

Kenzaburo Oe
The Unsundered People
(1965)

KENZABURO OE (b. 1935) is well known in his native Japan as a writer of fiction, essays, memoirs, literary criticism, and cultural commentary—and as an important chronicler of postwar Japan's struggle to come to grips with its imperial past while joining the ranks of modern industrial democracies. In 1994, Oe became only the second Japanese citizen to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, for creating a literary world "where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today."

Oe began his career as a writer by studying French literature at Tokyo University, where he enrolled in 1953. He absorbed the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and other French existentialists and, while still a student, began publishing short fiction in well-regarded Japanese magazines. In 1958, at the age of 23, he was awarded the Akutagawa Prize, Japan's most prestigious literary award. That same year, he published his first novel, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*, and he began his celebrated career as a professional writer immediately upon graduation from college.

Oe was ten years old when American forces dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, forcing the surrender of the Japanese empire and ending six years of war. This event, and the American occupation that followed, plays a central role in most of Oe's writings. Like many of his fellow citizens, Oe was caught up in the contradictions of trying to emulate American political and economic values, which he admired, without accepting the role of a conquered people or a vanquished culture. This ambiguity toward America was made worse by the fact that the American bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki unleashed on the people of Japan the greatest destructive force the world had ever known.

Oe's classic 1965 book, *Hiroshima Notes*, from which this reading is drawn, attempts to come to grips with the effects of the world's first atomic bombing. The bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killed up to 140,000 people and caused injuries, trauma, and birth defects that affected residents for generations. Oe visited Hiroshima numerous times between 1963 and 1965 to interview survivors of the bombing. *Hiroshima Notes* confronts the destruction of Hiroshima head-on, without turning away from the horror that it produced. But Oe's tone is ultimately both positive and humanistic, as he chronicles the efforts of the people to rebuild their lives and their city despite the tragedy they have endured. For Oe, the survivors of Hiroshima are both an example of and a metaphor for the human spirit and its indomitable will to survive.

In presenting his argument, Oe emphasizes the sheer, almost unimaginable horror experienced by the people of Hiroshima. In this way, he makes a powerful emotional appeal to his readers, most of whom already have strong emotions about his subject matter. ●

FEW PEOPLE TODAY VIEW the world in terms of a dualism of good and evil. Certainly it is no longer fashionable to do so. But, all of a sudden one summer, an absolute evil intruded into the lives and consciousness of the A-bomb victims. To counter that absolute evil, it became necessary to have an absolute good in order to recover a human balance in the world and to persevere in resisting that evil. From that instant the atomic bomb exploded, it became the symbol of all human evil; it was a savagely primitive demon and a most modern curse. The attempt to accord it positive value as a means of ending the war quickly did not, however, bring peace even to the minds of all the airmen who carried out the atomic attack. The atomic bomb embodied the absolute evil of war, transcending lesser distinctions such as Japanese or Allies, attacker or attacked.

Even while the smoke still rose from the wasteland of total destruction, human goodwill began to go into action as people made their first moves toward recovery and restoration. This action was seen both in the injured victims' will to live and in the efforts of doctors who worked, in a virtual vacuum of supplies and support systems, to treat the victims. Initiated soon that summer morning by the people in Hiroshima, the acts of goodwill were essential to resisting that ultimate thrust of accumulated science which produced the atomic bomb. If one believes that there is some kind of human harmony or order in this world, then he must also believe that the efforts of the Hiroshima doctors were somehow sufficient to cope with the demonic aftermath of the atomic disaster.

For my part, I have a kind of nightmare about trusting in human strength, or in humanism; it is a nightmare about a particular kind of trust in human capability. Toward this kind of humanism (and it is nothing more than a kind of humanism), I have a strong antipathy; so much so that I cannot help thinking about it from time to time. My nightmare stems from a suspicion that a certain 'trust in human strength', or 'humanism', flashed across the minds of the American intellectuals who decided upon the project that concluded with the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. That 'humanism' ran as follows: If this absolutely lethal bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, a scientifically predictable hell will result. But the hell will not be so thoroughly disastrous as to wipe out, once and for all, all that is good in human society. That hell will not be so completely beyond the possibility of human recovery that all mankind will despise their humanity merely at the thought of it. It will not be an unrelieved hell with no exit, or so devastatingly evil that President Truman will, throughout his life, be unable to sleep for thinking of it. There are, after all, people in Hiroshima who will

make the hell as humane as they possibly can. . . . I suspect that the A-bomb planners thought in such a way; that in making the final decision, they trusted too much in the enemy's own human strength to cope with the hell that would follow the dropping of the atomic bomb. If so, theirs was a most paradoxical humanism.

