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Night before last was the first falling of snow on Hiroshima since the bombing. A full moon, and I walked alone for one or two miles before dawn, a quilt sewn by Nomura about me, Akiko's old school socks pulled up my arms. [...] And yet later, holding her as she wept and muttered in her half-sleep, the grief welled up in me again, and swallowed the whole world.

— Yasusada's letter to his friend, Akutagawa Fusei
(*Doubled Flowering*, 13)

I. Introduction

In the decades following Hiroshima/Nagasaki,¹ controversy ensued over whether a devastating historical event could be properly represented within a literary sphere.² Depicting a certain historical event seems remarkably difficult, particularly for those who are not directly involved with it. Some might find it too painful to sympathize with the victims while others may feel helpless in the face of overwhelming accounts written by “true” witnesses. They may even carry a sense of guilt for narrating the event without having any actual experiences pertaining to it.

In the sphere of Japanese literature, a particular literary genre called “atomic bomb literature” or *Genbaku-bungaku*, made its appearance and established its prominence in the mid-1970s. It later became a part of mainstream literary criticism and writers such as Hara Tamiki, Hayashi Kyoko, Toge Sankichi and Nagai Takashi are notable both domestically and internationally for their essays and novels of this genre. Their works often illustrate the atomic holocaust in first-hand narratives, based on the writers' personal experiences. As a matter of course, telling a story through the perspective of the “witness” is bound to be painful, because in most cases, the writers must face their inner trauma that have left them with unspeakable wounds. However, one should bear in mind that in the case of Hiroshima/Nagasaki, the “first-hand testimony” has long been considered the definitive and authoritative text on the matter, and that its canonical power has sometimes excluded other possible voices. This leads to the question of how a certain event can be portrayed by those who did not directly experience it. Is there anything the literary imagination can do to tackle this issue?

Seirai Yuichi, an Akutagawa Prize-winning Japanese novelist from Nagasaki, has made the boundary between *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors) and *non-hibakusha* the focal point of his stories: his award-winning novel *Bakushin* (*Ground Zero and Other Stories*, 2006) and *Ningen no Shiwaza* (*Human Deeds*,

2015) are particularly ambitious works that highlight the limitations and possibilities of portraying the atomic bombing of Nagasaki as a non-*hibakusha*. Comparing himself to the actual bomb survivors, Seirai acknowledges he is a “fake storyteller” because he did not experience the bombing of Nagasaki first hand. He also admits that he feels a sense of guilt for editing, modifying and even composing *hibakushas*’ testimonies in his series of works (*Kanashimi to Mu no Aida*, 12). Even so, he states that he feels obliged to continue creating and telling stories of Nagasaki, choosing to believe in the power of miscellaneous “unofficial” stories that are normally excluded, eliminated or forgotten in the formal testimonies. As a fiction writer, he further suggests that while fictional stories may be less persuasive than “true” accounts, crossing over the boundary between non-fiction and fiction could present new narrative possibilities.

Seirai also introduces his own father’s curious case that leads us down a path to further discussion. As an atomic bomb survivor of Nagasaki, Seirai’s father had, over the course of his life, spoken about his wartime experiences. What Seirai finds significant about his father’s accounts is that there are some questionable parts in these stories that are inconsistent with the narrative of other *hibakusha* people. Nobody can say for sure whether such accounts are factually accurate, but as Seirai indicates, it is notable that these unreliable stories can be conversely seen as the most essential part of describing a certain incident. The way Seirai explains it, even misconceptions and imprecise memories are crucial factors that constitute a person’s “truth.” Therefore, while he may find some of the *hibakushas*’ stories dubious or even downright deceptive, he takes care not to dismiss them but rather treat such stories as valuable pieces of a larger narrative because they could be a reflection of an essential aspect of the event.

This notion of shedding light on “unreliable” elements of accounts may serve as a clue for how to approach the Hiroshima/Nagasaki narrative. When accounts of certain incidents are given, the recipient could choose to give weight to its fictitious aspects instead of pursuing only the story’s “authenticity.” This perspective could be useful for reexamining the latent power of fiction.

