

Jean-François Vernay, *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch*. Youngstown, New York: Cambria, 2007, 201pp.

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Two years ago a local reporter phoned me seeking comments on Cardinal George Pell's speech at the National Press Club (September 2005). Pell declaimed the apparent abandonment of "the great works of literature" in the pre-tertiary sector. Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania were singled out as prime offenders. Selected portions of our phone conversation were then handed to Christopher Koch for comment. The ensuing battle provided fare and fireworks for the newspaper for at least a week: the *wayang* of the left and right included the School of Education at the University of Tasmania; the Education Minister, and the concerned citizens of the Apple Isle. Like characters in a Koch novel we, academic and author, had played our parts in a pre-scripted event. We had been "puppeteered" by a journalist-narrator.

Of the half dozen novels for which Christopher Koch is known each brings with it the *wayang* dramas of the man himself: highlights include drama with creative personnel surrounding the filming of *The Year of Living Dangerously* (published 1978; filmed 1982); and drama with theory-bound academics at the Miles Franklin Award presentation for *Highways to a War* (1995).¹ Reader-reception theory be blowed: Koch is nothing if not protective of his fiction *oeuvre*, which includes six novels in the last five decades. Within those novels the thematic dramas are familiar territory to Koch's readers; stating that "Geography [is] the great shaper of human development", Koch constructs his experiences of life in Tasmania, an island that subscribed until recently to selective histories; an island that modelled itself on the textual histories of Britain's fiction writers, forcing its islanders (or at least, Koch's characters) to live a simulacrum existence in a "second England". Characters wishing to escape life at "second-hand" cross the sea-wall and attempt to negotiate the historical depth and Otherness of Asia. Even in Asia though, it's difficult to eradicate perceptions initiated by text: Koch's imaginative construction of the Asian Otherland began with yet another British work, Kipling's *Kim* (1901).

So it must be no small compensation, or perhaps it's the proof in the pudding, that Koch (and I will get to Vernay's book, shortly) finds himself no

longer the receiver of the second-hand. In the turn-around of writing places that settle into the eye-land of the mind, Koch produces images of Tasmania as Otherland, exporting them back to Blighty so successfully that Graham Greene can write “I feel now that Tasmania is part of my memory” (dust jacket, *The Doubleman*). Well, no, Graham, not really. If I’m understanding Koch here, the whole point is that textuality/art/illusion creates an Otherland that exists nowhere; only bodily confrontation with context (geography/reality) can create a modicum of knowing in the *wayang* of *ars longa, vita brevis*.

Jean-François Vernay’s *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch* is the first monograph to examine Koch’s entire novel output (with the exception of his just-published seventh novel, *The Memory Room*). Seconding David Brooks’s exuberant response to the publication of work on A. D. Hope (*JASAL* 5, 214) we can stand amazed and downcast that a New York publisher has published a work from a New Caledonian on an Australian author.

The inclusion of the word “Australian” in the subtitle indicates that this is a work by someone situated outside the literary and geographical context of “Australia”. And that is the case: what was Vernay’s PhD thesis (Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail) has been transformed into a handsome hardback book with a Foreword by Xavier Pons. It contains a glossary of theoretical terms, a fairly comprehensive bibliography, and “comparative grids” for two of the novels, *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *The Reincarnation of Rama; Out of Ireland* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Some failings common to a PhD thesis are carried on in this publication, small failings prompted by large enthusiasms of which most of us are guilty, such as a wish to overstate in order to make the case, to bend the material to suit the premise, and to engage, non-cohesively, with multiple theoretical frameworks (the academic’s collateral) against which novels and ideas are shown to fit or not. That said, Vernay’s writing is lucid, his theoretical approach incisive if somewhat eclectic. The monograph is a highly defensible work in good hands.

