The space of nations is never simply their own: Hiroshima in Australian Literature

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This essay examines two very different Australian literary constructions of Japan through the representation of the event and the site of Hiroshima in writings by Nam Le and Shirley Hazzard. Nam Le’s story “Hiroshima” presents the time leading up to the American bombing of Hiroshima through the unknowing eyes of a child who will witness the event. By contrast, in her fiction but also in her public writing, Shirley Hazzard represents the period after the bombing through the eyes of Europeans visiting the ruined city, basing these observations on her own experience of having been taken to the site in 1947. The tensions between these two literary events, separated in time and cohering around an historical event which happens outside the frame of the narrative in both cases, highlight some of the complications of national literary forms and representations. This point is compounded by the divergences between the two authors, both acclaimed in Australia and internationally. Nam Le arrived in Australia with his family as a child, as a refugee, while Hazzard left at age 16 and insists that she has no homeland. While both are characterized by their global topographies and imaginings, Nam Le tells us that his knowledge of the diverse locations of his work is based in intense but second-hand research, while Hazzard’s narratives are largely based on her own experiences.

I wish to posit two starting points for this discussion: First, I want to consider how Vilashini Cooppan’s argument about the capaciousness and the permeability of national forms and figures, and the “global connections” and the immense interiorities of national stories might apply to the study of Australia, in particular. Cooppan identifies a twinned or doubled movement of contraction and expansion in the texts of nation; she argues that

Nations … are fantasmatic objects knotted together by ambivalent forces of desire, identification, memory, and forgetting, even as they simultaneously move within, across, and beyond a series of spatial and temporal borders (us/them, territory/flow, present/past, life/death). The space of nations is never simply their own. What the structure of national identification conceives of as the outside—the world beyond the border, the cultural other outside the compact—is in fact always already inside, always already present in the very moment and process of national formation. (xvii)

I will begin with Shirley Hazzard in order to consider how she takes up the matter of Hiroshima as a point of ethical meaning alongside its historical (and political) significance. Within Hazzard’s writing, the event and site of Hiroshima constitute a point at which the limits
of human experience might be imagined, and where the category of the nation becomes unstable. At the same time, however, I want to suggest that there is a contrary movement in Hazzard’s writing which returns this event to the discourses of nation. Nam Le’s story “Hiroshima” comes about halfway through his award-winning 2008 short story collection The Boat. The first and last stories in the volume draw on Le’s own story, as he puts it in an interview: “I’m a boatperson. I escaped from Vietnam with my family when I was only three months old.” (Nam Le, Knopf Q&A) His story is thus a mirror image in many senses of Hazzard’s, but it speaks, as does her story, to the sense of “Australia” and of national connectedness as formed in moments of arrival and departure. My discussion of the ways that the ethical and imaginative, or literary spaces opened in very different ways by the writing of Nam Le and Shirley Hazzard requires us to think around and beyond the category of the nation, brings me to the observation, or claim that prompted this inquiry: Yasue Arimitsu’s consideration of exiled or diasporic writers who avoid reflecting or representing the nation in their work, which Arimitsu proposes provides an account of “a human reality” unenclosed by “the limits of national, ethnic and cultural identities” (Arimitsu, Nam Le: 413) in “a world whose boundaries are uncertain and unknowable” (Arimitsu, Nation, Identity, Subjectivity: 7).

