

***The “Literature of the Catastrophe” as a Canon: from Genbaku Bungaku
to Fukushima Bungaku***

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Abstract

The literary responses to Fukushima disaster appeared in the last few years highlighted the similarities with Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing experiences as long as both tragedies were caused by an arguable usage of nuclear power. What is remarkable, is that a seismically active area like Japan subjected to earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions ever since has not ever taken a stand on the “literature of the catastrophe” in itself. While the literature about Shoah got a foothold as Holocaust novel, the Japanese *genbaku bungaku* was instead refused by the Japanese *bundan* and by *hibakusha* themselves sounding a critical note for the literary value of the testimonial accounts. Nowadays, the increasing number of post-Fukushima literary works brought to the fore the need to reconsider the traditional literary canon to revalue a production, the one regarding catastrophe, which especially in Japan found literary expressions since the dawn of time: Kamo no Chōmei, Terada Torahiko, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke are just a few of the authors involved in the process of transposing into words the trauma related to disasters that occurred in the country and the necessary efforts to overcome them. This brief paper provides an excursus of the critical debate concerning the relation between literature and canon to define the literary responses to catastrophe. On one hand, it underlines the continuity of *genbaku bungaku* themes, on the other hand, it reveals the innovative character of the newborn *Fukushima bungaku* in terms of representing trauma not only in poetic and narrative forms but also on social media.

Keywords: catastrophe, literature, canon, genbaku, Fukushima

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Introduction: The Western Perspective of Literary Canon

To deal with canon means to investigate a wide range of works of literary criticism involved in the century-old debate around the idea of an aesthetic principle. For this reason it is more appropriated to consider this brief investigation as *théories de la connaissance*,¹ to quote Shaeffer's words, rather than a work of literary theory in a strict sense. Actually, the Fukushima literary responses appeared in the last few years brought scholars attention to recognise the importance of defining the canon of the "literature of the catastrophe" although works of literary criticism are still a few and the configuration of a canon is still out of the weeds.

The first approach to what is simply referred to as "canon" or "classical canon"² owns its credits to the Greek artist Polikleitos and his sculpture known as *Doryphoros* (440 bC) which represents author's attempt to demonstrate by visual art the accuracy of his written treatise entitled *κανών* (*Kanón*, translated as "measure" or "rule"):³ an explanation of Polikleitos's own view of harmonic and well-balanced proportions of the human body in the sculpted form. The *Canon*, then, assumed the connotation of a standard system of rules required in the creation of a perfect and sublime work of art, accepted as social convention. This "classical" or "aesthetic ideal" was soon applied to all artistic productions, including the literary field. According to Massimo Onofri, "Readers's tastes, critics's judgements, historians's works of reconstruction, are all factors that actually contribute to the constitution of the literary value."⁴ But it is slightly more complicated than that. First of all, what "readers's tastes" represents is the point of view of the reception of the artwork. Literary tastes can change in relation to the historical period, political background, social environment and so on; that means that the canon, from a reader point of view, can change rapidly and differs widely from country to country. Moreover, a shift in themes and trends can be individuated among authors too, as the formation of literary *écoles* or *mouvements* proved.⁵ Secondly, the "historians's works of reconstruction" refers to the work of an established authority: Roman Church (see Middle Age), a political group (see any totalitarian system and its censorship) and more recently, the publishing companies who answer to only one imperative, the one of profitability, are all examples of institutions in charge with interests in maintaining a particular canon alive. In the first case, the canon assumed the function to legitimise the political power thorough literary codes; in the second case, the canon is a mere definition for marketing purposes. What "reader's tastes" and "historians's works of reconstruction" both underline is that the canon can be no more considered as a fixed standard of rules but a flexible system instead. In the Japanese editorial world the literary production labeled by John Whittier Treat as *tsukaisute* 使い捨て ("read and throw away")

¹ Shaeffer, J-M. (1983). Du text au genre. Notes sur la problématique générique. In Genette, Jauss, Schaeffer, Scholes, Stempel, Viëtor, *Théorie des genres* (pp. 179-205). Paris: Points Essais.

² Developed during the Greek high Classical Period (400-450 bC) the term "canon" assumed the attribute of "classic" (often referred to simply as "the classic(s)").

