

Toward a “global novel”

An ecocritical reading of Tawada Yōko’s *The Emissary*

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Aim of this paper is to re-read Tawada Yōko’s novel *Kentōshi* through the interpretative framework of the new literary category of the “global novel.” Moving from the description of environmental catastrophe my analysis will show how this novel by Tawada can represent not only the first work of this genre written by the author but, for the intrinsic value of Tawada’s literature itself, it can help shape and redefine the category of the global novel itself.

Keywords: Tawada Yōko, global novel, world literature, *Kentōshi*, *The Emissary*, ecocriticism, environmental catastrophe, natural disaster, Fukushima

1. Ecocriticism and Japanese literature

In the vast and articulate landscape of contemporary Japanese literature, the case of Tawada Yōko 多和田葉子 (b. 1960) is surely among the ones that have gained the biggest critical attention in recent times. She has been awarded numberless literary prizes during her long and prolific career – among the most recent ones, the famous National Book Award for Translated Fiction assigned to the English translation of *Kentōshi* 献灯使 (*The Emissary*) in 2018, published by New Directions with the translation by Margaret Mitsutani.

Kentōshi belongs to a more recent phase of Tawada’s literary production, in which we can include the works that she has been writing since the terrible events of March 2011, a catastrophe that shocked not only Japan, but also had a deep impact on a global scale. This novel, which describes a dystopic aftermath in which Japan has isolated itself from the world and gone back to a pre-modern model, has often been analyzed as one of the main representatives of the so-called Post-Fukushima (or Post 3.11) literature¹.

¹ For an accurate discussion on the use of this terminology see Kimura and Bayard-Sakai (2021: 12-13).

Due to the ecological impact the nuclear accident had on both the Japanese environment and literary imagination, studies on ecocriticism have begun to intensify in Japan. Ecocriticism can be defined as a discipline that investigates the relationship between literature and the environment, in the form of the representations and the functions of nature in the literary product (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xix; Yuki 2020). The effort in this direction is evidenced by the publication, at the end of 2017, of the first volume in English entirely dedicated to the topic: *Ecocriticism and Japan* edited by Wake Hisaaki, Suga Keijirō and Yuki Masami. Despite the long and established tradition of ecocriticism in Anglo-American academia, it is only in the last few years that these perspectives have started to be used globally in the critical analysis of Japanese literature. The outputs are discontinuous and range from classical to modern works without an established critical corpus. *Ecocriticism and Japan* partially covers this gap, but it is a single publication and there is still much work to be done in order to acquire a complete conceptualization of this theoretical approach within the Japanese literary context.

As Yuki Masami (2014: 522) underlines very clearly, nature has always been one of the main protagonists of Japanese literature. On the other hand, there is a clear distinction between the presence of natural elements in the course of Japanese literary history and a proper ecocritical intention in literature: ecocriticism as a discipline encompasses the analysis of those texts that show and problematize an environmental concern, rather than simply representing nature or using it as a poetic device. Yuki best shows how the development of a proper ecocritical approach to Japanese literature has evolved through three different stages: in the first one, dated circa 1990-2000 and defined “translation,” the ecocritical perspective was used to translate and discuss mainly American and British literature, while only a relatively little attention was dedicated to works of Japanese literature. The second phase, that developed during the course of the 2000s, is defined by Yuki as a “comparative approach,” in which scholars of British and American literature tried to apply ecocritical theory to a selection of suitable Japanese texts. They did this in two ways: by establishing a dialogue with ecocritical scholars in East Asian academia and by applying ecocritical principles to Japanese literature itself (Yuki 2014: 522). The third phase, more contemporary, sees the evolution of an original Japanese ecocritical thought, the approach being used directly also by scholars of Japanese literature (Yuki 2014: 522).

The introduction and the normalization of the practice of ecocriticism in Japan leads the scholars to differentiate between “ecocriticism in Japan” and “Japanese ecocriticism:” as again Yuki clearly explains, the first term refers to ecocritical practices towards Japanese literature inside and outside the country, whereas the second defines peculiar approaches and thoughts to the discipline originally developed in Japan (Yuki 2018: 2).

Approaching texts using an ecocritical framework can prove a valid method to explore the options of a cosmopolitan imaginary, based on an everyday stronger net of connections among different cultures in the world. These connections are able to influence the way in which we perceive each other, not as different realities but as connected inhabitants of a common space.

2. The emergence of the “global novel”

Recently, the reflection on literature has seen the emergence of a new literary form: the so-called “global novel.” This definition is still a matter of very passionate discussions among literary critics. Still, we can identify a close relationship between a local and a global dimension, as well as a remarkable convergence of themes in contemporary novels from different literary traditions. And if, as Adam Kirsch (2017: 12) observes, the novel as a literary expression can never be immediately global (being always the product of a particular society), it is also undeniable that some contemporary masterpieces are perfectly conscious of their place in a global world. The global novel becomes, then, a way to make sense of a world that is increasingly interconnected, a new way to cope with the plurality of meanings of this new order. Contemporary to Kirsch, Debjani Ganguly’s *This Thing Called The World. The Contemporary Novel As A Global Form* avoids the insistence on processes of standardization and normalization included in the shared definition of global literature. On the contrary, she sees the global novel as the product of the new geopolitical asset of the planet, together with the digital revolution and all the cultural transformations that this revolution has introduced (Ganguly 2016: 1).