Apart from the first chapter, “Writing His Way to Fame”, which stresses Koch’s Anglo-Irish and German lineage as important influences in the novels, the chapters are dedicated to a critical discussion of each of the six novels. The first, *The Boys in the Island* (1958), is set in Koch’s island birthplace. Taking Koch at his word that he “wanted the novel to be a poetic vehicle”, Vernay traces the physical journey and emotional maturity of protagonist Frances Cullen. For his theoretical crutch he calls on Tzvetan Todorov’s work on the poetic novel. And it is thoroughly convincing stuff; it is a delight to

encounter this *petit tour de force* as Vernay builds and improves on previous observations regarding the novel's poetic properties (by John Barnes and S. J. Baker). The language of poetry teases novelistic subtleties into shy response in a clear and focused way. "Simile," says Vernay, "is Koch's favourite stylistic device, occurring every two or three pages." And, why yes of course, it makes sense that the simile is the dominant device for a writer preoccupied with "illusion" and "reality".

And the novel's epigraph (from Keats, "The Fall of Hyperion") signals Koch's preoccupation with illusion and reality from Day One. At the risk of sounding prescriptive, I suggest that while Vernay does solid work on hypo- and hyper-texts for two of the novels, a more consistent approach to intertextuality would unify the monograph. More importantly, the epigraphic framework confirms Vernay's proposition that the novel "presents the main characteristics of lyricism" (15). Which is why his case for a schizophrenic Francis Cullen seems slightly out of whack. Having pointed out Koch's German heritage, Vernay applies German literary terminology to Koch's work: words such as *Weltanschauung*, *Schlüsselroman*, *Bildungsroman*, *Doppelgänger*. Perhaps, for consistency of argument, the *Minneleid* (love lyric) is closer to describing the poetic heart of the matter rather than the mind-freezing term "schizophrenic"? Obviously (as Pons has demonstrated) the psychoanalytic approach is as valid as any, but in this instance it teases the novel into compliance with a particular theoretical approach and unnecessarily fragments the principal discussion which is, as Vernay's close textual reading leaves in no doubt, that *The Boys in the Island* is a poetic novel.

From here *Water from the Moon* engages in broader critical approaches; the range of topics is ambitious and includes Dubious Identities, Fictional Reality, the Modern Fairy Tale, the Postcolonial Dilemma, and Utopia in the Antipodes. In the chapter "When West meets East" Koch's second novel *Across the Sea Wall* (1965) is described as a "watershed in terms of the representation of Asian people in Australian literature" (43). Koch is credited with pioneering interest in Eastern culture not only in *Across the Sea Wall* but also in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) and *Highways to a War*. Comprehensive footnotes track previous scholarly work. But even allowing for reader-reception theory, some bendable moments occur. In the discussion of the Indian climate and its capacity to drive "foreigners mad" (41) Vernay quotes O'Brien's advice to Sunder Singh to put on his hat. Read in context the scene is in fact an attempt to make light of an uncomfortable moment when O'Brien realises he's bought into the colonial discourse of the pukka sahib.

A far bendier moment occurs in the sub-section, “Textus Absconditus”, which discusses *The Doubleman* (winner of the 1985 Miles Franklin Award). The character Richard Miller is struck down by polio when he’s a child. States Miller, “It was now that my interest in the Otherworld began”. In keeping with the monograph’s thesis it would seem that Miller’s wish to escape the physical reality of a damaged masculine body heralds the birth of the *Künstler* preoccupied by illusion, learning to puppeteer the *Künstlerdramen*. But polio isn’t mentioned; it’s “textus absconditus”. Instead, Bruno Bettelheim—a theorist I have a deal of respect for—is enlisted for this gem: “it is common knowledge that the more insecure people feel the more often they will have recourse to infantile projections” (94).

Perhaps the most troublesome section is “Out of Ireland: Utopia in the Antipodes”. Take the quote that “Geography is for Koch a great ‘shaper” (63). Simply put, Koch’s geography is Tasmania, and Tasmania’s historical and psychological sub-stratum is Van Diemen’s Land. The island’s four seasons predispose it to comparisons with England; and when Koch speaks of “this small, stormy island in the world’s utmost south” (65) he is not talking about the dry continent—that political entity popularly thought of as comprising “Australia”. The psychological territories are just not interchangeable.

But let’s return to safer ground, to geography less familiar presumably to either of us: Water from the Moon, meaning “anything impossible”, was originally the title of *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978). Set in Sukarno’s Jakarta, 1965, the novel concerns dual identities, hyphenated Australians, and *wayang* dramas. It is “Koch’s watershed bestseller”, establishing him as “one of Australia’s outstanding novelists” and bringing him “overnight worldwide recognition” (59). Although Vernay mentions that Koch “is one of the very few Australians who can afford to live by [writing]” (6) he nevertheless constructs Koch as an *écrivain maudit* whose “engrossing tales” have suffered an “enigmatic lack of recognition”.