As Seirai states, Hiroshima/Nagasaki surely has the potential to be reimagined and retold by non-*hibakusha* writers. On the other hand, what would happen if a writer intentionally poses as a *hibakusha*, concocts stories of Hiroshima based entirely on fake episodes, and releases it into the world as an authentic testimony? This question is the focal point of this essay, which will detail a controversial literary incident called the Araki Yasusada Affair. Some of the sensational literary criticisms sparked by this case will be introduced as well.

II. The Case

The Araki Yasusada Affair, which became known in the mid-1990s, is a still-unsolved case that has become the center of a massive dispute mainly within American literary circles. Ever since it first came into the spotlight in 1995, the Yasusada Affair and its subsequent criticisms have opened the door to many discussions.

In 1995, a series of poems by an unknown Japanese *hibakusha* poet named Araki Yasusada suddenly made their appearance in multiple established American Journals such as *Grand Street*, *Conjunctions*, *Stand*, and *The American Poetry Review*. According to statements attributed to Tosa Motokiyu, Okura Kyojin and Ojju Norinaga, who all claimed to be the English translators of Yasusada’s poems, his works

were discovered by his son in the 1980s, eight years after his death. What the son found were various writings such as drafts of his father's poems, English assignments, diaries and even personal letters. These miscellaneous pieces were later published under the title *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada* in 1997. *American Poetry Review*, which first featured Yasusada in 1996, introduces the biography of Yasusada alongside his photograph. It explains that Yasusada was born in Kyoto in 1907 and relocated to Hiroshima in 1921. Although he had been studying Western literature in Hiroshima University from 1925 to 1928, he later dropped out following his father's death. Subsequently, he started working at a post office and married a Japanese woman named Nomura in 1930. As Marjorie Perloff notes, in the Japanese cultural context, "Nomura" does not fit the conventional norms for a woman's first name. Many have pointed out how the people around Yasusada all have strange-sounding names: see note 6. During the Second World War, he was conscripted into the Imperial Japanese Army and on August 6, 1945, he lost his wife when the first atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima, and his beloved daughter Akiko also died as a result of radiation sickness.

As soon as they were published, Yasusada's works earned the accolade of the American literary scene. On the other hand, rumors began to circulate, mainly on the Internet,³ that Yasusada was not a real person: it was argued that his entire body of works were invented by an unknown person as an elaborate hoax. To this day, many scholars who support this theory suggest that this anonymous writer is most likely Kent Johnson, an American poet who also taught at a community college in Illinois. Although Johnson admits that Yasusada is a fabricated persona, he has long denied being the actual author and insists that the works were written by Tosa Motokiyu, one of Yasusada's translators. To make matters even more complicated, there is no proof that Tosa Motokiyu is a real-life figure,⁴ so the truth has remained a mystery to this day.

Nagahata Akitoshi, a Japanese scholar of American literature who first reacted to the Yasusada Affair in the mid-1990s, points out that throughout history, there have been known instances of fake literature.⁵ One can easily trace the first case back to the early 18th century (Nagahata 114). Even so, Yasusada's case should be considered peculiar in its own right, because of its exceptional deceptiveness and manipulation that sparked controversy and chaos not only among the readers but also the literary critics. This exploitation of the post-modern literary method misled the readers into believing that the poet Araki Yasusada was a real person and that his texts were the true accounts given by an atomic bomb survivor of Hiroshima. Regarding this point, Nagahata warns us that Yasusada's hoax should be regarded first and foremost not as hibakusha literature, but as a carefully crafted performance by an unknown writer.

III. Beyond Individual Authorship

Among the series of controversies resulting from the Yasusada Affair, poetry scholar and critic Marjorie Perloff's argument leads us to a broad discussion surrounding the relationship between the literary text and the "Western readers" (*Scubadivers and Chrysanthemums*, 23-50). Perloff states that if readers pay careful attention to the rhetoric of Yasusada's texts, they should notice that the works are not based on a genuine account written by an actual hibakusha (25). She continues that there are "any number of clues⁶ that raise questions as to Yasusada's authenticity." Then, why was the American literary circle deceived so easily despite these implied messages? Perloff further explores this matter by citing Edward Said's

Orientalism. She observes that Yasusada's, or more precisely, Kent Johnson's use of conventional Japanese motifs characterized by "reticence, dignity, and elusiveness" dovetails neatly with how Westerners romanticize Japan⁷ as a country of "the courtly or Zen tradition of the distant past" (35).

