

*The Non-Literate Other. Readings of Illiteracy in Twentieth-Century  
Novels in English*

Helga Ramsey-Kurz

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Reviewed by Federica Zullo.

At the beginning of David Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon* (1993), two children from a family of colonial settlers happen to meet a strange guy who tells them "Do not shoot. I am a b-b-British object" (3). This is the impressive start of a narrative in which an adolescent who escapes from England in mid-nineteenth century, arrives in Australia, the land of "convicts," and lives among the Aborigines for sixteen years. After that period, his language sounds like a mixture of a few aboriginal words and very poor English, and he represents a threat to community life in the settler's eyes. Malouf's is a dazzling story about racial hostility, newcomer fear and the impossibility of acknowledging the "otherness" of Aboriginal culture, something that certainly involves the problematic question of language.

Thus, it is not surprising to discover that the novel gave Helga Ramsey-Kurz the inspiration for her illuminating and rich volume *The Non-Literate Other. Readings of Illiteracy in Twentieth-Century Novels in English*. Gemmy Farley is an unlettered subject, an outcast, as well as a half-caste: a white person, but not quite. Moreover, the story is set in a colonial context, at the core of the disastrous encounter between Europeans and the natives. All these elements are explored and expanded in the different chapters that compose this fascinating volume.

The author considers different studies of literacy and illiteracy, from Derrida to McLuhan and Ivan Illich, from the question of alphabetization and so-called "online literacy," to the recognition that there exist new forms of illiteracy bubbling at the new interfaces. She sustains that we must be aware that illiteracy is a product of cross-cultural contact, so the readings of modern and postmodern fictions of scriptlessness need to be made considering this aspect of multiculturalism. Only thus can one do justice to the complex answers given in twentieth-century narrative literature to the questions of how to understand literacy and how to conceive of its very opposite.

The book shows how literary critics have often ignored the possibility that "illiteracy may be introduced into a literary text as a structure that constitutes meaning without having to be resolved or transformed" (50). In Kurz's opinion, what was unlikely to be accomplished in the metropolitan centres of literary studies was achieved outside them, in multiethnic contexts where the idea of

distinctive national languages forming collectively accepted identities is practically untenable.

She focuses on the role of postcolonial theory and how it deployed European traditions of literate discourse, inherited canons and modes of representation. This leads to questions about the suitability of the English language for the communication of postcolonial experience. Kurz exposes the works of some theorists like John Skinner, Homi Bhabha and Ismail Talib illustrating the roles played by the English language in different colonial and postcolonial contexts, not only as a *lingua franca* or a master language. Literary texts invoke a world in which literature may be distributed everywhere yet is still not accessible to everyone. There is a sense of global processes that allow a new form of identification with the culturally Other.

Illiteracy as a literary theme is explored in earlier fiction, starting from the Caliban-Prospero relation and moving to the works of Defoe, Richardson and Sterne, where it generally emerges how learning to read and write were evidently not experienced as a significant process of initiation into a special cultural practice of the writers' time. However, as we consider nineteenth-century literature, the author is able to show the different approaches to the unlettered individual of great authors like Hardy, Eliot and James, who mostly concentrate on women's illiteracy in their stories, and acknowledge the indispensability of literacy as well as the irreversibility of the process of alphabetization. Dickens provides a different reading of illiteracy in England, far from idealistic celebrations à la Scott or Mary Shelley's questioning of the moral integrity of literates in a literate society, suggesting that "there is nothing romantic about Pip's bewilderment, nothing suggesting the need to preserve his innocent ignorance" (75). Dickens believed in the necessity of knowing the unlettered Other, because he understood that the theme was bound to vanish from canonical literature. In fact, in twentieth-century novels in English produced by writers from outside Europe with historically colonial implications, an interest in illiteracy has been retained as a form of potentially subversive deviancy from Western master cultures. It is to those authors who have demonstrated this literary orientation that the book is greatly devoted, and the "postcolonial" section is not only the largest, but the most informed and detailed of the volume.

*Heart of Darkness* and its interpretation by Chinua Achebe are, inevitably, the first texts to appear, followed by pre- and post- literate minds in the characters of the English dystopian novels by William Golding and Angela Carter. Then, we move far away from Europe and meet David Malouf again, with his brilliant book, *An Imaginary Life*, where non-literacy, "while initially viewed as a sign of inferiority, is eventually seen as an ideal form of epistemological freedom which alone seems to facilitate the kind of dignified innocence the protagonists learn to admire in their unlettered opposite number" (142). Another remarkable exploration of illiteracy is to be found in so-called contact literature, and here Kurz takes J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to be supreme examples

of how the silence can be, especially in Coetzee's narrative, the result of the native's epistemic colonization through the act of representation.

The author's journey goes further, stopping in India with the untouchables of Mulk Raj Anand and the subaltern figures in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and ends in the United States, where illiteracy in literature inevitably refers to the "Black Atlantic," the historical legacy of slavery and black cultural heritage of contact with white supremacy. Migrant literature is the last field of investigation in the text, especially Chinese and Japanese narratives based in the United States. Here, what causes alienation and foreignness is not the identity of the outcast or the native, but the parents' language and writing that belong to a distant family background and, for the young generation, remains something undecipherable.

Apart from the vast and profound exploration of illiteracy in the world of literature in English, what gives Helga Ramsey-Kurz's study a great sense of authenticity and originality is the fact that, as the author declares, "many of the authors discussed in this book have taught reading and writing to children or illiterate adults. Some have witnessed the transition of their own cultures from orality to literacy" (440). It is precisely this kind of intertwining of personal experience and literary criticism that one can hope to expect from the world of books and letters.