Shirley Hazzard is a New York-based author, who won the US National Book Award and Australia’s Miles Franklin Award for her final novel The Great Fire (2003). Born in Sydney, Hazzard left Australia as a young woman, moving first to Hong Kong and then to New York with her parents. While in Hong Kong she was taken to visit Hiroshima, a visit which provided material for a pivotal event in her previous novel The Transit of Venus (1980), which sees the young hero Ted Tice visit Hiroshima, in a story recounted as an explicit analepsis, that is to say, it provides information which, the narrator tells readers, will help clarify the motivations for his actions. Ted is an utterly singular character: his experience of unrequited love for the novel’s heroine, Caroline Bell from Sydney Australia, sees him remain alone in a cruel and very particular sense through the novel. He is also defined as a singular figure by his ethical choices, beginning with his response to Hiroshima, which becomes, more than an historical or a political event, a measure of his humanity, of his capacity to comprehend and to make judgments about the world around him. It becomes for him, in fact, a moral index, as is clear from a passage when he learns where he will be posted, after the war: “And Ted Tice pronounced, like a lesson, the name of his destination: ‘Hiroshima’” (Transit 52). Ted Tice’s response to the sight of the bombed city is recounted in the third person, but it is tightly focalized first through his already distinctive moral register, and subsequently through the consciousness of his superior officer, a man without Ted’s moral fineness of vision. In this scene, we see first that what is at stake in this fictional confronting of the aftermath of the American bombing is the very category of the human. And further, my argument is that it is the city itself in its broadest sense – the city has

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been, since the time of Homer, a trope for human achievement, for civility, and civilisation – which has been destroyed.

This is what Ted Tice sees:

Due to the unearthly flatness where a city had been famously incinerated, the events he already called his life were growing inconsiderable before he practiced making them important. This derived from a sense not of proportion but of profound chaos, a welter in which his own lucky little order appeared miraculous but inconsequential; and from a revelation, nearly religious, that the colossal scale of evil could only be matched or countered by some solitary flicker of intense and private humanity

[...] When they got down from the jeep, Captain Girling took Ted aside: “Look here. Don’t make a goat of yourself.” Goat signifying anything unmanly, or humane. He was only giving advice.

And did not see why the bugger should laugh. (Transit 54)

We see here the suggestion of the limits of the human in the figure of the animal: the metaphorical “goat,” with its unmistakable trace of the biblical scapegoat, signaling guilt, responsibility and redemption. It “signif[ies],” the narrator advises, “anything unmanly, or humane.” The lexical cognates of “human” – human, humanism – ghost the word at this point, informing our reading of what is at stake, what has been lost, in this event. We also see the shift from one moral consciousness to another, from Tice’s insightful and magisterial grasp of the scene to the more limited military perspective of Captain Girling, with Tice providing the focalisation for the narrator’s musing:

In the past, the demolition of a city exposed contours of the earth. Modern cities do not allow this. The land has been leveled earlier, to make a city; then the city goes, leaving a blank. In this case, a river amazed with irrelevant naturalness. A single monument, defabricated girders of an abolished dome, presided like a vacant cranium or a hollowing out of the great globe itself: Saint Peter’s, in some eternal city of nightmare. A catastrophe of which no one would ever say, the Will of God.

It was now that Ted Tice’s life began to alter aspect and direction. (Transit 53)

As I’ve noted, this moment marks the beginning of Tice’s moral life, and at the same time, the end of humanism in so far as humanism might be understood as a narrative of specifically European progress. This moment is thus a point where the individual and the personal align with the political and the historical. The city, which tropes human civilisation in its broadest
parameters, has been razed; the destruction is emblematized here first through the forms of the sacred ("the Will of God", which is decisively absent), in the achievements of culture (St Peter's Basilica) and in human interiority (the image of the "vacant cranium"). Further, just as a Japanese city now comes to represent all cities, all of human achievement, we note that it is explicitly the greatest achievements of western humanism which are annihilated at this moment. And in the unspeakable wake of the atomic bomb, vitality is to be found instead in the capacity of the city dwellers – again locals, the city is no longer merely to be seen in the cities of the West – to reconstruct, reimagine, and rededicate, as Ted Tice observes:

All along the new street, there had been posted the signs of normality: habitation, children, the silence broken. Aligned timbers were assembling the tableaux of daily existence. And small squat women had been gathering up the concave reflectors from search lights, which had fallen everywhere like stones in an eruption. Filled with water, these dishes had been placed at doorways. And in each of them floated, rose-red and magnified beyond your wildest dreams, a frond or single flower of azalea. Such families could not be considered survivors, being physically intact, and prepared to rebelive.