To put it simply, in *The Global Novel. Writing the World in the XXIst Century*, Kirsch (2017) identifies, in contemporary novels that come from a variety of diverse literary expressions around the world, a notable convergence of motifs and topics. The author recognizes these issues as representative of this new form, the global novel, and summarizes them as follows: topics concerning identity and migration, violence and sexual exploitations, environmental issues and the plague of terrorism (Kirsch 2017: 24).

According to Kirsch, literary works that belong to global literature – or better said, global novels – may or may not address these themes directly, but they somehow relate or mention them and they can somewhat involve into their narratives topics belonging to this list.

Under this point of view, the theme of ecology, which can be included in the above-mentioned category of environmental issues, is closely related to the definition of global novel. It is again Kirsch who underlines how those novels that make forecasts and predictions about the condition of humanity conceived as a whole entity, as well as those that thematize future or present global apocalypses (works by Margaret Atwood and Michel Houellebecq, for instance), have a global vocation (Kirsch 2017: 76).

From a merely theoretical point of view, the first question that comes to mind is whether there is a difference between the established definition of a concept like “world literature” and this relatively new, and at the same time problematic, category of “global novel.”

3. “World literature” and “global literature”

First of all, it is helpful to see how Karen Thornber (2020: 9) notices that it is necessary to distinguish between world literature and global literature. World literature is, in the classical definition provided by Damrosch:

[...] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language [...]. In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base but [...] a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture (Damrosch 2003: 4).

According to this definition, world literature should also take into consideration the processes of translation: the more a text is translated into other languages, the wider its circulation becomes on an international scale and among a greater audience.

Tawada is not translated into many different languages and, while it is true that the number of translations is constantly growing, it is also correct to say that still only a few of her works have been translated into English and therefore have gained international dissemination. Of all her considerable production, the works available in English are three collections of short stories and novellas (or short novels) collected from various sources and translated from both German and Japanese; and four novels: *The Naked Eye* (published in 2009, from German), *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (published in 2016, from the German version of the novel), *The Emissary* (published in 2018, from Japanese) and *Scattered All Over the Earth* (published in 2022, from Japanese).

If we consider the circulation of the author into another foreign literary system, the French one, we can observe that the situation is almost identical. Only eight of her many works of fiction are published in French.

For this reason, I think that, for the time being, it is not possible to include Tawada within the domain of world literature. Her works are highly respected in the academic environment and are deeply appreciated by scholars of various disciplines: not only Japanese, German or Comparative Literature, but also scholars of Translation Studies, literary theorists, anthropologists and many other researchers in various fields. However, if we stick to the definition of world literature provided by

Damrosch, which is based on the circulation of (English) translations, a definition that is, per se, problematic and broadly discussed so far, we must conclude that Tawada's work is not actively present within a literary system other than the Japanese and the German one, and only a few of her numerous masterpieces are enjoyable by an international audience through their English or French translations.

Tawada's case is also different from the case theorized by Rebecca Walkowitz who, in her 2015 book *Born Translated. The Contemporary Novel In An Age Of World Literature*, suggests that the form of the novel in the contemporary world has a strong connection with translation as a means for dissemination around the world. This dependence on subsequent translation and dissemination processes is a real condition of this type of production: there are authors who write with this purpose in mind (Walkowitz 2015: 4) and even those novelists who do not purposely wish to write for an international distribution, in the end, involuntary become part of this system.

Surely, it can be argued that Tawada's *Kentōshi* has, in the definition by Walkowitz, 'entered the market' (2015: 2), meaning that there are different editions in the same language: despite having the same translator, Margaret Mitsutani, the title of the UK edition is *The Last Children of Tokyo*, whereas in the US it is entitled *The Emissary*. The novel also exists in different editions and in many languages (German, Czech, English, Chinese, Romanian, Korean, among the others). However, we cannot absolutely state that Tawada's literature is "born translated" in the sense intended by Walkowitz. With this definition, she means to describe all the novels that have been written purposely for being translated (Walkowitz 2015: 3):

In born-translated novels, translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device. These works are written for translation, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often written as translations, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed (Walkowitz 2015: 4).

If it is true that the process of translation is thematically extremely important in the production of Tawada, it is widely acknowledged that almost all Tawada's literature resides in a liminal space between different languages and cultures, defined by Mazza as a state of semi-translation (Mazza 2016: 141): she does not write with the purpose of being translated and distributed abroad, and translating the work of Tawada is a very complicated and sometimes an extremely challenging task.

Still, the second part of Walkowitz's definition, that this type of novel is "written as translations," can be perfectly applied to some works of Tawada, as the author herself often claims in interviews or essays. As Masumoto Hiroko (2020: 24-25) points out, Tawada's exophonic writing is presented in the

author’s early works as a proper translation process. “Exophony” is a word used by Tawada in one of her seminal works, *Ekusofonii. Bogo no soto e deru tabi. エクソフォニー。母語の外へ出る旅* (*Exophony. Travel outside the mother tongue*), to signify a way of writing outside borders and outside one’s native language (Tawada 2012: 3) Writing is for Tawada a translation process from what Masumoto defines as “inner speech,” that is to say thoughts and ideas in her mind, into an “external speech,” in her case the written word. Furthermore, Masumoto argues that the process of writing in two languages, that pertains to exophonic writing, appears to be a supplementary process of translation between two “external speeches.” For this reason in Tawada the process of writing is often associated with the process of translation. As a concrete example, I am thinking of *Yuki no renshūsei 雪の練習生* (*Memoirs of a Polar Bear*), whose German version, *Etüden im Schnee*, has been written by Tawada herself as a translation, or re-worked version of the original Japanese edition.

