

**Jean-François Vernay: *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch*.** Youngstown, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2007, 201 pp. AUD 84.95, ISBN 9781534043356. **Reviewed by Igor Maver,** University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Christopher Koch, an internationally acclaimed Australian writer and two-time Miles Franklin Award winner, born and educated in Tasmania, has been writing fulltime since 1972. Probably his best known novel is *The Year of Living Dangerously*, which was made into a highly successful film by the Australian director Peter Weir that was also nominated for an Academy Award. In his book on Koch's writing Jean-François Vernay covers and most minutely analyzes his novels, which mostly seem to talk about binaries such as illusion and reality, East and West, past and present or the divided and dubious or double identities: from the early novels *The Boys in the Island*, *Across the Sea Wall*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *The Doubleman*, *Highways to a War to Out of Ireland*. It has to be added, however, that Koch's literary fame at this very moment does no longer rest solely on *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) set in Indonesia in the 1960s, but also on his most recent well-received spy novel *The Memory Room* (2007), which came out right at the time of the publication of this monograph under review. In *The Memory Room* Koch once again, as in several of his novels, interweaves the political and the personal and juggles the double nature of the protagonists, in this particular case the motivations of Vincent (based loosely on Koch's long-time friend and in reality a secret agent), who chooses to live the life of an Australian secret intelligence operative.

Koch, who at times also lived in England, is someone who has always been aware of the power of the media, of political intrigue, and Australia's (Austral-Asian) closeness to Asia and its developments. The fictionalization of Asia (as for example in the works by Blanche d'Alpuget, Brian Castro and others) is thus also one of his recurrent themes, although most certainly not the only

one. Although Koch rejected the notion of being a political writer, he is frequently concerned with Australia's relationship with its Asian neighbours, putting white Australians into tense political scenarios in South-East Asia. He says in a recent interview that South-East Asia was what you flew over on your way to Europe and now multiculturalism has helped bring people closer; yet it still interests him to see typical Australians dropped into these "exotic worlds" (web reference).

In the realism of *The Boys in the Island* (1958) Vernay sees the rise of the Australian poetic novel and it is true that Koch's novel, despite its surface realism, charts the inward journey of the "failed" character into the irrational forces of the psyche, the landscape of the mind, as Patrick White would have it. In the novel *Across the Sea Wall* (1965) Koch brings together the two worlds, Australia and Asia, the West meeting the East, which, as Vernay's book clearly shows, starts from the Orientalist stereotypical construction of otherness, but one that eventually turns into its opposite and mutual respect:

With hindsight, Asia has proved a tremendous success with Australian citizens and has even superseded Europe in terms of identification. It has ceased to embody just mere backdrops to political intrigues in fiction and has gradually been recognized as a strong economic partner ... Australians need to deal with on a more intimate level (52).

Koch's probably most successful novel (and its film adaptation) *The Year of Living Dangerously* shows his fondness of historical novels but also "a Baroque-inspired *Weltanschauung*" (83), as Vernay puts it, one that introduces the Indonesian context of the theatre of life with stages, masks, stage effects, plots, puppetry, costumes, and the like, thus relativizing the concepts of illusion/appearances and reality. The novel *The Doubleman* (1985), a modern fairy-tale for which he won the Miles Franklin award, confirmed Koch's reputation, although it also earned him the first acerbic attack, in which he was accused of "xenophobia, male chauvinism, and misanthropy" (91). Vernay's narrative and psychological analysis interestingly leads him to maintain that

*The Doubleman*, very much like the original function of the *Doppelgänger*, is therefore an evil figure, which highlights a spiritual conflict within Man. Yet, ..., the Double-man does not take over the identity of his victim as he is only interested in the individual's soul. (102)

He furthermore draws the conclusion that in several of Koch's novels the "flawed personalities in search of their alter egos must renounce to their *sui generis* identities and become their models' shadows in order to feel complete" (106). Moreover, Vernay correctly maintains that within the Australian context the use of an exclusively male alter ego figure may well just be a literary expression of the cult of male mateship, derived on the one hand from the hostile reality of bush life for men without female companionship and on the other from the idealisation of the laconic and lone male that in a new land in this way rebels against authority.

In *The Doubleman* the Australian postcolonial dilemma is clearly played out; regarding the question of the transplanted Europe in the Antipodes Vernay concludes in favour of the latter. The novel *Out of Ireland* (1999) deals with the recurrent Australian collective trauma, the one-time penal colony of Van Diemen's Land, which is depicted as a land of terror and, better still, "the land of the damned or as a terrestrial Hell – which generated the anti-Eden myth on which the palimpsest of the national psyche has been fleshed out layer upon layer" (153). Vernay brilliantly juxtaposes Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and *Out of Ireland* and concludes that Koch updated one of the founding myths of Judeo-Christian belief, namely man's damnation. Koch may not have written "Christian novels", as Vernay writes, yet he also sees in the last two Koch's novels discussed the writer's expression of the need for the expiation of sins, spiritual distress and "the crisis in religion" (172).

Jean-François Vernay in his book-length study of Koch demonstrates with an assured critical hand how some of his novels owe a lot to certain classic hypotexts (or pre-texts that served as models), ancient epics such as for example, *The Reincarnation of Rama* (an Indonesian religious play), or Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and how reality is and always will be a social and cultural construct: illusion

thus constantly in an ambiguous relationship. He is right in discovering a sense of *bovarysme* in the novels discussed, as well as "an undeniable postcolonial dimension, which challenges the Eurocentric perspective on Australia" (174). It is owing to his fine in-depth study of Christopher Koch's literary *oeuvre* that we now have a much needed book-length critical study of his work. For over a decade, Koch's oeuvre has fallen from literary grace in Australia – due to his alleged conservatism, anti-postmodernism and even male chauvinistic treatment of certain women characters. Koch is, regardless of this, a great Australian literary author, despite some of the shortcomings that Vernay does not sweep under the carpet; rather, he certainly makes an excellent scholarly case for Christopher Koch's writing.