³ Stewart, A. (1990). *Greek Sculpture: An Exploration*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁴ Onofri, M. (2001). *Il canone letterario*. Bari-Roma: Laterza (p.8). My translation.

⁵ Actually the Italian term *corrente letteraria* ("literary stream") is to be preferred to address groups of authors, poets, novelists or journalists, who share the same aesthetic ideal or conception of literary production. See Vercier, B, Maurel, A. (1994). *La critique*. Paris: Éditions du Hachette (p. 31).

literature⁶ serves as an example. The term is used to address the literary production of authors like Yoshimoto Banana and Murakami Haruki, just to name a few, whose works are highly demanded by the public. The success of these literary pieces of art is explained by the quality of being products for leisure and entertainment only, a characteristic that arises doubts about their literary value, the last aspect of Onofri's statement. According to Jean-Paul Sartre⁷ all artworks are inestimable because they are the result of a free creative act in terms of *liberté/gratuité*. Unfortunately, for Sartre this also means that this creative act is always useless (*inutile*) except for the focus on the engagement, the authorial commitment in the act of writing. This position was strongly criticised by Roland Barthes, stirring up the famous Sartre-Barthes debate around literature. As for Sartre, the act of writing is not neutral because words have the power to change the state of things. Even silence is not a neutral choice because its value is measured by the absence of words; as to say, whatever an author decides to write or not write, he is still taking a position in front of a particular matter and it is exactly this stance that qualifies the author as such, because it is his responsibility to denounce and accuse acts of useless violence.⁸ This commitment turns to be an *impératif moral* towards writing itself and towards the public in terms of assuming all the consequences that the act of writing entails.⁹ From this perspective, the *beaux arts* are a product of author's engagement. This is totally a different approach compared to the one of Barthes: the *beaux arts* answer only to the *plaisir* or *jouissance*, the simple pleasure aroused from the act of reading.¹⁰ And this pleasant feeling is perceived precisely because the literary work itself was written with pleasure which makes the author similar to an hedonist. No engagement is required in Barthes's theory: the aesthetic principle "l'art pour l'art" ("art for art's sake")¹¹ is the only rule to follow. The success of a piece of art is then originality, singularity or something perceived as anew (actually Harold Bloom echoed Barthes in regards to this philosophy, see his *Western Canon*).¹² This different point of view concerning the literary engagement is a very thorny topic when trying to define the "literature of the catastrophe" as a canon in itself. To proceed with the last review of Onofri's statement concerning the "critics's judgements" it is useful to take advantage of Andrea Bernardelli's observations remarking two different approaches to the literary criticism: one, defined as "descriptive function or *ex-post* function" consists in an historical attempt to describe a map of literary genre; the other one is the "prescribed modality" or *a priori* modality: a subordination of the work of art to specific rules; in other words, the author himself brings his work in line with a particular genre or trend.¹³ In addition to that, according to Innocenti the first approach is diachronic or atemporal because it attempts to establish a large-scale evaluation system valid all time, with a retroactive effect; the second one, on the contrary, can be considered as

⁶ Treat, J. W. (1993). Yoshimoto Banana writes Home: Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject. In *The Society of Japanese Studies*, 19, 2 (p. 357).

⁷ Sartre, J.P. (1985). *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Paris: Éditions du Gallimard. This concept and the following ones are repeated several times in the essay.

⁸ Sartre, J.P. (1946). *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain*. Paris: Éditions du Verdier (p. 56).

⁹ Benoît, D. (2000). *Littérature et engagement*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil (p. 47).

¹⁰ Barthes, R. (1982). *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil. This concept and the following ones are repeated several times in the essay.

¹¹ Slogan credited to the French literary critic Théophile Gautier (1811–1872).

¹² Bloom, H. (1995). *The Western Canon: the books and school of the ages*. New York: Riverhead Books.

¹³ Bernardelli, A. *Che cos'è l'intertestualità*. Roma: Carocci Editore (p. 43). My translation.

synchronic because answers to the current trends.¹⁴ This academic work is referring to the first one, of competence of critics.