In this specific case, the definition of “global literature” might be of help: following Thornber (2020: 10), we should avoid the risk of using the term in an interchangeable way with “world literature” as it might result in an overlap with the commonly perceived negative effects of economic globalization, or with phenomena of standardization and homogenization. As Thornber reminds us:

[...] with several notable exceptions, neither world literature nor comparative literature scholarship has fully addressed the relationship between literature and such global problems as disease and other health conditions/illnesses, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, migration, poverty, slavery, trauma, and warfare. After several generations of great concern with the tensions and problems of the Cold War, neocolonialism, and neoliberal economic expansion, it is now appropriate for comparative literature and world literature scholarship to deal more rigorously with a broader range of global issues (Thornber 2020: 11-12).

Following Thornber formulation among the others, I understand global literature as referring to texts that deal with global challenges, without taking into account the dynamics of circulation of these works that are bound to economic factors, like profits of publishing houses. I see, therefore, a global novel as a work of literature that, through the themes it contains and the messages it conveys, is able to speak to a transnational audience neither easily nor superficially, but rather because it deals with issues that are shared globally.

Thornber states :

I use global literature to refer specifically to texts that address global challenges, or challenges that exist globally whether or not as a result of globalization, even when these works do not explicitly reveal their own planetary horizons (Thornber 2020: 10).

These challenges might or might not be a result of globalizing or economic processes.

4. Tawada Yōko's "global novel"

The aim of my paper is actually twofold. On one hand, I try to relocate Tawada outside the traditional interpretative framework of transcultural literature, or to be more precise outside the critical approach of *exophonic literature*.

Instead, I believe that an ecocritical approach could show how her writing, particularly produced after the nuclear catastrophe of Fukushima, has recently gained traits of global writing. In actual facts, I think that all her writings from the beginning have an intrinsically global vocation, but that this element became more evident after the turning point that was the Fukushima catastrophe.

In this contribution I am therefore deliberately overlooking the canonical migration or transcultural perspective from which Tawada has mainly been analyzed. I don't find this approach old or inadequate (far from it!), but in this case a focus on environmental issues might prove to be appropriate to shed new and interesting light on this fascinating author, who in her latest production deals almost constantly with themes related to nature. These themes were present also in her previous work, but after the 3.11 accident we can see a deliberate shift towards a more intentional inclusion of environmental matters in her poetics.

On the other hand, because her literary value is unanimously recognized by a vast majority of academia and by her affectionate readers, defining *Kentōshi* as a global novel I believe that could help reevaluating the literary category itself, by reinforcing the definition of global novel as proposed, for instance, by Karen Thornber and Adam Kirsch.

Thornber and Kirsch will constitute the theoretical framework from which my analysis will move. Keeping this framework in mind, in this contribution I argue that *Kentōshi* can be read as the first proper global novel by Tawada. Although it deals primarily with Japan, the international success and the prizes that have been awarded to the novel testify its ability to speak and to impact an audience that is ever more transnational, as ecological issues are becoming a very urgent matter not only for Japan, but for the Earth as a whole.

Themes related to the ecological conditions of contemporary Japanese literary reality can be found in many of Tawada's recent post 3.11 works, like *Kentōshi* 献灯使 (2014); *Yuki no renshūsei* 雪の

練習生 (2011) and other short stories such as *Fushi no shima 不死の島* (*The Island of Eternal Life*, 2012) and *Higan 彼岸* (*The Far Shore*, 2014). Literary critics around the world and from different academic fields have started to analyze her literature using an ecocritical framework (Maurer 2016; Beany 2019; Haga 2019). I believe that this is actually one of the most promising trends in Tawada’s studies nowadays. Although this contribution aims at demonstrating how *Kentōshi* can be read as a global novel through an ecocritical interpretative framework, I will also briefly introduce the analysis of environmental themes in some other works by Tawada, written in the aftermath of the triple catastrophe, trying to show how, due to the accident, the presence of ecological matters becomes absolutely central in the production of the author. I will start my analysis from a famous short story related to the environmental catastrophe, *Fushi no shima*, and I will briefly mention a second story, *Higan*. These two pieces of writings constitute the narrative bud of *Kentōshi* and have had a great dissemination among readers and critics. I will then briefly analyze an extract from a collection of poems written by Tawada during a journey in the area struck by the tsunami and the radioactive contamination, before concentrating my final remarks on the novel itself.

Fushi no shima was published in 2012 soon after the incidents and natural disasters that affected Japan, and translated into English by Margaret Mitsutani with the title *The Island of Eternal Life*. The story, which has been published in both Japanese and English in the collection of stories about Fukushima accident *Soredemo sangatsu wa, mata それでも三月は、また* (English title: *March was made of yarn*) constitutes the narrative bud for *Kentōshi*. It shows some biographical traits: set in a dystopian future, some years after 2017, the protagonist and narrator is a Japanese woman who has been living in Germany for a long time. The story opens when she comes back from a journey to the United States and shows her passport to the security check in a German airport. The inspector freezes when she is handed the Japanese passport and the narrator has to reassure her that she isn’t coming from Japan, and that she has not been there for a very long time. In fact, the reader discovers that since 2015 every connection from and to Japan has been cut off and any information that comes from the country is just a rumor that cannot be confirmed nor retracted. The narrator then makes some considerations on how Japanese passports used to elicit sympathy in the others, but after 2017 this sympathy had transformed into fear (Tawada 2012: 3-4). Possessing it means coming from a dangerous and contaminated land. As stated by Haga Koichi (2019: 87), this behavior of foreigners towards Japanese nationals mirrors the ambiguous behavior that Japanese people have had towards the facts that happened in Fukushima.

