

*WRITING COLONISATION*

*Violence, Landscape and the Act of Naming  
in Modern Italian and Australian Literature*

By Sestigiani, Sabina (2014). Published in 'Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures',

New York, USA: Peter Lang, pp.254.

**Reviewed by Antonella Sarti Evans**

'The Act of Naming', a central chapter of Sabina Sestigiani's book, *Writing Colonisation. Violence, Landscape and the Act of Naming in Modern Italian and Australian Literature* analyses the split between word and world and the violence of the namer over the thing named with special reference to Australian colonisation and the crucial concepts inherent in the German philosopher Walter Benjamin's theory of language. According to Benjamin ('The Task of the Translator', 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' ) the non-correspondence of thing and word as a consequence of Man's Fall has rendered language an 'endless' approximation and arbitrariness: the task of the translator is to reveal the original common thread of all languages concealed under a linguistic veil, thence a good translation brings to the



surface ‘the fragments of a greater language’<sup>1</sup> or ‘Ursprache’. An interesting parallel is suggested by Sestigiani between the linguistic state of humans in the Garden of Eden and the Aboriginal people’s ‘inscribing their language directly on to their place’ before encountering colonialism, by quoting J.M.Jacobs’ *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*.<sup>2</sup> According to the latter, the Aboriginal idea of the land as ‘the creation of the ancestral beings who journeyed across it’ and their belief that ‘features of the landscape are signs, both of people and of the embodiment of spiritual forces’ imply that ‘aboriginal languages never had to put up with the notion of the arbitrary signifier-signified relation’.<sup>3</sup>

Sestigiani’s comprehensive volume delves into the connection between language and violence in diverse colonial environments such as Italian and Australian literature, showing to what extent the naming of colonial space is a Western device of legitimizing colonial subjugation, in other words, an alibi for conquest and land-seizing. In particular, the literary comparison is investigated within the concept of border and

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, W. (1923). ‘The Task of the Translator’ in Benjamin, W. (1996) *Selected Writings*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> M. Jacobs, J. (1998). *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp.50.



wilderness ('human readings of these landscapes featuring frontier lines, border and peripheries have an intrinsic connotation of violence')<sup>4</sup> in a number of remarkable works, ranging from Dino Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari* (*The Tartar Steppe*) and Patrick White's *Voss*, to David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* and Guido Ceronetti's *Difesa della luna e altri argomenti di miseria terrestre* (*Defense of the Moon and Other Topics of Terrestrial Unhappiness*), to Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (*A time to kill*) – a novel set in Africa at the time of the Italian Fascist colonial empire – concluding with Barbara Baynton's short story 'The Chosen Vessel' (from *Bush Studies*) and Randolph Stow's novel *Tourmaline*.

I found chapter five of particular interest ('Silence, the virtue of speaking: David Malouf's *An imaginary Life*' – The Translation of a World) in relation to Benjamin's idea of the fallen state of language, especially when Sestigiani underlines Malouf's preoccupation of bridging the gap between word and colonial landscape by means of creative writing:

'all his writing is an attempt to achieve that state of perfect correspondence against the whole of our cultural history(..) Malouf distinguishes in art, the task of the restorer of

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<sup>4</sup> Writing Colonisation, p.3.



the magic correspondence of language. Like Benjamin, he is in turn the philosopher, the translator and the writer.’<sup>5</sup>

The book discusses the concept of ‘translation’ in a colonial environment as related to the attempt to regain the original essence of the language, in other words, the adherence of word and phenomenon, by quoting post-colonial critic Martin Leer’s definition of the European consciousness expressed in a new continent as ‘a translation in a void, a translation into a language which does not as yet exist’.<sup>6</sup>

David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*, being set on a remote border of the ancient Roman Empire, has been chosen as a study-case within considerations about liminal places and their role in the making of place through language. The landscape in front of Malouf’s Ovid’s eyes shifts from depicting ‘a vast page whose tongue’ he is ‘unable to decipher’ and ‘whose message’ he is ‘unable to interpret’, to one which slowly starts to make sense when the main character abandons, in Sestigiani’s words, ‘the masterful but ironically detached attitude towards life and language that he had acquired in Rome.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sestigiani, S. (2014) *Writing Colonisation*. pp. 90-91.