Literary Canon in Japan

A quick overview to the perception of canon in Japan is provided by the investigation of Sadami Suzuki.¹⁵ Since the concept of canon was created anew in Japan to answer the need to compare it to Western literature and art, it maintained unchanged the definition in itself and the role of an institution to protect it, namely, the Japanese *bundan*.¹⁶ As Japanese literature was defined for its characteristic of been written in Japanese language, the attention can be turn to the high quality that designates the literary product in order to be ascribed as a work of *jun bungaku* 純文学 (translated as “pure literature” as a derivative of the UK “polite literature”)¹⁷ and its opposite, the *taishū bungaku* 大衆文学, as to say, “popular literature”). This two notions obviously underline a different approach to the literary production: the *jun bungaku* responds better to Sartre’s ideas while the *taishū bungaku* would have been more appreciated by Barthes. What is remarkable here is the definition of “high quality products worth of a proud nation”.¹⁸ This aspect is directly connected with the Japanese aesthetics fundamentals: *mono no aware* 物の哀れ, *wabi* 侘び, *sabi* 錆び (often considered as a unit maybe because of the alliteration) *shibui* 渋い, *yūgen* 幽玄, 雅 *miyabi*, *fūryū* 風流 and so on;¹⁹ although any further investigation about these different Japanese approaches to aestheticism are now out of place, a common denominator can be identified in these concepts: they are all connected with nature. In particular, they refer to the transcendence and frailty of life, a kind of thinking that gives priority to the enjoyment of the impermanence as the source for beauty in itself, a concept derived from the Buddhist perspective of *mujō*.²⁰ The most common image in this sense is the one of cherry blossoms, more appreciated “when the air is thick of their falling petals”²¹ to quote Richie. The turning point of this study is then revealed: the importance of nature in the Japanese artistic and literary production. The attention can be focused on literary works written around the topic of nature, or better, on the theme of a catastrophic natural event: although the term “catastrophe” implied a feeling of fear and sorrow in the Western perception, the aesthetic mindset peculiar to Japan justifies the beauty of literary works on this theme and even encourages a reading in a new light. As stated at the beginning, to define a canon for the “literature of catastrophe” is all the more necessary to investigate past literary works on the theme. The most quoted is without any doubts the *Hōjōki* 『方丈記』 (“An Account of my

¹⁴ Innocenti, L. (2000). Introduzione. In *Il giudizio di valore e il canone letterario*. Roma: Bulzoni Editore (p. 20). My translation.

¹⁵ Sadami, S. (2000). From Canon formation to Evolutional Reformation: Man’yū, Genji, Bashō (pp. 25-45). In *PAJLS Issue of Canonicity and Canon Formation in Japanese Literary Studies. vol 1*, Bellingham: AJLS.

¹⁶ 日本文壇, the “Japanese literary circle”.

¹⁷ Salami (p. 27).

¹⁸ *ibidem*.

¹⁹ For further investigation, here out of place, see Richie, D. (2007). *A tractate on Japanese Aesthetics*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.

²⁰ Murakami, H. (2011). “Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer” in *The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 29 No 7*.

²¹ Richie (p 38).

Hut”, 1212) by Kamo no Chōmei, a report of various disasters such as earthquake, famine, whirlwind and conflagration that occurred in the ancient capital city of Kyōto. Several works by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (芥川龍之介, 1892-1927) and Terada Torahiko (寺田寅彦, 1878-1935), just to name a few, are worth to mention too. Finally, the *genbaku bungaku* 原爆文学 (“literature of the atomic bombings”) makes its appearance as a label used to describe all the poetic and prosaic responses to the double atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of which Ibuse Masuji’s *Kuroi ame* 『黒い雨』 (“Black Rain”, 1965) is the most well-known example: even if the *genbaku bungaku* genre refers to a man-made catastrophe, it sets a precedent in the Japanese literary production that deserves scholar’s attention.

From *Genbaku Bungaku* to *Fukushima Bungaku*

The final approach to a critic review of the *genbaku bungaku* literary genre is conceived following Tachibana Reiko’s *Narrative As Counter-Memory*²² as the main source of criticism.