(Transit 54)

First, I propose that the phrase "in your wildest dreams" draws the reader directly to confront the scene, imaginatively, through its use of the vernacular impersonal "your" thus locating the young, vernacular, author herself in the scene, a scene recollected across several decades of the post WWII half century, and constituting an historical trace or fragment. In this beautiful image, we are invited to imagine the rebuilding of the city, an act that takes place in the wholly local domain of the private citizen. Hiroshima at this point images not just the human capacity for "rebelief" demonstrated by its citizens but also, through Ted’s experience, the individual point of witness and the consequences of this witnessing for ethical growth. Robert Dixon has argued that in fact Hiroshima constitutes the first of three crimes in Hazzard’s novel: the second two operating in the domain of the personal and the relational, and these three crimes track Ted Tice’s moral development. There is a larger point to be made here about the ethical scope of the novel, but I want to dwell on just one feature of Tice’s experience at Hiroshima: that of bearing witness. It is an experience based on Shirley Hazzard’s own (and thus aligned with the image of the flowers in the reflectors) as is made clear in an essay she published in 1981 – the year after the novel – in the Boston Review.

I want to quote from her account of this visit at length, and to highlight two features in particular: first to see how the act of witnessing here becomes a moral event, and then to note how the self is formed in a moment of departure from the nation and of arrival in an international or global space. This essay represents two layers of reflection and indeed of
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witnessing: the young Hazzard’s 1945/1947 memories along with her reflection, after the publication of her novel, on those recollections through the lens of the early 1980s, that is to say, filtered through the anti-nuclear discourses that achieved clarity and some wide exposure within the international Left through that period. This is, then, a point of both personal and historical moment. Further, the narrative perspective for the first of these – the recollected event – is utterly Australian (the schoolgirl); that of the second – the reflection – has been transformed and is now global.

The first news of the atomic bomb reached Australia on a winter morning – I suppose it was the day following the event. I was dressing to go to school, and heard the announcement on the radio. I hardly know why the moment was immediately understood to be important – anaesthetized as we were by six years of information on mass bombing throughout Europe and in Asia. Even then, in the brute climate of war, there were persons who began to ponder the consequences – material, ethical, psychological, self-evident, or subtle. I was not close to such people; but the debate opened quickly and was already a global preoccupation by the time the tests took place at Bikini atoll.

Twenty months after the bomb was dropped, I was at Hiroshima. I was en route to Hong Kong, where my father was taking a government job. We had travelled from Sydney to Japan in a tiny ship, taking over a month on the way and stopping only once, briefly, for water in New Guinea. The ship was carrying about fifty wives of Australian officers in the occupation force in Japan. Some of these women had been parted from their husbands for the duration of the war. We arrived at the port of Kure, which was a shambles from the bombardment, and spent the next day at Hiroshima, a short drive distant. The city centre was still a wasteland, quite empty apart from the mangled dome and blitzed shreds even then familiar to us from photographs. On the outskirts, a lot of rebuilding was taking place: new houses swiftly assembled from light timber and plywood. Men and women were engaged in this busy scene, while the cast central area of the bombing remained still and empty, like a gray lake. The attitude of my family and of the officers accompanying us was the conventional one: that the bomb was an inevitable and justified – and even merciful – outcome of the total war. Yet among these generally unreflective people there was some uneasiness in discussing it. No one could explain why the bomb had not, in the first instance at least, been dropped in an unpopulated place. That was the extent of objection....
Some weeks ago an Australian friend – a poet and entirely gentle person – visited us in New York. We spoke in despair of the neutron bomb, with which Reagan had just announced his intention to proceed. The poet mentioned his own “first memory” of the atomic bomb. He had been a soldier at the time and dying of wounds in a makeshift jungle hospital on a remote Pacific island. His unit had learned it was hopelessly outnumbered by Japanese troops a few miles away. With the news of the bomb, they were saved. He said, “I never knew how to handle this in my mind: I wish the bomb had never been invented, let alone dropped. But if it had not been, I would be a rotting skeleton these thirty-odd years.”

