to run away from his "monster" baby (怪物の赤ちゃんぼう), and embarks on a torrid (but darkly comical) affair with his old girlfriend Himiko in which he tries to degrade himself to the point where he feels he is truly free (自由) of all responsibility to his child and to the world. His selfish actions throughout most of the novel – from getting fired from his job as a cram school teacher due to drunkenness and a hangover, to seeking solace in a sexual relationship with Himiko, and in planning to run away with Himiko to Africa – stand in contrast to his final acceptance of his own life and the responsibility he has to his son.

In the existential and humanistic subtext that runs through A Personal Matter, Ōe further defines what it is to be "human" through his questioning of what is "normal" (正常) and what is "abnormal" (異常). What is a normal reaction to such an unexpected event as the birth of an abnormal child? Who is more "human" in Ōe's estimation: the cowardly Bird who runs from the life he had a hand in bringing into the world, or the monster child that despite its deformity and the measures taken against its survival (for example, the deliberate replacement of its milk with sugar water) continues to demonstrate a strong desire for life (生

命力の強い赤ちゃんぼう[97])? Much in the same way that the absurdity of the atomic bomb creates an empty space from which new ideas about the nature of existence, responsibility and humanism can arise, so too from the inexplicable birth of an abnormal child can a man find redemption and forge a new life for himself based on accepting with patience (忍耐[98]) even the most miserable and unfair of circumstances. Throughout the novel Bird's very existence hinges upon the life of his child, and his efforts at deception (欺瞞) in running away only reaffirm the fact that Bird can never truly escape; as Himiko remarks while Bird anxiously waits by the phone for word from the hospital that his child has died due to his secret request of the doctor to let his child die through malnourishment, that even if the child were to die, the weight of the baby's memory will remain with him always no matter how he tries to forget. At his moment of revelation at the end of the novel, Bird realizes that his life will lose all meaning if he does not save the life of his child and that he wants to be a man who does not "continually [run] away from responsibility[99]" (逃げまわって責任を回避し続ける男でなくなりたい[100]).

A humanistic interpretation of Bird's transformation is just one way Ōe ties A Personal Matter with the Hiroshima experience. Ōe establishes a parallel between Bird's baby and the *hibakusha* through word choice, often referring to the baby in the perspective of Bird, Himiko, the doctors, and anyone else who hears of the baby's condition as "abnormal," "grotesque" and "monstrous" due to the oversized growth on its skull that gives it a two-headed appearance. Such portrayals of the baby mark it as something "other" than human: for if it is a human child, its plight has bearing on the lives of the people in its life. Bird goes

[97] Ōe, 体験的な体験, 308.
[98] Ibid., 439.
[99] Ōe, A Personal Matter, 163.
[100] Ōe, 体験的な体験, 437.

so far as to refuse to name the child. The struggle of the *hibakusha* echoes the baby's dehumanization, as it is much easier for "normal" Japanese to isolate the experience of Hiroshima and forget that it has any relationship to them. In this way, it is possible to read A Personal Matter as a loose allegory for the experiences of Japan (Bird) in trying to run from the truth of the suffering of Hiroshima and *hibakusha*. If Japan could accept its responsibility toward *hibakusha* and understand the meaning of "Hiroshima" in finding the courage to acknowledge the past as a way to face the unknowable future, it may be able to understand its place in Asia and in the post-nuclear world through efforts to ensure that Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain singular experiences. Thus, Ōe inextricably links Bird's personal matter with the wider experience of Hiroshima and from here, attempts to impart universal lessons to a world living under the perpetual threat of nuclear war.

Ōe directly discusses issues of nuclear armament and scientific progress in the context of Bird's private experiences in A Personal Matter. A critical moment thematically occurs as Bird and Himiko listen to a radiobroadcast announcing the resumption of Soviet nuclear tests. Bird barely registers the news as he is too preoccupied with his situation with his son and after Himiko chides him for worrying to the point of obsession, Bird explains

> … it's entirely a personal matter. But with some personal experiences that lead you way into a cave all by yourself, you must eventually come to a side tunnel or something that opens on a truth that concerns not just yourself but everyone. And with that kind of experience at least the individual is rewarded for his suffering.[101]

[101] Ōe, A Personal Matter, 120.

Bird goes on to say that he does not believe his situation with his child is such an example of a personal matter (個人的な体験) becoming a universal truth (一般にかかわる真実[102]) and that he is alone in suffering his existential crisis. The dramatic irony of this statement calls the reader's attention to the fact that these two seemingly disparate instances (Bird's child and the resumption of Soviet nuclear testing) are in fact connected through the lessons on humanism and Hiroshima that grew out of Ōe's own private and universal experiences. And just as Bird's existence depends upon the life of his child, so too does Japan's place in the world rely on the strength of the *hibakusha* to survive unspeakable tragedy and carry on toward the unknowable future.

In this confluence of personal and universal in the space of A Personal Matter, Ōe poses yet another existential question. Himiko presents the idea of a "pluralistic universe,"[103] wherein moments of life or death create alternate realities. At these critical junctures (分岐点[104]), one iteration of a person chooses life while another chooses death, and in each universe a different set of consequences unfold. Certainly such an idea stems from Ōe's own experience as he traveled to Hiroshima in 1963 with Hikari clinging to life in an incubator: Ōe's life would change irrevocably in either instance. At these critical junctures it is possible to begin to understand the implications of one choice of another. And in expanding from the personal matters related to the survival of one child to the survival of entire populations, Ōe seems to pose his own counterfactual in his elucidation of the pluralistic universe: what if the bombs had never been dropped? What would the world be like today if it did not exist with the perpetual threat of nuclear destruction? Though it is impossible to ever really know the answer to these questions, Ōe believes that the world can still learn from the bomb and create

[102] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 398.
[103] Ōe, A Personal Matter, 45.
[104] Ōe, 個人的な体験, 332.

a world free from the threat of nuclear holocaust. And Japan, having experienced the bombs, can lead the way if only it can come to grips with the past and accept responsibility for all that has come to pass.