As sum up by Tachibana, the *genbaku bungaku* genre can be considered by the point of view of the strict form, as suggested by Hijiya-Kirschner; in these case works concerning Hiroshima or Nagasaki atomic bombings can be divided into:

- 1) *jun bungaku* 純文学;
- 2) *taishū bungaku* 大衆文学;
- 3) private accounts (diaries, letters...);
- 4) scientific data (reports, inquiries...), the last of which is nowadays labeled as non-fiction. It must be added, for the sake of completeness, that even though many academics like Takahashi Toshio and Jonathan Dil share the opinion that a *jun bungaku/taishū bungaku* distinction is no more a necessary discourse,²³ the influent critic Harold Bloom still defends the position of the superiority of “the classics”.²⁴ Although the aim of this study is not headed to classify the authorial literary responses to catastrophe as products of “high” or “low” literature, this division can not be lapsed while dealing with the revaluation of the genre. This article takes then the stance of Sartre in considering every literary expression as a potential *ouvrage de l’esprit*.²⁵ As regarding Japanese non-fictional production however, a further division can be figured out in regards to the literary form assumed by the piece of work in question, as to say:

- *kiroku bungaku* 記録文学 (“literature of the recording”): journals, autobiographical notes, *mémorial*: private accounts with the aim of registering facts;

²² Tachibana, R. (1998). *Narrative As Counter-Memory: A Half-Century of Postwar Writing in Germany and Japan*. New York: State University of New York Press.

²³ According to a private conversation with Dottor Dil, assistant professor at the Department of Foreign Languages and Liberal Arts of Keio University in occasion of this IAFOR conference. Takahashi Toshio, professor of Late Showa and Contemporary Japanese Literature at Waseda University, shared his thought-provoking stance about this topic during his course about non-fictional production at Waseda University, May 2016.

²⁴ Farkas, A. (2015). *Che cosa resta della letteratura? Intervista con Harold Bloom*. Luxembourg City: Amazon Media EU SARL (Kindle format only).

²⁵ Benoît, (2000) (p. 141).

- *ruporutaajyū* レポルターージュ (“reportage”): articles and journalistic inquiries with journalistic purposes (often politically compromised);
- *jiken shōsetsu* 事件小説 or *nyuusu sutoorii* ニュース・ストーリー (derived from English terms): fictional paraphrase of an historical event, merely an accident;
- *jijitsu shōsetsu* 事実小説: autobiographies (also in the form of *shishōsetsu* 私小説)²⁶ and biographies of notable people or novels based on events claimed as true.²⁷

According to Treat however, the *genbaku bungaku* genre can also be observed by the authors’ point of view, as to say, the “post-nuclear generation” approach:²⁸ in the first case the author is also the witness and identifies problems in depicting his experience; Treat individuates Hara Tamiki, Ōta Yōko, Kurihara Sadako as the main representative examples. The second and third cases concern authors not directly involved in the atomic bombings which is considered as a personal (Ōe Kenzaburō, Ibuse Masuji, Hotta Yoshie) or social problem respectively (Oda Makoto). Tachibana herself distinguished the literary production on the theme in two categories: one, derived from the German *Trümmerliteratur* and translated as “rubble literature” consists in works written and published soon after the World War II; the other, called “long-distance literature” regards works of art published after decades.²⁹ These three categories can be applied to the literary responses to 11th March 2011 too, with the only difference that the focus is not on the nuclear atomic bombings but on the three-fold catastrophe of earthquake, tsunamis and nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant instead. By the way, a link between the two tragedies has just be underlined, as many authors remarked soon after 3/11 (one for all, the nobel prize Ōe Kenzaburō in his *New Yorker’s* article).³⁰ In this regards the debate around the different but similar nature of *genbaku* 原爆 (Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings)/*genpatsu* 原発 (Fukushima nuclear accident)³¹ broke out among scholars after 11th March must be kept in mind too. Although the literary works belonging to the *genbaku bungaku* genre can not be found so easily in bookstores’s shelves, so do not the post-Fukushima literature, as highlighted also in Kimura Saeko’s first work of literary criticism about this topic. A critical note can be raised in regards to the title chosen, *Shinsai bungaku ron* 『震災文学論』 (“A theory of the literature of the catastrophe): it is more likely to refer to the “literary of the catastrophe” as a canon in itself, since the term *shinsai* 震災 often translated as “disaster” implies a seismic event; as noticed before anyway, 11th March catastrophe was a double-nature crisis that involved a human mismanagement at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant too. In these light the label *shinsai-jinsai bungaku* 震災・人災文学 is thought as more appropriated. Moreover, for these reasons the *shinsai-jinsai bungaku* can be

²⁶ *shishōsetsu* or *watakushi shōsetsu* 私小説 means, literally, “I-Novel” and represents the Japanese version of the German confessional literature known as *Bildungsroman*, introduced in Japan in the Meiji period.