Of course, as Perloff points out, one could say that the anonymous writer behind Yasusada's works must have used these devices with careful intention. However, things are not as simple as they seem: when evaluating the Yasusada Affair, one must go through a two-step process. First, it is necessary to understand that in the early days, Yasusada's works were applauded by the American literary scene because his lyrical texts were believed to be written by a hitherto-unknown Japanese poet who had managed to survive both the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the chaotic post-war Japan. If one does not acknowledge that this enthusiastic response is rooted in the West's prejudiced, sentimentalized, and exotic ideals of Japanese culture, the Yasusada Affair cannot be truly comprehended. Thus, the initial reception of his works should be put into perspective by moving on to the second step, which is to make it widely known that his works are part of a grand hoax. Only when Yasusada's works are criticized for what they are, the implications of this literary incident become apparent.

Another intriguing argument regarding verbal evidence and firsthand account literature was made by Eliot Weinberger in 1997, immediately after Yasusada's texts were accused of being fraudulent. In his essay "Can I Get a Witness?" (1997), Weinberger questions the readers' blind acceptance of writings believed to be based on firsthand accounts (*Scubadivers and Chrysanthemums*, 17). He particularly criticizes an anthology of poems called *Against Forgetting* (1993) edited by Carolyn Forché, which is generally regarded as one of the greatest firsthand account collections of poems. Although Weinberger partially admits that this anthology can be considered an all-time masterpiece in the poetry genre, the crucial issue is that the "poets in the book qualify as witnesses only if they have been combatants or civilians in a war, prisoners or exiles, or citizens of a totalitarian regime" (16). He further notes that these poets include "journalists or visitors in a war zone, even for a short period" (16). If firsthand accounts by actual witnesses are the only ones given credibility, other multifarious voices may be excluded from the narrative, simply because they are not based on firsthand experiences. This could also result in the readers' unquestioning acceptance of any text that is presented as testimony-based literature or supposedly written by a witness of the event, especially if the author's background information (however fictitious it may be) is provided.

On the other hand, one must also acknowledge that testimony-based literature is newsworthy: in most cases, its shocking disposition will catch the readers' attention. Such stories are generally based on the storytellers' overwhelming and unspeakable experiences. However, as Weinberger is careful to point out, one should not rely too heavily on testimony-based literature just because they are written by witnesses of certain events. The distinction between testimony-based literature and non-testimony-based literature, which Weinberger states as "literalness and hair-splitting historicism" is "a surprisingly absolute denial of imagination" (17). Taking all of this into account, Weinberger observes that Yasusada's inauthentic narrative "is clearly an act of empathy and compassion" that gives us a glimpse into an unforeseen scenery beyond what testimony-based literature can provide.

Another affirmative critical response toward Yasusada's hoax can be seen in Mikhail Epstein's "Hyper-Authorship: The Case of Araki Yasusada" (1997). He argues that Yasusada's unreliable, unidentified

authorship enables every reader to imagine themselves as the subject of August 9, 1945:

Perhaps we can say this: In Yasusada's poetry there exist as many potential authorships as there are individuals in the world who are aware of Hiroshima and can associate themselves with the fate of its victims and survivors. *In our quest for the genuine author of Yasusada's works a moment of truth arises when each of us is ready to ask: Could it be me?*

(DF, 74, emphasis in original)

Epstein further explains that Yasusada's forged first-hand narrative goes far beyond traditional authorship and opens a new door, which he coined "hyper-authorship"⁸ (63).

