

Applied Literature in the Age of New Enlightenment: Projection for Sustainable Development

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Abstract—Applied literature is a discipline that adopts a moral-philosophical approach for sustainable development (SD). Its mission is to make a literary contribution to the real world, with the aim of creating a better tomorrow in the twenty-first century. Making use of the global movement along with the United Nations campaigns for SD, applied literature will re-examine current literary roles and values and set a responsible standard. This essay introduces a new conceptualization of literature as a necessary tool to project sustainable society in the upcoming Age of New Enlightenment.

Index Terms—education, English; enlightenment; ethics; sustainable development; literature; United Nations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, a role of literature has been reconsidered and is more obviously becoming ethical and educational. Putting a period on the destructive twentieth century and giving hope and solutions for the sustainable society toward the twenty-first century, the Age of New Enlightenment has started with an idea of applied literature, a discipline that adopts a moral-philosophical approach/reading for sustainable development, or SD.¹ Its mission is to apply literature to the real world, with the aim of proposing an exemplary way of living for a better tomorrow. Therefore, applied literature values a text more when it *projects* constructive methods of solving key issues and advocates for sustainability than when it merely represents the tragedies of human history and leaves the reader in a state of despair.

Making use of the United Nations SD campaigns, applied literature will re-examine current literary roles and values and set a responsible standard. This may lead to a new literary history, as this essay proposes a new conceptualization of literature as a necessary and effective vehicle to help create a sustainable society. Education for Sustainable Development,

¹ Both terms, “applied literature” and “age of new enlightenment,” are coined by the author of this essay in order to properly characterize the thesis of his essay, whose fundamental idea was orally presented as “Applied Literature for Sustainability: Theory and Practice” at the L3 conference in 2013 for the first time internationally.

or ESD, therefore, should be understood as a set of global conscience-creating trans-disciplinary practices in academia.

Literature should be committed to a sustainable future, and applied literature can direct us to this goal. For this purpose, current literary history has to be first reexamined from the SD perspective to see whether it is properly addressed to the reader, and then texts, which have been neglected despite their “sustainable” significance, must be reevaluated. It is not an easy task to pursue, as I experienced in my classrooms, but where most see darkness, ESD is a well-lit road to a better future, and applied literature is a guiding light. And, eventually, I hope the twenty-first century will be remembered in English literary history as the *Age of New Enlightenment*, when both individual and collective human rights and environmental issues are respected and implemented peacefully for the sustainable development of our planet earth.

II. BACKGROUND:

GLOBAL MOVEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The philosophy of SD is a vehicle for the constructive future. According to the 1987 UN Brundtland Commission, SD is defined as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”² SD is the keyword in pursuit of global happiness.

At the UN Conference on Environment and Development, or Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, this concept took another step, reinforcing the idea that “[e]ducation is the foundation for achieving sustainable development.” Agenda 21 was another outcome of this Earth Summit and proclaimed issues and targets for SD in four sections.³ In 1997, the UN General Assembly (Rio+5) held a special session to assess the status of Agenda 21. The

² United Nations. “Our Common Future, From One Earth to One World: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development.” Web. <<http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-ov.htm#1.2>>

³ According to “United Nations Division for Sustainable Development - Agenda 21,” they are Section I: Social and Economic Dimensions; Section II: Conservation and Management of Resources for Development; Section III: Strengthening the Role of Major Groups; and Section IV: Means of Implementation.

Assembly concluded that progress was “uneven.” When the UN Millennium Summit was held in 2000, the role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century was discussed. Its outcome was a list of Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, that set eight concrete objectives and targets to be achieved by 2015. They are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower; reduce child mortality rates; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.⁴

UNESCO, being the leading agency of this movement, started a new campaign called the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in 2005, seeking to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning, in order to address the social, economic, cultural and environmental problems we face in the twenty-first century. The so-called UNDESD 2005-2014 raises eight key action themes: gender equality, health promotion, environment, cultural diversity, rural development, peace and human security, sustainable consumption, and sustainable urbanization.⁵ And the mission of SD was reconfirmed in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, or WSSD in Johannesburg, at which ESD was reconfirmed and prioritized.