The fallout of the bomb on our modern thought and life has been continuous and incalculable. And combined over the same period, with other destructive phenomena that exist on a new, incomparable scale: pollution of air, water, oceans, upper atmosphere; the death of forests, of species; the depletion of natural resources and essential minerals; overpopulation and threat of world famine; dislocation of entire peoples; and the apparent disintegration of structures of civilized order. It is impossible to be confident of “posterity.” Even were we assured of the survival of the race, we could not prefigure to ourselves the forms of future human existence or its qualities of mind. In our present uncertainty, not the least danger lies, too, in self-dramatization: our state of suspense is exploited, on the one hand, to excuse inertia; and, on the other, to justify violence.

I have written, briefly, in fiction, on Hiroshima and the bomb. In my own life, the event was a confused beginning of pacifism. And also of an awareness that immense evils are impossible to hold in the mind. One’s own contemplation of them can carry dangers of posturing, of easy vehemence, and of claims of unearned morality. By contrast, acts of goodness – even of “public” goodness – can only be properly discussed or understood in their individual manifestations. The dominant proposition of the atomic age – that humankind is doomed by its own evil – cannot be refuted with any single sweeping show of virtue analogous to the bomb. To counter the implications of the bomb, humanity can only offer its history of individual gestures – the proofs of decency, pity, integrity, and independent courage. I suppose this touches the central premise of the Christian ideal, and the very meaning of the word Redeemer. However, the sense of it as a reality was formed in me long
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...before I realized that, and was developed by a few great living spirits I have been lucky enough to know.

I cannot prevent the making of the bomb – although, like others, I may make my protest. I cannot prevent the use of it. My faith is, merely, that the world against which the bomb may be used has not entirely deserved it. (Hazzard, "A Writer’s Reflection")

For Robert Dixon, Ted Tice’s witnessing of Hiroshima (and of several other later events, including a murder),

can be understood in terms of Levinas’ account of the ‘awakening’ (l’éveil), or potential awakening, of the moral self. In Levinasian ethics, there must be something other that prompts the ontological self to wander into what he describes as the exile of ‘otherwise than being.’ This awakening of the moral self does not refer to the confrontation with ‘myself,’ but to the foundational sight of the Other, when ‘subjectivity wakes up from its egology: from egoism and egotism.’ (Dixon, 86)