As can be seen in these examples, ever since Yasusada made his appearance in the Western literary world, his works have generated a wide range of affirmative responses that commend their narrative style. If we were to imagine that we, living in the post-atomic era, are all "potential hibakusha"⁹, as John W. Treat suggests in *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (1995), one could argue that Yasusada's fictitious narrative provides us with a new possibility of retelling this historical event without going through the actual experience.

IV. Uncanniness behind Yasusada's Narrative

With all this in mind, one should not disregard the criticism against the Yasusada writer's anonymity.

Nagahata Akitoshi, the aforementioned scholar of American literature, highlights the crucial issue of a text that is produced by an unknown writer with doubtful intent. Nagahata acknowledges that, as Weinberger and Epstein suggest, it is theoretically possible for readers to grasp the post-modern intention behind the Yasusada hoax as a means for them to participate in a certain historical event. He further notes that it may also be true that the Yasusada Affair successfully deconstructs the conventional concept of the particular/individual author and offers an alternative "hyper-authorship" that enables every reader to "experience" August 6th, 1945. Yet, Nagahata observes that the problem lies in the fact that the anonymous Yasusada writer's attitude toward this historical event is entirely opaque. It is cruel that no one can be sure to what extent the writer had empathy toward Hiroshima (120). As a case in point, Nagahata notes that overtly pornographic motifs can be seen all over Yasusada's works. One poem entitled "Silk Tree Renga,"¹⁰ is a superb example (121). No clues are given as to why "the sorority girls sing of fucking in a plaintive way" and why "a screen of moonflowers and creeping gourds, with a thicket of cockscomb and goosefoot" evoke the image of "cock and cunts." No one can know for sure the reason behind the anonymous Yasusada writer's choice of words. Nagahata observes that because Yasusada's works are written under a false identity, it is impossible to discern the purpose of these excessively obscene wordings. In the worst case scenario, they could be interpreted as an intent to defile hibakushas and Japan, yet frustratingly, no one can determine whether this notion is reasonable. Thus, the false identity behind Yasusada's texts leaves Nagahata with a sense of doubt and uneasiness (122).

There is one thing that Seirai Yuichi, mentioned earlier in this paper, has in common with Yasusada. Like the latter's poems, Seirai's works also feature inappropriate motifs such as seemingly unnecessary

erotic scenes.¹¹ However, the major difference is that Seirai has spoken publicly about his intentions behind the use of these motifs¹²: his objective is to differentiate himself from other already-established Hiroshima/Nagasaki writers. Because many of Seirai's readers are aware of the fact that he is a non-*hibakusha*, they can rest assured that he is not a fraudulent or unknown writer with unclear intentions.

The contrast between Yasusada and Seirai further highlights the fact that, as long as the Yasusada writer's identity remains a mystery, one can never be sure what they were thinking. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the enigmatic Yasusada writer might have anticipated all the subsequent controversies even before he started writing. If this is true, it may be useless to raise the simple question of whether or not it is possible for anyone to tell the story of Hiroshima and Nagasaki within the confines of literature.

Moreover, critics may be made aware of the limitations of evaluating fabricated atomic bomb literature using post-modern methods. One possible reason for this is that the Yasusada hoax was crafted not as a true first-hand narrative of *hibakusha*, but as a completely different type of literary text having a high affinity with the hyper-postmodern way of interpretation. In this sense, the title of Yasusada's book *Doubled Flowering* works well in a metaphorical way. Only when the critics are deceived in the first process, Yasusada's texts start to flourish as a first-rate work of literature.

V. The Boundary

Even if one acknowledges Yasusada's works as masterpieces of post-modern literature that opened the doors to many debates, there is one last mystery that should be considered. Why does Yasusada's unknown author focus on the *hibakusha*'s memory and his emotional pain as the central motif for his writings? The answer to this question becomes more ambiguous when Yasusada's texts are analyzed and discussed through the lens of the post-modern criticism. Judging from the number of critical responses that have been raised to this day, one can easily conclude that Yasusada, who was once hailed by the Western literary circle as a miraculous discovery, is in fact an intentionally fabricated figure with the goal of creating a wildly ambitious literary project. However, why was it necessary for the unknown Yasusada writer to use the *hibakusha* motif in the first place?

