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John Hersey's *Hiroshima*: Reactions to a Technological Novelty

The bombing of Hiroshima was, in several respects, an unprecedented event. It was a novelty, on the most basic level, because the atomic bomb was a new type of weapon, based on new concepts in physics that were inconceivable to the majority of people at the time it was dropped. Yet the effects, as well as the mechanism, were also new: the immediate effects of the bomb, as well as the radiation sickness that plagued survivors in the years that followed, were like none that humans had ever experienced. Further, the bombing of Hiroshima was a novelty of sheer magnitude – the amount of power released by the atomic bomb, and the scale of the harm inflicted on its victims, exceeded that of any other single weapon that had been used in human history. The victims therefore had to respond not only to devastation and disaster, but also to *novelty*. What was the meaning of this novelty for the survivors, and for human experience in general in the post-atomic age? Were the responses and experiences of the survivors as novel as the event they experienced, or else were they crystallizations of reactions many before them had had to the trials of modern life? It is tempting to call the bombing of Hiroshima a technological novelty, despite the fact that the meaning of ‘technology’ is by no means obvious. Thus, it is possible that the ways in which the survivors coped, or else failed to cope, with what happened to them says something about the nature and significance not only of this technological novelty, but also of experience in what is arguably a ‘technological age’.

John Hersey's *Hiroshima* is an invaluable resource for any investigation into the reactions of the survivors of Hiroshima. Hersey manages to recreate the mindsets of the survivors he interviewed while the disaster was occurring and in the days and weeks that followed, capturing the way they struggled to somehow deal with something that at the time was new and inconceivable. Looking to Hersey's account, it seems that, among the diverse and personal struggles the survivors faced, they were all in some way struck by a feeling of helplessness. The survivors in Hersey's account responded to this helplessness in a multiplicity of ways: some tried to *understand* what happened to them, as though some scientific theory, or else political theory, would help them gain a handle on the situation of which they were victims. Others tried to act, as though exercising agency – cleaning wounds, providing or seeking out religious guidance, providing medical aid – could give them some sense of control over the situation. And others still resigned themselves to this helplessness. Yet ultimately these attempts (or absences of attempts) to deal with helplessness point to a metaphysical void carved out by the novelties of the technological world – one will never know enough, or be able to do enough, to have control over one's fate and to know what's coming next. This does not mean that action and the quest for knowledge are futile and should be abandoned. Rather, the ultimate inability to seize control of fate through knowledge and action reveals something of the sense of helplessness that comes with living in a post-atomic, technological world.

In the days following the bombing, most victims knew nothing about the nature of the weapon that caused so much destruction in Hiroshima. And while, as Hersey writes, “most of them were too busy or too weary or too badly hurt to care that they were the objects of the first great experiment in the use of atomic power [...]” (49), rumors

circulated among victims, hypotheses about the nature of that which had caused the suffering they could not comprehend. Very soon after the explosion, Dr. Fujii, not understanding what had happened, looked for a modicum of comfort in a theory:

Although there were as yet very few fires, wounded people were hurrying across the bridge in an endless parade of misery, and many of them exhibited terrible burns on their faces and arms. “Why do suppose it is?” Dr. Fujii asked. Even a theory was comforting that day, and Dr. Machii stuck to his. “Perhaps because it was a Molotov flower basket,” he said (23).

The ‘Molotov flower basket’ was just one of many theories that circulated before the official news, that an atomic bomb was dropped, reached the masses. As Hersey writes: “Those victims who were able to worry at all about what had happened thought of it and discussed it in more primitive, childish terms – gasoline sprinkled from an airplane, maybe, or some combustible gas, or a big cluster of incendiaries, or the work of parachutists” (49). Once the news was released, scientific experts began an effort to understand the details of what had happened: the radiation levels, the heat of the explosion, the nature of the new radiation sickness. Yet several of the victims Hersey describes cared little for scientific explanations, focusing only on their own survival. Others simply resigned themselves to what had happened to them; that is, to their fates. All of the victims were faced with the ultimate incomprehensibility of the event, whether or not they attempted to overcome it or resigned themselves to it. This resulted in a sense of helplessness that was not material, but intellectual: the inability of the survivors to locate causes for the effects they suffered.

Further, while some responded to the bomb with an attempt to *understand* what happened – the nameless scientists who figured out the technicalities, or else the

laypeople who developed their own theories - most tried to *do* something, to somehow take action in the face of the devastation in which they found themselves. Immediately after the bombing, both the Reverend Mr. Tanimoto and the Jesuit Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge were a position to provide some assistance – however inadequate – to the victims. Mr. Tanimoto transported people in a boat to the safe side of the river and Father Kleinsorge did what he could to find food and water for those in need. And both men joined together to try to fight the fires (37-38). Further, as time passed, these two religious men provided spiritual guidance to those who are otherwise incapable of dealing with what had happened to them. Father Kleinsorge, for example, was instrumental in Miss Sasaki's conversion, which brought her out of depression. In this latter capacity, religious figures emerge in Hersey's account as a source of comfort – finding God, or else continuing to work for Him and helping others find Him, is something the characters were able to *do* to deal with what happened to them. Medicine also emerges – through the figures of Dr. Sasaki and Dr. Fujii – as a way of taking action, and ultimately a way of providing some degree of comfort to the victims. Yet there were others who adopted a position of resignation toward the bombing. Mrs. Nakamura, for example, simply tried to continue with her life as normally as possible. And Miss Sasaki, before her conversion, was too dejected and depressed to do anything. Again, whether or not they attempted to overcome their sense of helplessness through the exercise of agency, helplessness was something with which all of the victims were confronted. This helplessness was twofold: the intellectual inability to understand what had happened to them and the material inability to act effectively.

I am arguing that the sense of helplessness the victims faced was intrinsic to the experience of a 'technological' event. While we generally think of technology as something that improves human capabilities, it seems to simultaneously aggravate human feelings of helplessness. The reactions of the victims of Hiroshima to the technological novelty they suffered, as beautifully rendered in John Hersey's account, brings out a central paradox of the technological age: technology eliminates our feeling of control over the world precisely as it gives us more and more means for controlling it.