The Dawn of the Atomic Age

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In the issue of Life magazine devoted to the Hiroshima bombing a feature opened: ‘Aug. 5, 1945 is the day men formally began a new epoch in their history’. The historical positioning of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remains a matter of controversy over whether they marked the end of one period or the beginning of another. Were they the unavoidable necessary final step to destroy the Japanese war machine or an object lesson to the Soviet Union in a superpower confrontation which was already taking shape? Whichever view commentators took there was common agreement that the explosion of the atomic bomb marked a radical turning-point in warfare, and Paul Boyer has shown in his classic study of the bomb’s impact on the American imagination By the Bomb’s Early Light (1985) that, even though there might have been popular acceptance of the bombing, the event was very quickly transposed on to the American scene in a whole series of accounts of atomic attack. In what follows I shall be examining the procedures followed by the two most widely read early commentators on the atomic bomb, William L. Laurence and John Hersey, to see how they articulate their respective convictions that it constituted a turning-point in the natural and political order so radical as to be apocalyptic. Although both writers were journalists they approached the event from the opposite perspectives of producer and victim, and not surprisingly drew on equally opposing conventions of representation.

As soon as Roosevelt decided to press ahead with the Manhattan Project a total clampdown was imposed on all information relating to it. At the same time, however, the director of security General Leslie R. Groves invited the New York Times journalist William L. Laurence to become the Project’s official chronicler. Part of Laurence’s brief was to prepare alternative reports of the Alamagordo test and the Hiroshima bombing in advance of the events, the latter being used...
by Truman and Stimson, his Secretary of War. In addition he had to prepare a series of articles on the project which would be released to the public after Hiroshima. Laurence was thus at one and the same time given a unique journalistic opportunity, put in a position where he could hardly afford to be critical of the enterprise, and because of security restrictions had time, as Ken Cooper argues, to ‘formulate a mythology of the atomic bomb’. It is no surprise then that when he visited the Hanford nuclear reactors in Washington State he depicted them as timeless ‘Promethean structures, which may well stand as eternal monuments to the spirit of man challenging nature, [where] mighty cosmic forces are at work such as had never been let loose on this planet in the 3,000 million years of the earth’s being’. Laurence abstracts the installations from a specific historical and military context and eternalizes them in a grandiose epic of humanity’s drive to uncover the secrets of Nature. He casts himself as an apocalyptic witness granted a privileged glimpse of this massive and silent factory complex. But of course the historical context is only temporarily suspended, and Laurence’s ringing rhetoric none too implicitly endorses a national undertaking by replacing the lone mythical hero with the USA. Similarly when Laurence turns his attentions to nuclear bombs his exploitation of the apocalyptic paradigm surcharges the patriotic implications of his accounts.

Laurence’s description of the Alamagordo explosion frames itself within biblical accounts of creation. The countdown is delivered by a ‘voice ringing through the darkness, sounding as though it had come from above the clouds’. Laurence blanks out the enormous technological enterprise of the Manhattan Project to depict the event as if the observers are witnessing a cataclysm of nature:

And just at that instant there rose from the bowels of the earth a light not of this world, the light of many suns in one. It was a sunrise such as the world had never seen, a great green super-sun climbing in a fraction of a second to a height of more than 8,000 feet, rising ever higher until it touched the clouds, lighting up earth and sky all around with a dazzling luminosity.

Up it went, a great ball of fire about a mile in diameter, changing colours as it kept shooting upward [...] It was as though the earth had opened and the skies had split. One felt as though one were present at the moment of creation when God said: ‘Let there be light.’