<sup>6</sup> Leer, M. (1985). *At the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the Work of David Malouf*. *Australian Literary Studies*, vol.12, n° 1, University of Queensland Press, p.15.

<sup>7</sup> Sestigiani, S. (2014). *Writing Colonisation*. p.92.



Further along, it is demonstrated by the author of *Writing Colonisation* how in Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* and in Stow's *Tourmaline* the trap of colonialist thought is avoided in a positive way, through silence:

‘Both Malouf and Stow revert to silence or strategies of not naming in order to set the characters free from colonial perspectives, as if language, violence and colonialism were doomed to be connected. Only in a state before or beyond language can a way out of colonialism be conceived of: *An Imaginary Life*'s Ovid and the Child set forth into the wilds communicating in an intuitive language – whose silence can neither kill nor suppress any named object – beyond the barbarian frontier’.<sup>8</sup>

Which is linked back to Benjamin's speculations on the existence of an idyllic language spoken by Adam before the Fall, where word and world adhered, absolutely free of violence or dominion over uttered objects which would represent a dimension out of colonial exploitation.

Divergent from Benjamin and Malouf's, are Ceronetti's views, as presented in chapter six, ‘An Angelic Rape: Guido Ceronetti's *Difesa della Luna e altri argomenti di miseria terrestre*’. From Ceronetti's satirical essay, half-way between prose and poetry,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*:181



published as a reaction to the 21<sup>st</sup> July 1969 moon landing, Sestigiani analyses the outstanding translation of Genesis 1, 26-31. Ceronetti's version differs from the official translations mainly in his interpretation of 'dominion over' from Hebrew word *radàh* which he chooses to render with a stronger verb, 'tread on' (in Italian: 'col piede schiacci'). While claiming that his translation is faithful to the primary sense of the original word, Ceronetti emphasizes Adam's self-destructive behavior that makes war on nature in the Edenic Garden. As pointed out by Sestigiani:

'whereas in *An Imaginary Life*, colonialism allowed Malouf to conceive of a primordial state where language was perfect and exhibited complete unity between name and object, in Ceronetti's *Difesa della luna* colonialism assumes rapacious characteristics which stem from *Genesis* 1,26. Colonialism has feet whose trampling is the descendant of the first human stamping over the universe. Armstrong's footprint on the moon re-enacts that ancient walk by Adam over the newly created earth. The pristine act of naming performed in *Genesis* which informs *An Imaginary Life* is absent in *Ceronetti's* reflections on colonialism. Ceronetti's analysis suggests a murky and murderous tone to the act of naming.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sestigiani, S. (2014) *Writing Colonisation*. p.123.

Besides Benjamin's theory of language and Western canons such as the myth of the Roman Empire later perpetrated by Italian Fascist Colonialism or the Bible, other sources of inspiration for *Writing Colonisation* are the philosophical inquiries into language by Hegel, Blanchot and Heidegger in the European justification of colonialism, as we read in the conclusion:

'The world compressed into a frame to be humanly conceptualized, as Heidegger suggests, and language that annihilates the physicality of the objects it names, as Hegel and Blanchot argue, seem to be inherent in the fate of humankind'<sup>10</sup>

Springing from those assumptions, the literature studied in *Writing colonization. Violence, Landscape, and the Act of Naming* challenges their very cores, as Sabina Sestigiani has demonstrated with profound knowledge, wonderful linguistic command and subtle comparative skills – a kind of literature which she defines as 'the literature of delusion':

'a literature whose obsession with what lies beyond the frontier – what has been cut out of the view and left 'out of the picture' – is founded on a fantasy of dominion (..)'

I do agree with her that 'colonialism is founded on delusion'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p.182.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.183.

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