Yet, as the final years of the UN campaigns for DESD and MDGs, 2014 and 2015 respectively, approach, the increasing global uncertainties have led to apprehensions to rethink the sustainable development policy. In 2012, at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, the attending members reaffirmed their commitment to Agenda 21 in their outcome document, called “The Future We Want,” and proposed another step for sustainability, calling it Sustainable Development Goals, to take over the MDGs in 2015. Individuals and organizations are taking action for ESD to carry out their missions, therefore bringing hope for our future.

⁴ The MDGs emphasize the role of developed countries in aiding developing countries, as outlined in Goal Eight. Goal Eight sets objectives and targets for developed countries to achieve a “global partnership for development” by supporting fair trade, debt relief for developing nations, increasing aid and access to affordable essential medicines, and encouraging technology transfer. Thus developing nations are not seen as left to achieve the MDGs on their own, but as a partners in the developing-developed compact to reduce world poverty. The MDGs were developed out of the eight chapters of the Millennium Declaration, signed in September 2000. The so-called Goal Eight consists of 21 targets, and a series of measurable indicators for each target; Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education; Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower; Goal 4: Reduce child mortality rates; Goal 5: Improve maternal health; Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability; and Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development.

⁵ UNESCO, “Education for Sustainable Development.” Web. <<http://www.unesco.org/en/esd/>>

III. LITERARY MISSION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Under such global ESD movements, literature can play a pivotal role by employing a literary text as a living laboratory, a space to project solutions for the real world. This idealism of literature’s mission may go back as far as Plato’s and resemble Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of engagement, or commitment, as he expressed it in *What Is Literature?* in 1947. For him, literature was a vehicle through which oppressed minorities could gain group consciousness, and through which members of the elite would be provoked into action. Applied literature takes the same stand as Sartrean engagement, which can be usefully compared to common conceptions of moral responsibility.⁶ This may also remind the reader of M. H. Abrams’ romantic idea presented in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), in which he identifies two of symbolic missions of literature as to “please and instruct” or presentation and projection. The difference is that the mission of applied literature is to look at global issues as recognized by the United Nations, discover practical solutions in a text to apply to the real world, and participate in a community that strives for sustainable development.

Let’s now take a look at literary responses, for example, to “peace and human security,” one of the UNDESD’s eight key action themes and the major mission for the UN, as declared in its *Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in the 1940s.⁷ Despite such calls to action both society and literature appear to keep their distance from this mission and seem rather unable to detach themselves from violence so far. As if violence were a necessary evil.

Human history has denied violence and approved peace and human security in idea; but, in actuality, it has exposed itself to violence and has often taken it for granted, especially when it was committed in the name of justice. Literature has done the same. For example, a traditional genre such as the revenge story has been the case. The classic epics and Senecan dramas are popular forms of its kind and are still appreciated by the contemporary audience. Furthermore, it is not too much to say that the twentieth-century literature can not appeal its presence without violence. Warfare writers, such as Hemingway, Heller, and O’Brien, may treat their wars differently, but it is hard to deny that they are obsessed with violence in writing. In domestic scene, violence also

⁶ “Sartre’s Political Philosophy,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-p/>

⁷ See especially Article 1 of *The Charter of United Nations* and the “Preamble” of the *Universal Declarations of Human Rights*.

One of the academic responses was the birth of peace studies. This new discipline was introduced after World War II and was developed by Johan Galtung in 1969, when he defined peace studies as the discipline to study broader “structural violence” rather than narrower peace-war relations. Because of this, peace studies came to include issues of human and environmental rights, such as poverty and discrimination, with its proponents declaring that no form of violence should be allowed if we are to promote the sustainable development of people and nature.

dominates in the twentieth-century literature. Crime fiction, for example, is one of the most popular genres and exposes domestic violence and hate crimes as if they are something indispensable in everyday life of the world. Literature enjoys violence as a means of aesthetic expression.