According to *The Henley Passport Index*,² the Japanese passport is actually considered the most powerful one in the world, as it grants its holders access without a prior visa to 192 countries (whereas the Italian passport, for instance, allows access to 190 countries and the United States one to 186). The story therefore completely overturns reality and elicits in the reader a sense of estrangement that, in fact, permeates all the narration.

In *Fushi no shima*, the terror in the eyes of the immigration officer is so impressive for the protagonist that, for a second, she seems to notice a transformation on the cover of the official document:

I stared angrily at the sixteen-petal golden chrysanthemum on its red cover. For a slightly disturbing moment, I thought I saw seventeen petals, though the idea that it could be genetically deformed was obviously absurd (Tawada 2012: 4).

On the red cover of the Japanese passport, indeed, there is the imperial seal of Japan: a 16-petals chrysanthemum. For just a second the narrator thinks that she has seen seventeen petals instead, and she links this to a sort of genetic modification of nature caused by the nuclear fallout.

The story of *Fushi no shima* takes place, as mentioned above, in a dystopian future, a time in which Japan has been completely isolated from the rest of the world. On the third anniversary of the incident of Fukushima, the Japanese government announces its decision to shut down all nuclear power plants; after that announcement, the official government gradually disappears from the public scene and it is finally privatized in 2015, transformed into a joint-stock company whose major shareholder is an organization called Z-Group. In the same year the country starts its isolation from the rest of the world. In 2017, another great earthquake severely destroys central Japan, but at that point nobody has the possibility to verify the extent of the damage, because of the seclusion of the country. Only a Portuguese writer apparently was able to sneak into Japan and reported his observations in a book that became an international success, translated in many languages. What he describes is a total overturning of all the laws of nature known to humankind, a consequence of the nuclear accident of March 2011: old people have acquired an unnaturally long life, as if they lost the possibility of dying. On the other hand, children that have been exposed to radiation become extremely weak. Interestingly enough, this is the only story in which Tawada mentions the earthquake directly. In other works there is no straightforward reference to the natural phenomenon and the event remains rather implicit in

² <https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking> (last access: January 29th, 2022)

the narration (Fujiwara 2021: 78). The same is true as well as for spatial and temporal coordinates, who are rarely given in Tawada’s works except for *Fushi no shima* (Fujiwara 2021: 81).

The story describes a complete subversion of all natural and social laws: as the young are too weak and too ill, they need to be taken care of by the elderly, who now suffer from a very prolonged ability to live. Civilization continues in the southern provinces of Japan, such as Hyōgo 兵庫 and Okinawa 沖縄, whereas the central area where once was Tokyo and all the economic power of the country is now in a state of semi-primitivism. Doctors are forced to continue their research using fireflies as night-time illumination.

Another interesting story is *Higan*, translated by Jeffrey Angles as *The Far Shore*, which was published in the literary magazine *Waseda bungaku* 早稲田文学 in 2014, almost contemporary to *Kentōshi*. The story is set again in Japan, where an American plane loaded with a new type of bomb crashes against a nuclear reactor that had been reactivated some months earlier, after a terrible accident. It is not difficult to imagine that here Tawada was again inspired by the Fukushima catastrophe. This time, the fault of the explosion and the following fallout is of precise human responsibility, contrary to the Fukushima accident that was caused by a natural disaster. The explosion is clearly visible throughout a vast area and the effect of the explosion affects millions of people. The only possibility left, in order to survive, is to leave Japan for good via sea, in search of asylum from another country.

The story then focuses on the sea travel of a man named Ikuo Sede who, back in Japan, was a politician, famous for his strong and violent positions against China. We are told that he is seeking rescue in the country that he has despised so much during his political career: the reason was not ideological but, ironically, the aggressiveness against China was only a compensating mechanism for his sexual impotence. He had discovered that, if his political speeches made spiteful remarks against China, his masculinity would revive.

The ship which he boarded to escape the country is headed precisely to China, and Sede is worried that he will be refused shelter in the country because of his past statements.

Before concentrating my analysis on *Kentōshi* I also wish to briefly mention a poem taken from a recent publication titled *Out of sight / Aimagina sōshitsu* 曖昧な喪失 (2020). This hybrid publication puts together photographs of people and places taken by photographer Delphine Parodi in the area of Fukushima affected by the nuclear accident, and a commentary in the form of poetry written by Tawada.

The book is about the relationship between man and environment in the aftermath of the nuclear fallout. The Japanese title, *Aimaina sōshitsu*, means “ambiguous loss” and refers to the fact that all the things that the people in Fukushima had before, all the places where they used to go, all the spaces they inhabited are still there, but nobody knows if they are contaminated or not. They do not feel free to let their children play in their favorite spots anymore, because of the possibility of contamination. As for safety they are made inaccessible, these locations are technically lost forever (Parodi and Tawada 2021).