In Dixon’s reading of *Transit*, Hazzard “[locates] ... ethical responsibility in the proximate scene of the face-to-face,” and I would argue that this face-to-face is seen in the act of witnessing. In Hazzard’s essay, something similar occurs around her biographical narrative. We find that arrival in a place – here in Hiroshima – is at once the experience of colonial otherness and of the ethical encounter with the other. What comes together here is the work of expatriation: being outside the nation, being away from home is a way of being “otherwise than being”, an “awakening of the moral sense”. Witnessing is in this sense thus also the point at which we leave home, or more precisely, leave the nation itself. Recognition of the crime of Hiroshima – which I argue is in Hazzard’s novel seen as a crime against the city as the repository of human life and achievement – is a step in becoming a moral and an ethical entity. For Hazzard, this is aligned to the process whereby our selves are uncoupled from the nation. It is the site, moreover, of the modern, which takes form here through her questioning doubts about the possibility of the future, or as she puts it here, of “posterity” (and I will come back to this point about modernity and the future in more detail in the discussion of Nam Le). It is a point of an utterly singular and individual ethics, as we find in the confronting comment from Hazzard’s friend, the unnamed Australian poet, to the effect that: ‘I wish the bomb had not been invented but had it not been, I would be dead.’ The subjunctive and conditional modes here signal the dire speculation that limit-events such as the Hiroshima bombing press onto individuals. And it is the proper work of memory and reflection to persist with these questions; to re-pose them for later generations, while conveying the ethical immediacy of that past moment, that achievement of individual freedom at incalculable expense.
Shirley Hazzard’s articulation of this point, eloquent and resonant as it is, is not, however, an unmediated event. She does note that the visual scene immediately before her eyes on this visit was familiar already through photographs of the devastation. There are two other points of mediation or intertextuality that are useful here, two texts that also coincide with her 1945 memory and 1947 visit: John Hersey’s collection of first-person accounts from survivors, Hiroshima, published in 1946 and Georges Bataille’s 1946/7 review of Hersey’s book in Critique. I’m not suggesting that Hazzard would have read either at the time, but rather that all three accounts likely draw on key discourses circulating in those post-war years – for instance the way the devastation of the city is imaged in the labour of rebuilding, the exposed girders, and the striking presence of natural forms, including rivers. I want to focus on two images from Bataille’s essay that are also to be found in Hazzard: the idea of the animal and the concept of Christian redemption. The animal I have already noted in The Transit of Venus where Ted Tice’s “unmanly, or inhumane” response to the devastation of Hiroshima sees him taking on himself the category of the “goat,” with the ironical suggestion of a decline or a falling away of human achievement or being not in Ted, but in those around him who saw his response as a weakness. Redemption is explicit in Hazzard’s essay as a point of transcendence, where the human coheres again after trauma – and this is striking, as it is almost the only reference to Christian thought in any of Hazzard’s work, which is avowedly and comprehensively secular. For Bataille, however, the animal is not less than human; rather it is an ethical stance. It signals a move away from the co-optation of the event (of Hiroshima) into public and historical discourse, the discourse of the state. It is a complex point in Bataille, but, to summarise, the animal recalls the capacity of sacrifice to return sovereignty and immediacy to the world, a move away from the isolated sovereignty of kings or the state, and a move which vests transformative power in the world of ordinary humans(1) – where we might see the citizens of Hiroshima placing flowers in the reflectors, as in Hazzard’s novel. For Bataille, moreover, one place where this work of sacrifice, this animal dimension is found in the modern world is in the work of literature, as he puts it: “only literature restores what is necessarily sovereign in us.” (Bataille “Hemingway” 14). As Anthony Reynolds argues,

Bataille saw the value of Hersey’s book in its reduction of the catastrophe ‘to the dimensions of animal experience’ (225), unlike what he called the ‘human representation of the catastrophe’ provided by [President] Truman that was predicated upon a rationality that projected consequences into a future it sought to secure. (Reynolds 313)

What Bataille sees as Hersey’s “animal” representation rests in the domain of sensory experience, which is not overlaid with intelligence, or a higher comprehension; and intellect is not more highly valued than sensory apprehension. In this sense it is, as he puts it, “deprived …
of a passage into the future” (Bataille 225). The human, then, for Bataille, is a category in the service of the state. It subordinates “the reality of a specific historical event (the violent execution of Christ) to the ideality of a future compensation (the promise of eternal salvation)” (Reynolds 313). It invests the present trauma in an imagined ideal future. This argument identifies, I think, a point of tension in Shirley Hazzard’s otherwise compelling account. Despite her striking attempt to engender the specificity of this site of Hiroshima and the event that sits behind it, to account not simply for human sympathy, but also for the moral imperatives that flow from such sympathy, Hazzard voices a humanism which stalls the capacity of her narratives to move to imagine a shared humanity for Hiroshima’s inhabitants, its survivors. In other words, we are trapped in the immediacy of the event’s after-ness, and can only look to the future.