VI

"As someone living in present-day Japan and sharing bitter memories of the past," Ōe explains in Stockholm in 1994, "I cannot join Kawabata [Yasunari, the first Japanese Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1968] in saying 'Japan, the Beautiful and Myself'... It is only in terms of 'Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself' that I can talk about myself."[105] The dichotomy that Ōe sets up here between "beautiful" (美しい) and ambiguous (あいまいな) reveals much about his discomfort with Japan after the war; Kawabata was an author who allowed the West to identify him as an Other, one whose esoteric poems and prose added to the recreation of Japan into a country of beauty and impenetrability after its period of blatant aggression and militarism. During the War, Kawabata had participated in several nationalistic efforts and was generally complicit in the war effort, even supporting the suppression of fellow author Tanizaki Junichirō's The Makioka Sisters in the 1940s.[106] Though Kawabata feels misunderstood by Western audiences, his treatment as an Other provides an opportunity for him to shed his associations with his checkered past. Ōe cannot accept such an interpretation of himself and his work. There is too much about Japan's past and its current amnesia toward the truth of the War and Hiroshima left to reinterpret and rectify. Beauty is but a gloss; Ōe cannot feel anything but ambiguity toward his home country that he believes holds so much promise and yet willfully isolates and forgets those experiences that should define its hopes for a peaceful future.

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[105] Ōe, "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself," 116-7.
[106] Gessel, Van C., Three Modern Novelists: Sōseki, Tanizaki, Kawabata, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993), 175-6.

Taken in conjunction, Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter provide a space in which to begin understanding Ōe's literary and cultural project in defining and redefining what it is to be "human" when the most evil and inhuman of events (nuclear war) thrums as an insidious undercurrent in the modern world. The meaning and lessons Ōe draws from his own experiences with Hikari and Hiroshima inform his creation of a type of Japanese humanism: one that borrows from distinctly Western literature and thought, but shapes and recaptures that most traumatic event of Hiroshima to create the hope Japan can take responsibility for the past and can forge ahead into the unknowable. Through an acceptance of its wartime past, Japan can perceive the utter immorality of a nuclear world and work toward keeping Hiroshima and Nagasaki the exception rather than the standard. And for Ōe, whose journey began at that critical juncture in 1963, finds in the universal truths of Hiroshima a way to understand the ambiguity of Japan's experience and also of his own personal life. For even in making Hikari the center of his world, Ōe deems himself a "weak person"[107], but hopes that in his attempts to capture a new sense of Hiroshima and humanism that he can in some way help to cure the world of its ambiguous modern condition and make it possible to live in peace.

[107] Ōe, "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself," 128.

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Due to the approach I took in writing this paper based on close readings of Kenzaburō Ōe's Hiroshima Notes, A Personal Matter and "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself," my bibliography is heavy on Ōe's writings in Japanese and in English translation, and a lighter on secondary sources. I used the works of Treat, Washburn and others as an introduction to Ōe's canon and to begin forming ideas of my own on the books and essays of his I read. Much of my final draft, however, is my own interpretation of Ōe's concept of humanism and Hiroshima rather than a reiteration of the work of other scholars. This paper began to take on a life of its own by the end, and I found writing it to be much more fulfilling because I was writing from primary sources and I have always enjoyed getting down into the smallest details, extrapolating words and interpreting them to reflect on the whole. Further, this project afforded me the opportunity to research in Japanese and provided me a space in which to begin to understand the meaning of working in translation.

It is interesting to think about the implications of a translation, as I had a particularly perplexing time in citing the quote I use in my introduction from "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself." Ōe himself speaks in French ("je suis de nouveau un homme"), but this phrase had been translated from the original line in Swedish, and Ōe then paraphrases in Japanese, which Hisaaki Yamanouchi then interprets into English. There is a bit of an echo here of the instance in A Personal Matter wherein Delchef (Ōe designates him of ambiguous "Balkan" descent) writes the word "hope" (as translated by John Nathan) in his native language, which Oe translates as 希望. I have done my best in this process to cross-reference everything to make sure that the words have not lost their meaning in the process of translation, but I think with Ōe, his ideas are ultimately universal and though the words may be imperfect, the concepts still translate. Still, I made the conscious decision to use kanji and kana in my paper

because I think writing in the original language imparts much more meaning on the text than does Romanization.

There has a fair amount of writing done about Ōe in English, but many of those scholars focus on other recurring themes (such as marginality and the nature of sexuality). For the purposes of this paper, I had to jettison a lot of the notes and thoughts I generated from these academics and ended up using largely what Washburn and Treat had to say about Ōe in the context of the atomic bomb. Further, I tried to read as much of Ōe's relevant works to the bomb, WWII and Hiroshima as I could, but given the page and time constraints, analyzed only a fraction of what I read. I had planned to integrate his introduction to The Crazy Iris, as the original Japanese title of the collection, 何とも知れない未来に (Toward an Unknowable Future) resonates with the themes present in Hiroshima Notes and A Personal Matter. However, I chose only to borrow the title in this paper so as to keep my focus fairly narrow. After writing this paper, I feel there is still much left to say about Ōe, humanism and Hiroshima, as I know in trying to understand his "literary and cultural project," it means pulling from all he has written and all he has read. But Hiroshima Notes, A Personal Matter and "Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself" provided a solid foundation upon which to build and conceive of Ōe as a writer consumed with the need to understand his personal experiences in the context of larger events.

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