David Brooks’s remark that incoming university students are unfamiliar with significant figures in Australian culture (*JASAL* 5, 214) suggests that Vernay might need to modify his assessment of Koch as the only neglected figure; the woeful inference here is that the problem is systemic. More discomfiting, however, is Vernay’s assessment that Koch does not enjoy the same academic recognition in Australia as his contemporaries; and that “it is perhaps no coincidence that interest in Koch’s fiction has been flagging since his 1996 Miles Franklin acceptance speech”. Awarded for *Highways to a War*, Koch used the Miles Franklin occasion to attack the viability of theoretical frameworks such as deconstruction and postmodernism in the teaching of

literature (published as “Beware Bullies Who Sap The Beauty From Young Writing” in *Australian*, Opinion (14 June 1996: 15)). It’s a view supported by critic Andreas Gaile as the reason why *Out of Ireland* was “almost completely ignored”. It’s a view that makes the Australian academic community look a little, well, petty-minded.

Although Pons states that the book’s purpose is not to join or challenge the fray but rather to play a part in rectifying “the current critical neglect of this elegant yet forceful writer” (xi) there is implied the familiar tune of Australian neglect for one of its own as chorused recently by Hazel Rowley in “The Mocking Country” (*Weekend Australian*, Books (25-26 August 2007: 8-9)). And it’s at this point that I begin to feel churlish: there are few enough rewards for those engaged in the business and pleasure of Australian literature even with the 100% increase in the number of chairs we can scramble for in our careers; so all hail! to the critics and the authors in this joint endeavour to raise the profile of Australian literature. My understanding is that European PhD candidates publish their theses as a matter of course, and as such this is clearly an outstanding production; we should indeed celebrate along with Vernay that Cambria has made it “possible to promote Australian literature beyond its national borders”.

A gentle reminder though that, if this is a way forward, we are treading water. This is what we did in the first four decades of the twentieth century: writers had to go beyond their national borders in order to be published. As for monographs, take a look at where the first book-length study of Randolph Stow (1978) was published (USA, by Ray Willbanks); admittedly in Willbanks’ collection of interviews, *Speaking Volumes* (1991), Koch is nowhere to be heard. That will be rectified if Vernay has his way, for Cambria “has achieved what I have attempted ever since my earliest dedication to the study of Australian fiction, namely putting it on the world map. Major Australian literary figures like Christopher Koch will now be able to join the international big league of writers” (xxii). We can hope. I thought OzLit was already on the world map, however; I thought the German translation of *The Doubleman* that I picked up in Graz meant Koch was already out there, swimming with the literary heavies.

Like it or not, in addition to his critical approach to Koch’s *oeuvre*, Vernay’s less guarded comments are spot on in the current literary climate. And so are Koch’s. It’s time to wheel out the curmudgeon and ponder his outspokenness: Koch’s “Beware Bullies” has come back with bite. The Australian Literature in Education Roundtable, sponsored by the Australian Council for the Arts, met 7 August 2007. Stakeholders included teachers and publishers (though

oddly, not the Association for the Study of Australian Literature). Concern for the “role of Australian literature in schools and universities” saw the Roundtable endorse the idea that “there should be less pressure on teachers to adhere to interpretive frameworks, set out in prescriptive curriculum documents” and that teachers and students “should be left free to explore the meaning of literary works by their own lights” (“Lost Literature Refound” in *The Australian*, Higher Education (15 August 2007: 25).

So, Koch: a “grumpy old man forever railing against the misdeeds of post-modernism and political correctness” (xi)? Or/and “Australia’s greatest living novelist” (Greg Sheridan, “Impressions that Linger”, in *Weekend Australian*, Review (June 23-24, 2007: 40))? Vernay shows both sides of the man, his work, and his place in Australian literature. For all its strengths and faults *Water from the Moon* is, importantly, relevant and topical: the outsider perception confirms the insider perception that we are letting our literature go to buggery.

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NOTE

- ¹ Koch’s seventh novel, *The Memory Room*, published by Knopf (Random House Australia) was released 1 November 2007.