In providing this critique of Hazzard’s account of Hiroshima, my concern is not to denigrate it – both the novel and the essay are fine pieces, and express gripping and compelling perspectives on the event. But I wanted to outline its limitations in order to suggest what Nam Le’s story does that is quite distinctive. Returning to what Bataille found compelling in John Hersey’s first-person narratives, we find something I suggest we also find in Nam Le’s story: this dimension which Bataille calls “animal,” by which he refers us to the sacrificial or indeed to the literary as a form of sacrifice, which returns to human experience its own immediacy. The animal here is a dimension that resists the incorporation of human experience into the discourses of the state, or the nation. What cements this link for me is that we can find in Nam Le’s story aspects that seem to draw directly from Hersey and Bataille’s accounts of the scene. I’ll start with the largest dimension of this: Bataille’s summary of what he finds in Hersey, and which I would argue scopes the narrative arc of Nam Le’s story: “The individual in the streets of Hiroshima, dazzled by an immense flash – which had the intensity of the sun and was followed by no detonation – learned nothing from the colossal explosion. He submitted to it like an animal, not even knowing its gigantic scope.” (Bataille 224)

Nam Le’s story is told from the perspective of Mayako, a child, aged about eight, who is living in Hiroshima in the period leading up to the bombing. It is a fictional, imagined first-person ‘witness’ account, which invokes Hersey’s collection of true accounts directly through the naming of two secondary characters after two of Hersey’s confidants: Dr Sasaki and Miss Sasaki, not related to each other, reappear in Mr Sasaki and Mrs Sasaki, teachers at Mayako’s school, doubling an already uncanny, because unrelated, coupling. There is a second intertextual reference here to the internationally well-known children’s book Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes (1977), based on the experiences of the child Sadako Sasaki, who was “two years old in the last days of the war” (Yurita and Dorman 229). And this doubling of names is, I would suggest, extended by the persistence in Le’s story of some key features of Hersey’s eyewitness
accounts, in particular the ubiquity of dust (Big Sister comes home from training “[c]overed in grey dust like she is made from stone” (187), and Sister’s friend from the Volunteer Corps, wearing a shirt which is “open and the skin beneath it is the colour of concrete where the dust sticks to his sweat” (191). This dust is of course a prefiguring rather than a consequence of the devastation to come. There is also, and I’ll return to this, the elemental and atmospheric world of water and light, of air and sound, to be found in both Le’s story and Hersey’s book.

The narrative coordinates of Le’s story are diametrically opposed to those of Hazzard’s: rather than reflecting back on the event, the narrative anticipates the bomb, after which there can be no future. Rather than the moral and ethical imperative which the site of the bombed city offers for the young adult Hazzard or her protagonist Ted Tice, there is no larger perspective for narrator and protagonist Mayako; she has no intellectual grasp of the event. Her first-person stream-of-consciousness account folds an apprehension of the spirit world and the responsibilities of the citizen back into her childish and incomplete perspective on the world, a world filled with not just the matter and technologies of war – airplanes, bombs, radio announcements and warnings – but also the new domestic labours taken on by children, and their endless capacity for play:

After we recite the Imperial Rescript on Education at assembly each morning, Mrs Sasaki reminds us we are all small citizens. Sometimes, after I dip the rag into the bucket, the wooden floorboards squeak like small dogs. Hungry! they yelp. Hungry hungry! My spirit smiles back at me, more open-eyed now. Some of the younger children like making this noise; when three or four of them do it at the same time they giggle. Children, says Mrs Sasaki. Citizens. (187)

Mayako’s narrative takes us right to the event, which is experienced directly but not comprehended; it happens literally in a flash, through the prism of another recollected experience – the taking of a family photo. The photograph is presented in both past and present tenses, eliding the orderly passage of time, fixing trauma and memory in a single instant. It is a flash that provides not insight but rather the immensity, the luminosity and the immediacy of experience. There is no gap between the event and its recollection – both are already mediated by the technology of the camera, which is itself connected in a chain of technological mediations that dominate the narrative in the form of radio, letters, bomber-planes:

