

*Water From the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian
Novelist Christopher Koch*

Jean-François Vernay

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There has been some press debate over the future of Australian literature in our universities and claims that it is a focus of greater interest abroad than it is in Australia at present. So it is interesting to find a critical study from a US publisher by a French scholar, singling out for attention someone who had been productive over a long period, controversial occasionally, and largely neglected—at least in recent years—by antipodean academia.

Jean-François Vernay in this monograph based on his doctoral thesis takes up the cause of Christopher Koch, responding to his craft and compelling themes. As he points out, apart from study guides for high school and one longer reading of Koch's fiction, there is no serious, sustained analysis of his work, though there have been a few theses and a number of articles and interviews. Vernay's view from the margins, as it were (he is quite familiar with Australia but lives in New Caledonia), point up how these days it seems unlikely that a young Australian PhD candidate would take up Koch as a subject—multiculturalism, postmodernism, feminism, indigeneity, the urban grunge fashion, and so on, all point to more contemporary writers and critical approaches that Koch is on record as abhorring.

Nonetheless, he is an important figure in the history of Australian literature, and Vernay is able to come at his subject from formalist and psychoanalytic angles to show Koch's poetic style and carefully structured narratives, as well as his central themes of dualism and dream that continue to play a part in the national imaginary. In the process, he provides insights into the author's particular focus on ordinary protagonists, his interest in androgyny and threatening temptresses, penchant for grounding fiction in historical and autobiographical material, and the importance of Tasmania's convict past in shaping some of Koch's work, plus the careful—at times seemingly obsessive—concern for patterned overlays of symbol, action and structural composition. It is good to be reminded of the author's emphasis on testing his work for its sound effects. There is also a useful mapping of the critical responses to Koch's work, some of which have clearly led to a reactive hostility on the writer's part, reaching visible heat around Susan McKernan's article of 1985, and

culminating in his denunciation of contemporary literary and cultural movements in his speech at the 1996 Miles Franklin Award. This book demonstrates the overall consistency of Koch's use of bildungsroman form and his sustained interest in the duality of material and spiritual worlds and the dangerous attractions of illusion.

There are two ways of reviewing this book: one for the quality of its content (that is, its use as a scholarly guide to Koch's fiction) and the other as a monograph for general readership adapted from a doctoral thesis. Obviously, the two go together, and hinge on the cross-over from a narrow readership of experts on the author or the theoretical framework employed, to a wider audience of students and interested public. The 200-page book we have derives from a 440-page doctoral thesis that applied a solid psychoanalytic apparatus to comparative readings of fiction. Material on religion, time, an interview with Koch and much of the footnote material was dropped, partly at the publisher's insistence. There remains a productive identification of Gnostic elements in the novels that calls for further exploration (some of which is in the original thesis), and a largely archetypal analysis that works to good effect. Unfortunately, a penchant for Greek and Latin terminology makes it through the edits and seems rather pedantic (though there is a glossary)—and when the more familiar literary terms are explained, it seems patronising of the reader as well. This again raises the question of audience and balance: if the book is meant for general undergraduates, then the terms and their explanations are probably needed, but will deter some with their air of pedantry; if it is intended for informed scholars, the more descriptive moments will seem a bit flat and the loss of the original governing theoretical framework will be felt. A publisher with knowledge of the field and a clear sense of market might have helped more in fully realising the potential of this otherwise useful book. The original comparative approach also interferes with the governing book-by-book chronology of chapters to blur the focus and allow repetition here and there, though it is useful in drawing out the main continuities of motif and theme. Some of the appendices from the thesis are helpfully retained, providing structural maps of intertextual links in both *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *Out of Ireland*. There is also a comprehensive bibliography of works by and about the novelist that shows how popular Koch's work has been in schoolrooms, despite the frequent stand-off between the writer and his academic audience. This book will be a very useful supplement to "study notes", but principally for teachers, and will find its main audience via university libraries.

If Vernay's external view allows a more admiring (but not uncritical) reading of Koch than might be forthcoming from within Australia, and if his descriptive survey and analyses will be informative to the European or American reader, the Australian who has followed Koch's career will not discover much that is startlingly new in thematic analysis, though there is some close attention to style and form that is an original contribution to existing commentary. There is a heavy reliance on the novelist's own

pronouncements in *Crossing the Gap* and the major commentators along the way, but this is expected in an overview to an audience not commonly familiar with the work. The scholar closely familiar with Koch's work, however, might quibble over some elements of interpretation. For example, while scholarly evaluations of his fiction may have started to surface around the time of *The Doubleman*'s appearance, it was not that work itself, but *The Year of Living Dangerously* that sparked a general regard. Moreover, although the colonial psyche is addressed in the latter parts of the book, there is perhaps a too personalised psychologising of Francis in *The Boys in the Island*.

It seems to me that Koch's greatest significance lies in his ability to reflect, through his unremarkable and mostly ineffectual protagonists, the closeted collective psyche of 'fifties and 'sixties Anglo-Australia. It is precisely this period analysis, vital though it is to national self-understanding, that means his work is relatively uncelebrated in recent times. It is the depiction of a white mindset of the period that accounts for the Orientalist aspects in Koch's representations of Asia and the books' attitudes to men and women. Thus it is perhaps too much to ask that his work reflect contemporary multiculturalism—he does, in fact feature some European migrants and a Chinese-Australian—though it is equally true that his work does not seem to move with the times, and, indeed, goes back into the colonial past. Such objections are repeatedly offset by suggestive observations, such as that Koch's characters are often raised in single-parent families and that, while initiation into adulthood seems to end in a fall into the Australian mundane, adventure abroad—geographically or imaginatively—is nevertheless the vehicle to maturity, but is also tied to an attachment to childhood dreams that is dangerous to full self-realization.

At times the willingness to take a bird's eye view of the social context of books leads the author open to pot shots from below. Vernay slides occasionally into general pronouncements about the Australian context, the "editorialising" that "Asian languages have seduced many young people . . . unfortunately to the detriment of Romance languages" seems gratuitous and, in the long run, just wrong. In universities, at least, Spanish is currently booming and Indonesian can barely fill a classroom. These moments, fortunately, are few, and do not affect the readings of the novels, centred interestingly around the figure of Plato's cave and the idea of colonial distance. Another valuable feature of *Water from the Moon* is its bringing Koch commentary up to date, with chapters on *Highways to a War* and *Out of Ireland*. Vernay is to be commended on pushing through the post-thesis trough to produce this study.