It is a dialogue between two different arts: the poetry was written in 2012, one year after the disaster, in order to constitute a comment on Parodi's photos from Fukushima. Tawada and Parodi met at Tawada's home in Berlin and the writer traveled to those places the following year, after Parodi had mediated in order to help her meeting all the people she had photographed:

2013年夏、Dさんがいわき市に住むTさんを紹介してくれて、その方の案内で、いわき市中央台の仮設で生活する方々と会うことができました。それから、いわき市の薄磯地区、富岡町上手岡、富岡町夜の森、楢葉町山田岡地区などをまわり、浪江町から避難している方々のお話も聞いた。喜多方に避難しているTさんの叔父さんを訪ねた帰りに三春にも寄った。三泊四日の短い滞在だったが、わたしはたくさんの方々から貴重なお話を聞かせていただき、感謝の念でいっぱいだった。(Tawada 2014)

In the summer of 2013, Ms. D introduced me to Mr. T, who lives in Iwaki, and with his guidance, I was able to meet with people living in a temporary housing complex in Chūdai, Iwaki. Then, we went around the Usuiso area in Iwaki, Kamioka in Tomioka, Yonomori in Tomioka, and Yamadaoka area in Naraha, and listened to the stories of evacuees from Namie. We also stopped by Miharu on the way back from visiting Mr. T's uncle, who had evacuated to Kitakata. It was a short stay of four days and three nights, but I was filled with gratitude for the precious stories I heard from so many people (translation by the author).

The photos taken by Parodi and the poems written by Tawada, as well as the stories that she had collected, were then shown together on the occasion of an exhibition entitled *Out of sight. Gedichte - Fotografien* that was on at the *Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum Berlin* in February-March 2014.

This collaboration eventually became the afore-mentioned publication edited some time later, in 2020, which received the “Prix HIP 2020 catégorie Nature et environnement” award.

Of all the poems inserted in the work, that deal with themes related to environmental disaster and ecological catastrophe, I believe that the following one might be of particular relevance for the aim of this paper:

女の子がアサガオに水をやっている
炭酸の入っていない水を
土がごくごく飲んで濡れた花壇
あわててとんで来た母親
買った水を無駄にする人がいますか
子供は落ち着いて答える
汚染って言葉、使っていたでしょう
自分では飲まない水道の水を
如雨露に汲んで花壇にまくなんて
お花は信頼してくれているのに
(Parodi and Tawada 2020, page number missing)

A girl is watering her morning glory
with the uncarbonated water.
The earth gurgles in the moist garden patch.
Her mother hurries over.
The store-bought water that I never waste!
The child answers calmly:
Contaminated is the word that I heard you say.
To fill the watering can from the faucet, which I avoid,
would be absurd,
since my flower trusts me
(translated by Bettina Brandt in Parodi and Tawada 2020, page number missing).

Here the importance that Tawada gives to the relationship between humankind and environment is explicit. Specifically, in the poem on the flower cited above she expresses her idea of the responsibilities that human beings have towards the environment. The figure of the girl taking care of the flower establishes an analogy with the mother who buys bottled water to avoid possibly contaminated water and poison her child. The girl follows the same pattern, treating her flower as a creature that needs protection and care.

The choice of the flower, *asagao* アサガオ, the morning glory, is in my opinion particularly relevant. This flower is contained in various classical poems, thus establishing a direct link between Tawada's writing and her literary tradition. Moreover, the peculiarity of the flower itself is that it unfolds its petals in the morning and closes them at night. This might be interpreted as a symbol of rebirth and an encouragement that Tawada gives to the people of Fukushima, as she sees the possibility for those people and places to bloom again after the disaster. The little girl who takes care of this flower becomes an incredibly strong symbol of optimism in a poem that invites responsibility toward the environment.

Giordano (2021: 30-31) also noted that the morning glory in the Heian period was linked to the concept of *mujō* 無常, the impermanence of things, because of its very short and ephemeral life cycle. In this respect we can also interpret the choice of the flower in this poem as a personification of the innermost feelings of Tohoku inhabitants, who live in a sort of psychological state of impermanence, a suspension of their own usual routine because they are not sure when and whether the contamination will start to become tangible. As noted by Rachel DiNitto, *mujō* is one of the keywords and concepts that somehow helped in building a collective and therefore unifying narrative of the trauma in the times immediately after the accident. The very term of *mujō* expresses a sort of submissive resignation towards the events that goes along with a passive acceptance for something that is beyond human control and pertains to forces that we have no power to contrast. This attitude, *de facto*, denies or avoids any political implication and human responsibility in this event (DiNitto 2014: 342-343).

On the contrary, Tawada strongly suggests that it is a precise human responsibility to take care of the environment. It has always been a task for humankind and the failure represented by the Fukushima accident leaves room for (hopefully) one last chance to take care of our planet.

The use of the honorific prefix *o-* お before the word *hana* 花, flower, is normally used in female colloquial language, therefore the poem achieves a higher grade of realism in the accurate representation of a polite girl's way of speaking. Nevertheless, I think that this might also be read as the respectful behavior towards nature that Tawada believes is necessary: we have failed our environment and now this is our very last chance to treat it with respect. In addition to that, the use of the form *-te kureru* てくれる in the last verse *Ohana wa shinrai shite kurete iru noni* お花は信頼してくれているのに can be read as a humanization of the flower. The grammatical form is used to address it with feelings that pertain to humans, like trust, thus elevating the plant to a sentient being. Besides, this poem can also signal that new generations have a more innate respect for nature than the older ones, who have ruined the planet with indiscriminate and uncritical pollution.