Mother has a photograph of Big Brother wearing a khaki uniform with a rifle in his hands and a dagger on the right side of his belt. It was taken at Ujina Port. We made a photograph to send to Big Brother too. Look here. Don’t blink now. The man’s rabbit teeth above the box, the sky behind him dark and green-looking. (189)
Look here, says the man with the rabbit teeth. The sky is green like the leaves of the plum tree before night. I stand in the middle and sitting on my left is Mother in her best kimono and sitting on my right is father in his white jōe with his headgear and standing behind me is Big Sister in her designated nametag and armband from the Volunteer Corps. We look into the box. Mother is holding the photograph of Big Brother in front of her stomach. Father has one hand on the bronze statue of Kannon, Goddess of Mercy. Don’t blink now. But everything turns white – the box disappears – and I blink. I have been naughty. It’s only the magnesium flash, says Father. He laughs at me and says, Don’t worry. The air feels like it wants to rain. The clouds are green. (199)

These two moments take up the stuttering echo already signaled by the repetition of the name Sasaki and the dust scattered through the city and the story. These passages are structured around the recurrence of elements including the photographer’s rabbit teeth, the green light, the flash, the father’s care for his daughter, his reassurance that she is safe, that she is not to worry, and the arrangement of family members in a single space. For most of the story the family are separated from one another not by the bomb itself but by preparations for war, with Mayako sent away for “safety,” (another word repeated over and over through the story) and her sister and brother involved in military and citizens’ groups. In the final moments, Mayako takes out the photograph, bound now, in her apprehension, to the letter she imagines writing to her parents in order to mitigate the profound sense of loss she feels at being separated from them:

Dear Father and Mother. Thank you for the pears and the rice with red beans and the sesame seeds mixed with salt. Thank you for my yukata and wooden sandals. It is hot here. … Please let me come home and work on mobilization. I will be safe there. I take out the photograph. And thank you for the photograph. Over the light wind there is the roar of another B-29. Just a single plane. … All around me are the eight million kami. I look in my hand. On my left is Mother and on my right is father. Behind me is Big Sister. The paper is mostly grey. Then everything turns white and the left side of my face is warm. Don’t blink says the man with the rabbit teeth. Don’t worry, says father. He laughs at me. Don’t blink. Look here. (202-203)

What Nam Le’s story enacts in these fragmented and repeated moments is a reflection on mediation and immediacy. Le commented in an interview that this story is “pretty wedded to [its setting]. [It] developed almost entirely in negative relief; that is, I wanted to capture something real, relatable, human, behind a historical tragedy that’s absolutely saturated in
previous expression and assumption” (Knopf Q&A). The machinery of mediation is built into the fabric of the story, or rather, into the consciousness of its narrator and protagonist, who literally cannot imagine the world around herself except through the operations of technology and the forms of human communication. Nam Le thus builds for us a fictional world which is both utterly familiar to us, and highly subjective and thus fundamentally unknowable, with its focus tightly on the little girl bound by history and location to an event which in itself defines global modernity. What lifts us out of the endless chain of mediations, what brings us to the immediacy of the event, to Mayako’s experience, is her experience of being photographed; her seeing the photographer, fixing him in an image just as she is fixed as the object of the camera’s gaze. She is thus in this (repeated) moment both subject and object, or as Lacan has it in his account of seeing the light glinting off the sardine can, floating on the water in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture.’ That is, the subject is also under the regard of the object, photographed (as it were) by its light, pictured by its gaze ...” (Lacan 96, quoted in Foster 139). The point here is in the shuttle between subject and object; this repeated moment of her seeing the camera (over and over) has Mayako breaking out of its frame instating a capacity to resist being seen. This shuttle speaks also to Le’s readers as we read about Mayako and imagine her experience. Le’s aim here is to generate something “real, relatable, human” out of a scene which is already all too familiar. It is very like Hazzard’s point of witness, a point where history freezes in the necessity for an ethical response. But it differs from Hazzard’s in the immediacy and sovereign capacity it accords to Mayako’s own position in the very moment of her death and the annihilation of her home.