For the past 70 years, when the terms "Hiroshima and Nagasaki" or "atomic bomb" are used in Western literary world, the *hibakusha*'s personal stories were hardly ever featured. Even when the *hibakusha*'s accounts are given, their stories, which are quite familiar within the Japanese culture, have never reached a canonical status in the Western atomic narrative. As some scholars have noted, the only exception to this is John Hersey's 1946's work of nonfiction, *Hiroshima*, but the canonization of this work leaves us with some problems. For example, In *Producing Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Literature, Film, and Transnational Politics* (2018), Shibata Yuko explains the mystery of why Hersey's *Hiroshima* is considered to be the singular American atomic bomb literature to this day. According to Shibata, *Hiroshima*'s canonization could potentially marginalize the voices of other *hibakusha*'s. She states that "if people learn from the *hibakusha* experience only through Hersey's work, their understanding of Hiroshima is susceptible to the effects of the narrative form adapted by Hersey's text" (84-85). Another essential point was made in Susan Southard's seemingly simple notion that has become the basis of her 2015 work of nonfiction,

Nagasaki: Life after Nuclear War. She raises a question as to the reason why Americans “know little or nothing about the victim’s experiences beneath the atomic clouds or in the years since 1945” and observes that the Western literary world has long ruled out hibakushas’ firsthand accounts or literary works based on their experience, focusing too much on the apocalyptic narrative or the political discussion of whether or not it was right to drop the atomic bombs.

Considering this circumstance of the Western literary circle, one could regard the Yasusada Affair as a breakthrough that successfully introduced a hibakusha’s personal memory into the Western literature. However, this idea is immediately brought to a halt upon the realization that the works of Yasusada are intended to be a reflection of postmodern imagination rather than actual hibakusha accounts. Once they are seen for what they are, the works of Yasusada go through a fundamental shift. Thus, one can conclude that even though Yasusada’s works are true hibakusha accounts at first glance, they are, at their core, nothing like the texts of atomic bomb literature. The chasm between the Yasusada hoax and testimony-based hibakusha accounts is enormous, almost beyond comprehension. Let us conclude this essay by introducing one more anecdote that is worth considering.

Hosea Hirata, a scholar of Japanese Literature at Tufts University, observes that Yasusada’s poems are characterized by sophisticated and wondrous narrative styles that exclude a sense of anger, which can be discovered in many Japanese hibakushas’ firsthand accounts.¹³ Yet, like Nagahata, his personal evaluation of the Yasusada hoax is one of skepticism. During his visit to Japan, he happened to witness something that left a strong impression on him. The quote below describes a scene just after Hirata read the Japanese version of Yasusada’s poem, “Mad Daughter and Big-Bang” in front of the audience.

There was a moment of silence. And then an elderly woman stood up and began a long tale of how her family was bombed out in Tokyo, and her family members, who were burned to death, came back and haunted her as ghosts, and how she had to perform special rituals to console their souls...Everybody was aghast! This woman was really mad. She didn’t want shut up, though the panel chair begged her to stop! Finally she shrieked—“Please everyone console the victims of war!”—and sat down. Wow, that was something to behold.

(*Scubadivers and Chrisanhemums*, 315; ellipsis in original)

This episode is introduced in Hirata’s essay, “Letter to Araki Yasusada,” which itself utilizes a super postmodern narrative style. While no one can say for sure whether or not this elderly woman truly exists, her “mad” response after the poetry reading is noteworthy because it is the epitome of the stereotypical reaction of a Japanese WWII survivor triggered by war stories. Hirata’s reaction to this elderly woman is understandable, but one should not ignore his implied message in describing this episode. As long as Yasusada’s unknown writer uses “war” or “Hiroshima and Nagasaki” as his central themes, Yasusada’s poems evoke the heartbreaking trauma of the people who survived the wartime era. As many critics observe, Yasusada’s fabricated poems are written in a postmodern literary context. It is also true that they provide the readers with a new type of narrative that enables everyone to be the subject of a certain historical event. However, it would be difficult to imagine that Japanese WWII survivors will accept Yasusada’s works the same way the Western critics do. There will inevitably be a gap between the two sides. Was the

Yasusada Affair intended to be a bridge over the dark abyss between Japan and the Western atomic narrative? No one can ever know for sure.