It is reasonable to believe that these poems were written just before the publication of *Kentōshi*, and this might remark the strong shift towards ecological matters in the poetics of Tawada.

Tawada’s most famous and longest piece of writing that deals with 3.11 events is *Kentōshi*, a novel which re-elaborates some themes of her previous works: *Fushi no shima* and *Higan*. *Kentōshi* narrates the life of Yoshirō 義郎 and Mumei 無名, respectively grandfather and grandson, in a Japan devastated by a terrible and unnamed environmental accident. This catastrophe affected the life of human beings, plants and animals in almost the whole country. Many vegetal and animal species have been blown away in the aftermath of this unnamed event. Moreover, all the Japanese children born after the terrible accident, as a common feature, are weak and frail and need continuous care by the elders. It is basically a simple story of the everyday life and love between two members of the same family, the old Yoshirō that patiently takes care of all the needs of his grandchild Mumei who, in the end, is sent to India with the hope to find a cure for the strange disease.

In the background, the frequent flashbacks of Yoshirō’s previous life help the reader to make sense of what led to the present conditions described in the novel, even if these remembering are not organized in chronological order thus making the reconstruction of the whole chain of event almost a challenge for the reader (Fujiwara 2020: 156). As Haga underlines, the timeline of the novel is organized in a non-linear, spiral form, as in the aftermath of the disaster it is legitimate to question the possibility of humanity to progress further on a straight line heading ahead (Haga 2019: 93).

Although this can be considered the longest piece of writing by Tawada dealing with the Fukushima disaster, there are many things that need to be taken into consideration.

First of all, there are at least two metaphors in the story that refer to other environmental disasters different from Fukushima, which are inserted as important parts of the narration.

The first one refers to the strange disease of the children of Japan in *Kentōshi*, which in the story is said to be caused by the aftermath of the unnamed accident. It is too early to see if the actual accident of Fukushima will affect new generations and how (as happened, for instance, in the aftermath of the two nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with consequences that lasted for the following decades). Therefore, when it comes to the representation of the possible medical conditions caused by the unnamed accident, Tawada draws inspiration from another, real ecological disaster that happened in Japan previously: the systematic water poisoning caused by Chisso Corporation in Minamata, that continued from 1908 to 1959, when people started falling ill and local authorities realized the oddity.

For many years the chemical implant of Chisso in Minamata had been releasing many toxic substances in the sea through waste water. These substances irreversibly contaminated, in the long run, fish from the area. The people of the neighborhood, whose diet relied mostly on that fish, were in

turn contaminated by methylmercury contained in the catch. This intoxication resulted in a new neurological disease: indeed, medical investigations on this condition led to the discovery of a new condition, later defined as *Minamata byō* 水俣病, Minamata disease, which targets the central nervous system and whose symptoms included lack of muscular coordination and general muscle weakness, numbness in limb extremities, damages to sight and hearing, difficulties in the articulation of speech. Moreover, medical researches have shown that methylmercury can be transferred to fetuses: the newborn manifest mental retardation, have unbalanced coordination, deformities of the limbs, and most of all they show insufficient nutrition and growth.

These symptoms remind of the medical condition from which the new Japanese generation suffer in the novel of Tawada and make up a pretty much accurate description of the medical condition from which Mumei is affected. This parallelism was also confirmed by Tawada herself during her talk at the Department of Humanities of the University of Turin in October 2021.

Although this environmental accident was limited to a narrow area of Japan, its echoes reverberated worldwide. This was possible thanks to American photojournalist William Eugene Smith, who in 1975 realized a photo documentary and a book titled *Minamata*, denouncing the effect of mercury poisoning on people and making this tragedy known all over the world. The impact of Smith's work was so important that recently a movie about his story was made, starring Hollywood actor Johnny Depp (*Minamata*, directed by Andrew Levitas, 2020, 115').

A second precise reference in *Kentōshi*, this time to an external natural disaster, was traced by Tara Beaney (2019: 86) and it refers to a local behavior that degenerates into a global ecological catastrophe, as theorized by Val Plumwood in her work *Environmental culture. The ecological crisis of reason* (2002). During her morning walks on the beach in Tasmania, Plumwood would see a significant number of dead stranded penguins. Some research led her to discover that the poor creatures had died of starvation because of a disease that killed pilchards, a species that constituted the main source of food for penguins around Australia. This disease was spread by cheaper South African pilchards imported in Western Australia by salmon farmers. The consequent disappearance of these pilchards affected all the creatures whose diet relied upon them, this is to say penguins, that eventually died of starvation. Their corpses were transported by streams up to the beaches of Tasmania where Plumwood found them (Plumwood 2002: 13-14).

Beaney (2019: 87) shows how Tawada uses a similar event (or maybe she wants to refer precisely to this event) at a certain point in her novel, when she is narrating the anxieties that Yoshirō has toward the impossibility of Mumei to assimilate almost any kind of nutrient:

Though he was always on the lookout for food Mumei could eat without trouble, he never bought products unless he knew where they came from. Once thousands of dead penguins had washed up on a beach in South Africa, and a company run by an international pirate gang had dried the meat, which it then ground into powder to make meat biscuits for children. According to the newspaper, another company was smuggling the biscuits into Japan, making a killing. The biscuits reminded Yoshiro of dog food, but having heard they were an ideal protein source for children he definitely wanted to buy some (Tawada 2018: 94-95).