One final aspect of Nam Le’s story that I want to draw attention to is the importance of the world in which Mayako lives, not simply the familial, social and civic worlds – although these are presented with great vividness – but the elemental, atmospheric world of the earth, sky, wind and water around her. This dimension of the story further refines the sense of global modernity being imagined. The narrative devotes much time and attention to Mayako’s sensory apprehension of this world, its smells, tastes, sounds and so on, which works to enhance the sense of immediacy, and of Mayako’s embodied-ness. Central to this, and to the story as a whole, is the reproduction of sound in the story. Just as the atomic bomb itself is enacted in the memory of the taking of a family photograph, so the arrival of the B-29 Fortress Superbomber, “[j]ust a single plane” (202) is prefigured and amplified throughout the story in the sounds of the birds and insects, other airborne bodies, around Mayako:

It is hot outside. I hear the sound of the higurashi cicada – kana kana kana.

There are kites and crows in the blue sky. I imagine I hear the song of the
tsukutsukuboshi which says: chokko chokko uisu. Chokko chokko uisu. All around me are the eight million kami. (203)

The sounds of birds and insects, focalized through Mayako, have been recorded throughout the narrative. In this final passage, Le’s readers finally recognize, perhaps, one further intertextual reference for this story, one further mediation which brings us both closer to and further away from Mayako: T S Eliot’s The Wasteland, with its crickets, cicadas and nightingales singing the brutal destruction they witness.

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water of a rock
Where the hermit thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

In Eliot’s words and images, themselves plundered from some of the most revered texts of western culture, we might find another source text, another model for Le’s account of the bombing of Hiroshima. Like Hazzard’s ruined city, Le is searching for a way to express the end of civilization, to imagine calamity and cataclysm in their global forms:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal
Le’s story, I am proposing, takes his readers back to the apocalyptic images and rhetorics of Eliot’s post-World War I poem; and I think even Le’s stream-of-consciousness narrative might be read as in part a response to *The Waste Land’s* fragmented flow of voices, as a way of figuring a defining event from the mid-century. Le adds to Eliot’s modernist urge to totalisation, in a move that domesticates and diminishes that world in scale, the experience of witnessing, which Hazzard has proposed is an ethical imperative in the wake of the mid-century war. But what we also need to bear in mind as we consider Le’s story is the ways it might read as an Australian work, the way, that is, it speaks to that sense I’ve outlined of the nation formed in moments of arrival and departure, the nation imagined from outside. Here it shares with Hazzard’s writing about Hiroshima particularities that are only fleetingly able to be definitional of Australia, so that we might include Hazzard’s memory of her young self dressing to go to school and hearing of the bombing on the radio, and her recounting of the unnamed Australian poet who recalls the way his own survival was due to the terrible work of the bomb, but apart from these, there is little that might be clearly defined as an “Australian” perspective or experience. The confining of Australian writing to voices and locations that are identifiable as literally “Australian,” such as in the strict definition of the Miles Franklin award does not address – indeed can not include – writings like Le’s and Hazzard’s (Hazzard’s being awarded the Miles Franklin in 2004 notwithstanding). In their profoundly different ways, both these authors push the focus on interest and concern well beyond any stable representation of a national “reality”. Rather our focus as readers must shift to attend to this “world whose boundaries are uncertain and unknowable,” and to the ways that the space we inhabit and imagine “is never simply [our] own”.

**Works Cited**


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Notes:

(1) I am indebted to the careful reading of Bataille’s essay provided by Anthony Reynolds in “Towards a Sovereign Cinema”.

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