However, from the SD perspective, violence should not be tolerated in any form, because it merely continues a vicious cycle. Margaret Drabble, a British novelist, reviewed the last century as “a Beastly Century” in her address to the Royal Society in London, 2000.

And Thomas Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau also negatively look back at the century in their *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*:

In many respects, twentieth-century literature defined itself by reflecting the prevalent violence of modern society—from the destruction of large-scale warfare to individual crimes of murder, rape, and abuse. ... By the close of the twentieth century, images of violence in all forms of media had become so commonplace that the destructive potential of the human race seemed a given, making moral solutions to the problem appear unlikely at best. Thus, violence had become a subject that most modern writers who wished to convey the historical, psychological, and artistic landscape of the modern world could not fail to confront. (160)

One may say that literary violence is innocuous because it is fiction. However, a media psychologist, Akira Sakamoto, says that the influence of a virtual violence is regarded more harmful than beneficial in recent studies, as he introduces “acquisition theory” against “catharsis theory”.⁸ He explains that “catharsis theory” looks at the short-term effect of violence in TV games and values such experiences as a means to relieve the player from stress and give him/her a positive effect through virtual experiences. In contrast, “acquisition theory” is concerned about the long-term negative influence and claims that virtual experience may paralyze human senses and sensibilities against violence. Sakamoto says that this outcome is especially likely when violence is presented as an “approvable action” taken by an “attractive hero”: The player learns that violence is just and fun. The insinuation of virtual experience into actual life does not always occur to everyone, but, as Sakamoto warns, an innocent player may transform violence in media into reality. This has to be avoided, even in the literary media.

Therefore, we have to be extremely careful in selecting an appropriate text in order to practice applied literature. In most canonical works, violence dominates and the SD issues

are left unsolved. With current literary values and attitudes, the reader can masochistically be left out of joint and critics may not be able to take responsibility.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, literary works by minorities start to play significant roles, by not only disclosing their stories but also proposing reconciliation with their past for the future, while the so-called “majority” literature seldom does so and uses such untrustworthy techniques as “open ending” more often than liable enlightenment. Minority authors often accuse those who treat them irrationally, but they also propose their ideal life. Some of the representatives of such minority literatures are Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), a legend of a Chinese woman warrior adapted to the life of a Chinese-American protagonist who becomes involved with the anti-Vietnam war movement, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), another Vietnam story in which ethnic identity becomes a key to solving the protagonist’s personal crisis after his mythic journey, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), an African American feminist ghost story that puts emphasis on the unity of women, and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), which suggests the importance of communication among Chinese women over generations. The aesthetic characteristics of these minority literatures are adaptations of their ethnic/racial/gender backgrounds, and thematically, these works often project moral lessons applicable to a sustainable life in a transcendental way.

As for the twenty-first century, realist and trans-realist literatures are still mixed. However, “violence” is more critical a theme to produce post-9/11 literature. A literary analyst, A.J. Aronstein, says, “If you want to read the Greatest Work of 9/11 Literature, the consensus is: keep waiting. It will be a long time before someone writes it” and continues:

One thing that seems certain is that no one has yet written that book. Not DeLillo (too sterile), Safran Foer (too cloying), Hamid (too severe), Messud (too prissy), O’Neill (too realist), Spiegelman (too panicked), Eisenberg (too cryptic) or the 9/11 Commission (too thorough).