Here some differences are introduced, but it is very easy to link the episode narrated by Tawada to the one that occurred in Tasmania, as they both have in common the death of penguins for economic reasons and both events had an international resonance.

We can see a difference between the two natural disasters used as narrative inspirations by Tawada: Minamata disease had only local effects, whereas the disaster narrated by Plumwood had a much larger outcome in geographical terms. Moreover, one happened in Japan, so Tawada is taking inspiration from a domestic situation, while the other one happened in another continent. Nevertheless both accidents had a global echo and reached the attention of the media and people all over the world.

But Tawada is not only making reference to extradiegetic, real-life disasters: in *Kentōshi* there are various accounts of environmental mutations caused by the unnamed accident:

Recently all dandelions had petals at least four inches long. Someone had even submitted one of these jumbo dandelions to the annual Chrysanthemum Show at the Civic Center, giving rise to a debate over whether it should be recognized as a chrysanthemum. “Oversized dandelions are not chrysanthemums-merely mutations,” asserted one faction, while another charged that “mutation” was a pejorative term, further enflaming the war of words. Actually, the word *mutation* was rarely used anymore, having been replaced by the more popular *environmental adaptation*. With most plants growing larger and larger, if the dandelion alone had stayed small it would have ended up like a kept woman, hiding away in the shadows. It had simply grown larger in order to survive in this new environment. Yet there were other plants that had chosen to survive by getting smaller. A new species of bamboo, no larger than a person's little finger when fully grown, had been named “the pinky bamboo.” With trees this small, if the Moon Princess from the Woodcutter's Tale came down earth again to be discovered shining inside a bamboo, the old man and woman would have to crawl on their hands and knees peering through magnifying glasses to find her (Tawada 2018: 8-9).

This passage is significant because it clearly shows that the novel has more than one key to understanding its themes.

On one hand, the most evident is the representation of the impact the environmental disaster had on the lives of any order of living creatures: plants, animals and humans. On the other, as Haga brilliantly remarks in his deep analysis of the novel, mutation is not only biological but also linguistic: conventional language is transformed to adapt to the new geological and physical reality of the environment itself (Haga 2019: 88). Therefore words are carefully selected in the narration in order to represent more accurately the environment that resulted after the unnamed accident. Not only language is used in its referential function, but according to Haga the protagonist of the novel undergoes physical transformation to adapt to the new environment. These bodily changes go hand in hand with variation in his language (2019: 91). Tawada is therefore able to represent this new dystopic condition not only on a symbolic level, but also on a linguistic one. In addition to that, foreign words are often abandoned and substituted with local expressions, in order to mirror the situation of isolation of the country, which had shut down all communication with the external world. Therefore ‘language and environment are reciprocally referential’ (Haga 2019: 91) in the work of Tawada.

The dandelion is also present at the very beginning of the novel, when Mumei wakes up in the morning and his eyes are metaphorically filled with a light ‘yellow, as melted dandelions’ (Tawada 2018: 3). We can read the choice of the verb ‘to melt’ (in the Japanese original the verb used is *tokeru* 溶ける) as a deliberate reference to nuclear reactions, and it somehow anticipates the above-mentioned passage on mutations of the flower caused by the environmental changes following the unnamed accident.

Nevertheless, environmental concern is one of the themes that run through the whole narration. Yoshirō, who has spent all his life secluded in Japan and is curious about the environmental situation outside the country, questions: is nature “adapting” all over the world or is it just a national peculiarity?

Encountering a real animal - not just its name - would have set Mumei’s heart on fire, but wild animals had not been seen in Japan for many years. As a student, Yoshirō had traveled to Kyoto through the mountains along the Nakasendo Trail with a German girl from a town called Mettmann. He had been shocked to hear her say, “The only wild animals in Japan are spiders and crows.” Now that the country was closed to the outside world, no more visitors came from afar to wake up people with jabs like that. [...]

He was dying to know if the environment in Germany was unchanged, or becoming more contaminated like Japan, and whether her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were healthy (Tawada 2018: 24).

In the years that immediately followed the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, the Japanese government in charge kept an ambiguous behavior in respect to the nuclear matter. But in the country this debate has been going on for decades, even if, due to Japan’s geographical conformation, at the moment there seems to be no other alternative solutions to nuclear power to provide the country with the monstrous amount of energy it requires to function properly.

The use of irony is a constant in all of Tawada’s novels. For her, irony had always a political function. In *Kentōshi* Tawada is problematizing the ambiguous behavior of the political class who, despite its leading role, does not seem to be able to find a practical solution to Japan’s massive dependence on nuclear power. *Kentōshi* is a novel that identifies precise human responsibilities for this disaster, even if these charges are often expressed with a good dose of irony, as it happens in the dentist’s scene:

To get a little more calcium into Mumei, for a while Yoshiro had tried giving him about half a cup of milk every morning, but the boy’s body had responded with diarrhea. The dentist explained that diarrhea is the intestines’ method of getting rid of whatever they decide is poisonous as quickly and efficiently as possible. The brain in the head is well known, the dentist went on, but the intestines are actually another brain, and when these two brains disagree the intestines always get the upper hand. This is why the brain is sometimes called the Upper House, and the intestines the Lower House. Because Lower House elections are held often, it is generally believed that it’s the Lower House that truly reflects shifts in public opinion. In the same way, because the contents of the intestines are constantly changing, the intestines reflect a person’s physical condition more accurately than the brain (Tawada 2018: 18-19).