Suppose that the atomic bomb had been dropped, say, on Leopoldville¹ in the Congo, instead of on Hiroshima. Initially, a huge number of people would have died instantly; then wounded survivors, forced to accept total surrender, would have continued to die for many months to come. Epidemics would have spread, and pests would have proliferated in the desolate ruins. The city would have become a wasteland where human beings perished without cease or succor. There would have been no one to dispose of the dead. And when the victor would come in to investigate the damage—after the threat of residual radiation had passed—they would have experienced the worst nausea ever. Some of them would never be sane, normal persons again. One whole city would have been rendered as deadly as a huge death chamber in a Nazi concentration camp. All the people would have been doomed to death, with no sign of hope to be found. . . . Such a scenario is shocking to even the toughest mind. Unless some slave driver's descendant had been available to make the decision, the dropping of an atomic bomb on Leopoldville would have been postponed without setting a future date.

What actually happened in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was in fact dropped was not quite as horrible as the preceding scenario. For one thing, the people who survived in Hiroshima made no particular effort to impress on those who dropped the bomb what a dreadful thing they had done. Even though the city was utterly devastated and had become a vast, ugly death chamber, the Hiroshima survivors first began struggling to recover and rebuild. They did so, of course, for their own sakes; but doing so served also to lessen the burden on the consciences of those who had dropped the atomic bomb.

The recovery effort has continued for two decades, and continues even now. The fact that a girl with leukemia goes on suffering all her life, not committing suicide, surely lessens—by just one person's portion—the A-bomb droppers' burden of conscience.

It is quite abnormal that people in one city should decide to drop an atomic bomb on people in another city. The scientists involved cannot possibly have lacked the ability to imagine the hell that would issue from the explosion. The decision, nevertheless, was made. I presume that it was done on the basis of some calculation of a built-in harmony by virtue of which, if the incredibly destructive bomb were dropped, the greatest effort in history would be made to counterbalance the totality of the enormous evil to follow. The inhumane damage caused by this demonic weapon would be mitigated by the humane efforts of those struggling to find what hope they could in the desperate situation.

1. **Leopoldville:** the capital and largest city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with nearly ten million inhabitants. In 1966, the name of the city was changed to Kinshasa.

The notion of 'balancing' also reflects a 'confidence in human strength', itself a reflection of confidence in the strength of humanism. But it is the attacking wolf's confidence in the scapegoat's ability to set things straight after the pitiless damage is done. This is the gruesome nightmare I have about humanism. Perhaps it is no more than an overanxious delusion of mine.

I think of the patience of the A-bomb victims quietly awaiting their turns in the waiting room of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission² on the top of Hijiyama hill. At least it is true that their stoicism greatly reduces the emotional burden of the American doctors working there.

I have little knowledge of the Bible. It seems to me, though, that when God made the rain fall for forty days and nights, he fully trusted that Noah would rebuild human society after the Great Flood ended. If Noah had been a lazy man, or a hysterical man given to despair, then there would have been great consternation in God's heaven. Fortunately, Noah had the needed will and ability, so the deluge played its part within God's plan for man, without playing the tyrant beyond God's expectations. Did God, too, count on a built-in harmony of 'balancing out'? (And if so, does God not seem rather vicious?) 10

The atomic destruction of Hiroshima was the worst 'deluge' of the twentieth century. The people of Hiroshima went to work at once to restore human society in the aftermath of this great atomic 'flood'. They were concerned to salvage their own lives, but in the process they also salvaged the souls of the people who had brought the atomic bomb. This Great Flood of the present age is a kind of Universal Deluge which, instead of receding, has become frozen; and we cannot foretell when it will thaw and flow away. To change the metaphor, the twentieth century has become afflicted with a cancer—the possession of nuclear weapons by various nations—for which there is no known cure. And the souls salvaged by the people of Hiroshima are the souls of all human beings alive today.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. Why does Oe refer to the atomic bomb as an "absolute evil"? What might he say makes it more of an evil than a series of conventional explosions resulting in the same loss of life?
2. Why does Oe have a "nightmare" about a certain kind of humanism? What view of life does he refer to? What does he say that American intellectuals might have been thinking when they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?

2. **Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission:** a committee established by President Harry Truman after World War II to investigate the effects of radiation on the survivors of the Hiroshima and

Nagasaki bombings. The commission's main facility was on the top of Hijiyama Hill in Hiroshima.