²⁷ The main source of inspiration for this scheme was professor Takahashi’s course.

²⁸ Tachibana refers to Treat’s *Ground Zero* here. For further information see Treat, J. W. (1996). *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

²⁹ Always refer to Tachibana (1998).

³⁰ Ōe, K. (2011). History Repeats. In *New Yorker*, March 28.

³¹ Kimura, S. (2013) *Shinsai bungaku ron. Atarashii nihon bungaku no tameni*. Tōkyō: Seidosha.

considered as a possible translation for the “literature of the catastrophe” as a canon, while the literary responses to 3/11 disaster can be addressed simply as *Fukushima bungaku* フクシマ文学 written in *katakana* to emulate Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the sense of cities exposed to nuclear radiation. Both *genbaku bungaku* and *Fukushima bungaku* are to be considered as a part of the *shinsai-jinsai bungaku* canon.

Conclusion: Fukushima Bungaku Genre

In addition to Hijiya-Kirschner, Treat and Tachibana perspectives this article also offers further contribution to the description of the *Fukushima bungaku* by keeping in mind the diversification in poems and prose (fiction, non-fiction and mixed-up literary approaches to the catastrophe). In particular, a new trend in the poetic production is represented by the popular poet Wagō Ryōichi who, soon after 11th March, started publishing on his Twitter profile poems about Fukushima situation; his production, called *net-poetry* as a paramount word of “network” and “poetry”, can be conceived as the missing link between social media (as a worldwide platform to share traumatic feeling in real time) and the lyricism attributed to the poetic production.³²

According to a work of testimony, with a slight revision of Treat’s approach it is possible to distinguish:

- authors who directly witness 3/11 or not;
- authors who became spokesmen for friends, relatives, acquaintance;
- authors who chose silence or took action in other ways (for instance by participating in no-nuclear energy movements).

In this respect, as far as this study has been developed, a notable tendency in authorial choice between fictional and non-fictional format has been observed: authors who directly witnessed 11th March earthquake and tsunamis or suffered from the evacuation measures approved by Japanese government to limit the radiation exposure in the neighbouring area of Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant, show a preference for private accounts that directly depicts the catastrophe, while fictionalised works are the major response of those authors who can not give a personal testimony of the event.

The Sartre-Barthes debate regarding the importance of a *littérature engagée*³³ is directly correlated to authorial responses to 3/11 and must be born in mind too, especially while dealing with the purpose of author's writing. For example: can a work for entertainment labeled as *tsukaisute* been re-evaluated for its devotion to post-Fukushima trauma? The question here is clearly referring to Yoshimoto Banana’s *Suiito hiaafutaa* 『スイート・ヒアアフター』 (“Sweet Hereafter”, 2011)³⁴, just to give an example. Moreover, according to Kimura, the literary production can be divided into two categories: the one written after 3/11 (which consists in the majority part) and works started before 3/11 but ended up with a change in plot due to 11th March catastrophe. A third analysis can be conducted on the authorial responses, as to say, authors who devoted themselves to literary

³² Further investigation about Wagō Ryōichi’s *net-poetry* can be found in De Pieri, V. (2014), (2016).

³³ “committed literature”, see Sartre (1985).

³⁴ Yoshimoto, B. (2011). *Suiito Hiaafutaa*. Tōkyō: Gentōsha.

productions focused on 3/11; or, the case of authors who, after writing a work on the topic, turned back to their “common” themes; eventually, a periodical return on post-Fukushima matters can be noticed too. An other categorisation is a remark on the popularity of authors in question, already famous before 11th March or not. To conclude, literary works can also be divided by topics, considering the *Daishinsai* or the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi as the main feature although works written on both themes are also available. This study represents a first overview of the “literary of the catastrophe” as a canon and an attempt to define the newborn *Fukushima bungaku*, especially in relation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing experiences. Anyway, further investigation and an implementation of the selected sources would be the right path to follow in order to revalue this Japanese aesthetic literary response to trauma.

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