Blaming the political class, that was not able to take a resolute stand against the dangers represented by an indiscriminate usage of nuclear power after the terrible events of Fukushima, is a precise political position that Tawada had assumed before. I am thinking of the famous line of *The far shore* in which the author is ironic about the statement made by the scientist that ‘[I]t is absolutely safe to restart the reactor as long as nothing unforeseen happens’ (Tawada 2015). As noted by Jeffrey Angels in his preface to the English translation of *The far shore*, the word “unexpected” (in Japanese *yokishinai* 予期しない) Tawada is taking a clear stance against a behavior that she considered too superficial and inattentive to the possible causes of any natural disaster (Tawada 2015).

To conclude, I would like to propose that *Kentōshi* can be read as the first proper “global novel” by Tawada, not only because it draws inspiration from an event whose echoes have resonated all around the world, whose fears have contaminated much further than the explosion rate. The ecological impact

of the Fukushima disaster has been dramatic for Japan and for the Asia Pacific region and we still don't know its long term effects.

Even if the events are stated to take place in the future, many critics have argued that this might be read not as a dystopian novel, or a futuristic one, but rather as an accurate metaphor of a present condition. As Seungyeon Kim notes, Tawada believes that dystopian fiction can be an efficient representation of our actual world (Kim 2020: 254).

As days go by we become more and more aware of the impact that our lifestyle is having on our planet: taking her country as an example, Tawada is clearly warning us that our behavior toward the Earth is not going to be sustainable anymore. The choice of setting *Kentōshi* in the near future is, first of all, a concrete warning to humankind at large that our lifestyle is not going to be sustainable for long. We need to plan our existence on this planet taking into consideration that what we do can have concrete and fatal impacts on its environment and on the health and lifestyle of future generations.

Moreover, the integration in the narrative of two external ecological catastrophes, one domestic and one international, prompts me to read this writing as a global novel, because of the strong connection with actual situations that happened in the real world. It is true that the main theme of the environmental disaster is ascribable to Fukushima, but Tawada makes references not limited to Japan alone; indeed, similar cases happened also in other countries and they have resonated globally. We can say that the author somehow shifts the focus from a local dimension to embrace a more global one, and in doing so she is able to reach a transnational audience and transmit her message in a transcultural way.

The populism and closure of the boundaries described in *Kentōshi*, a sort of new *Sakoku* 鎖国³ for Japan, seem to be influenced not only by the country's present and past history, but also by the events that have taken place around the world in the years preceding the publication of the novel. Tawada was able to understand and incorporate in her narrative the transformation that was awakening in the world's morality. The possibility of building walls between nations, in order to stop the free movement of people around the globe, might in fact derive from both author's personal experience and the historical times during which Tawada has lived. For a short period of her life, Tawada lived in pre-unification Germany, in which the presence of a separation within the same cultural reality – represented by the Inner German Border and, more significantly, by the Berlin Wall – was tangible and

³ *Sakoku* literally means “chained country” and it is a term used to designate the isolationist foreign policy of the Tokugawa shogunate. From 1603 to 1686 the government prohibited the access to Japan to almost all foreign people; also international trade was strictly regulated and strongly limited.

problematized. Additionally, many other examples can be found from different parts of the world, such as the barriers built between Mexico and the United States, which have received great media coverage in the past years.

These political directions of contemporary world, policies of separation instead of inclusion, are problematized by Tawada in her work with these simple, but powerfully ironic, words:

“[...] Japan is closed to the outside world.”

“Why is it closed?”

“Every country has serious problems, so to keep those problems from spreading all around the world, they decided that each country should solve its own problems by itself”

(Tawada 2018: 42).

With *Kentōshi*, but also with other works, Tawada has proven to be a careful reader and a skilled portraitist of contemporary reality.

5. Conclusions

This paper intended to reframe and demonstrate the impact that the narrative of Tawada had on a global scale: not only does this work deserve a place within the literary genre of the global novel, but I also believe that it can help define (and refine) the category of the global novel itself.

Kentōshi deals with a number of problems that do not pertain exclusively to Japan anymore: it is undeniable that the aftermath of the triple disaster has strongly affected the life of all Japanese citizens, creating enormous sufferings to the inhabitants of the area struck by the accident. But this disaster has also kept the whole world on tenterhooks: its echoes have resonated through media all over the planet, and people watched with dread and concern at the images that came from Japan after the accident and in the following months.

Kentōshi deals with a reality that is not so distant in time and in possibility: Tawada speaks to a global audience of themes that resonate worldwide, calling for environmental awareness.

With her prose, her ability of overcoming boundaries and the representation of the different nuances that reality is assuming on a global scale, she is one of the most authentic voices of a fiction that is not only able to entertain, but also to advocate for many issues of the utmost urgency. In fact, by pointing out these issues of extreme actuality, like environmental dangers, Tawada is strongly advocating a sustainable and inclusive future.

On the other hand, by including this masterpiece of contemporary literature into the category of global novel I hope to demonstrate that this type of literary production can also transcend economic and profit purposes. I am in fact convinced that one of the responsibilities of this type of literature is to address a wider audience and make it become more aware of the problems that afflict global society.

The success of Tawada Yōko's works on an increasingly wider audience could prove that more and more people recognise themselves in her writings, supporting the issues that she deals with in her literature.

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