Note

- 1 In the past few decades, the term “Hiroshima/Nagasaki” has been used widely and officially as a symbol signifying for not only the geological sites in Japan but also the U.S. use of the two atomic bombs in 1945. However, in recent years, some critics have raised concerns that the symbolized use of this term is problematic in a historical context. Regarding this, see: *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Yoneyama, 1999)
- 2 Regarding authenticity in remembrance of wartime atrocities and traumas, there has been a wide range of discussions as well as experimental literary movements that were inspired by T. W. Adorno’s famous remarks “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”
- 3 One of the first skeptical responses toward Yasusada was submitted by Lee Chapman through *POETICS-L* on August 29, 1995. His entire message can be read here: <https://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9508&L=POETICS&P=612669>
- 4 As Johnson has stated, Motokiyu is also a nom de plume. He further explains that Motokiyu, was the name of his former roommate in the 1980s, who passed away in 1996. Nobody can be sure whether or not this Motokiyu was a real-life person.
- 5 There are some common patterns seen among fabricated stories. In most famous cases, writers intentionally publish their works under a pseudonym and come up with a detailed biography of the so-called “author.” The Ern Malley Hoax of 1943, where two conservative Australian poets imitated the style of modernist poets and published poems in canonical journals to make fun of the literary circle, is frequently mentioned alongside the Yasusada Affair. To read about this case properly scrutinized in *Jacket*, the web journal, see: <http://jacketmagazine.com/17/index.shtml>
- 6 For example, Yasusada’s wife’s first name “Nomura” as well as the two translators’ names “Motokiyu” and “Ojiu,” should immediately raise red flags as sounding superbly unnatural. Another hint is the wrong year of publication. In a supported letter from Yasusada to his friend written in 1967, he wrote, “There is also a very interesting looking book by one Roland Barthes, entitled *Empire of Signs*, which I haven’t yet had time to read” (79). However, Barthes’s *Empire of Signs* was published in 1970, so there is no way Yasusada read it at the time the letter was written.
- 7 For example, keywords such as *Geisha*, *Zazen* and *Kawabata Yasunari* are obvious examples of clichéd images of Japan within the context of Western culture.
- 8 Epstein uses this term for the first time in a fictional letter to Tosa Motokiyu published in *Denver Quarterly* in 1997.
- 9 Treat coined this term based on his recognition that everyone in this society can be a victim of nuclear weapons, regardless of their nationality. For further explanation, see the preface of *Writing Ground Zero*.
- 10 In an e-mail that was sent to Nagahata in 1997, Kent Johnson explains that “Silk Tree Renga” is “undated” and is to be taken, along with some other pieces in the manuscript, as a pre-war poem (to

see the complete version of their correspondence, see the website: <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/yasu.html>). Yet, the problem is, as Nagahata replies, that “the persona identified as a ‘hibakusha’ is shown to have been a bawdy poet. If a fictional poet is made into a ‘hibakusha,’ his or her earlier experiences would also be taken as those of the ‘hibakusha.’ They cannot be severed from the ‘hibakusha’ identity. [...] One cannot but wonder what’s the point of such excessive bawdiness in the fictional ‘hibakusha’ personage.”

- 11 For example, in a short story titled “Honey” (the original title, *Mitsu*), the central theme is the erotic love affair between a housewife in Nagasaki and a young man. Their obscene communication culminates on Nagasaki’s atomic bomb memorial day.
- 12 For example, in his autobiographical essay titled *Between Sadness and Hollow* (*Kanashimi to Mu no Aida*), he states that the most essential part of his writing is to condemn various kinds of human atrocities, which include not only Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also more universal tragedies such as barbaric wartime crimes (98).
- 13 Hosea’s observation first appeared in the conference paper for Proceedings of the *International Conference on Japanese Literature* in Japan, vol 27.

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