... Works of 9/11 Literature obsess about the intricate and far-reaching effects of 9/11 on the lives of characters, whereas Post-9/11 Literature emphasizes how individuals can move beyond the trauma of the attacks and allow ordinary life to resume its flow.⁹

Post-apocalyptic narrative varies, and there is one rising genre called transnational literature written by non-native

⁸ Sakamoto, Akira. “For Correct Perception of TV Games [tebebi geemu no tadashii rikai o].” *Game Studies Data Index*. Web. <<http://research.cesa.or.jp/interview/sakamoto01.html>>

⁹ Aronstein, A. J. “Recovery in Pieces: A Study of the Literature of 9/11.” *The Millions*. Web. <<http://www.themillions.com/2011/09/recovery-in-pieces-a-study-of-the-literature-of-911.html>>

English speakers who write in English and often introduce their local issues of violence in a realistic way, as in such works as Daniel Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006), Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* (2007) and a magic realist Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005).

On the other hand, there are other types of literature that seek for reconciliation against violence. This literature can project ways of living for the age of enlightenment and contribute to create sustainable society in a more positive mode. The literature of non/anti-violence resembles minority literatures in that it often transcends realism and suggests alternative lifestyles for sustainability.

Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *Writing on the Wall*, *New York Magazine's* 2005 Best Literary Fiction Award winner, projects the importance of multi-lingual communication in the globalizing post-9/11 world, suggesting that monolingual communication of English, metaphorical of the post-1989 US monopoly, only brings destruction. Karen Russell's "Reeling for the Empire" (2012) is a short story in which young Japanese girls are forced to work in a silk mill in the imperialist Meiji Restoration and, in order to free themselves, carry out hunger strikes, eventually transforming themselves into silk worms. Russell's traditional feminist picture of a woman as "a bird in the cage" is represented in this magic realist fiction and re-projects the importance of sororal unity.

Another trans-realist genre is Manga or graphic novels, a genre extremely popular among younger generations and often made to animated films. Although one has to admit that much of this rising genre is often times extremely violent, I would say Manga has a great potential. If properly used to reorient the youth who are so exposed to violence in games of virtual reality that they may become unable to differentiate the real and the unreal as Sakamoto warns.¹⁰ Again, if the vertical experience of Manga is properly presented, this genre appears to explore a new set of texts explicitly committed to building a new literary roadmap for SD, like Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 Japanese animated fantasy film *Howl's Moving Castle*, originally written by Diana Wynne Jones.

IV. CONCLUSION

Applied literature, which may well appear to be a revival of the old-fashioned, conservative moral/philosophical approach, is new and should be appraised now that the twentieth century has proven itself to be a destructive wasteland. After such ruination, all academic disciplines are invited to join the global movement for SD. Natural and social scientists should not be the only participants; the scholars of the humanities should join them as well. In addition to philosophers, ethicists, and historians, scholars of literature are

equally responsible for SD because literature is a living laboratory that can project hope for our future.

Richard Altick and John J. Fenstermaker proclaim the mission of literary scholars in their 1963 classical literary conduct book, *The Art of Literary Research*:

Like all professions, ours has its code of manners and ethics, the heart of which is the proposition that we are working together for the benefit of society, not for private aggrandizement. Scientists and inventors have their patents, but in humane learning all knowledge is the public domain. (251)

Applied literature responds to such anticipation and contributes to a better tomorrow. If one agrees with the SD motto, "Think globally, act locally, and change personally," this new discipline of literature can become a starting point for an individual shake-up.

Earlier in this essay, I introduced the term Age of New Enlightenment with the hope that the twenty-first century should be remembered so by the people of the future, because we are experiencing the very critical moment of the world and may be witnessing its end. Fortunately, we are moving toward the period of diversities that respect individual as well as collective human rights, while we are also learning about duties we have to recognize in order, for example, to solve environmental issues for SD. With such anxieties, we also sustain hope for our future. And this determination is constructed under an idea of inclusivism, or the ideology that seeks for peaceful coexistence of all species on earth, which necessitates the engagement of academia for realization.

Literature can and should also be a part of such academic movements and contribute itself to our precious planet earth. Literature cannot only be a representation of the real but also a projection for the ideal, and I suggest such *Applied Literature* for sustainability in the *Age of New Enlightenment*.

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