

REZENSIONEN / REVIEWS

Xavier Pons. *Messengers of Eros. Representations of Sex in Australian Writing.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 361 pp. \$44.99 ISBN: 1443805238. **Reviewed by Susanne Braun-Bau, Düsseldorf**

On the cover of the present literary study the book is praised as a major achievement with the following words: "After decades of strict, puritanical censorship, Australian writers are free to address sexual issues." Its author Xavier Pons is well-known as the editor of *Colonisations* (1985) and *Departures* (2002) and teaches at the University of Toulouse (France). He is a former President of the European Association for Studies on Australia and has lectured and completed research at several Australian universities. Pons is certainly temerarious to tackle this topic of sex and eros. Feminists will enjoy reading it and frown upon his necessarily male perspective.

It is always problematic to investigate the "Australianness" of a topic in this globalized world of ours as Pons sets out to do according to his title ("Representations of sex in Australian Writing"). While there can be no doubt that there must be something typical in the representation of its unique nature in Australian writing or in coming to terms with its individual history, the reader may wonder what might be so typically Australian with a universal topic such as love, sex or eros.

The introduction starts with the truism that sex can be seen as an expression of love, as the basic underpinning of a conjugal relationship etc., and that with its almost magical properties sex might even be presented as distinct from love. It becomes clear where the Australianness of the topic might be found when Pons claims that sexism merges with colonialism. He points out that there it is not only the exploitation of women by men, but also exploitations of Asians by

Europeans or as he shows in his chapter on "Black velvet", the exploitations of Aborigines by whites (see chapter on "Blackfella Loving"). As an instrument of oppression it makes women, as well as some male protagonists, victims of sex, leaving them disempowered and alienated. They are left with feelings that "books were more satisfying than lovemaking" (Meehan 4). Sex becomes a means to indulge in power games, to have it mostly on one's own terms and to feel in charge.

Pons thus develops his major thesis underlining it with the theory of poststructuralist and French philosopher Michel Foucault:

Through the *topos* of sex, Australian fiction is able to explore a variety of power relationships and to confirm Michel Foucault's contention that power relationships are not in a position of externality in respect of other relationships such as economic processes, knowledge relationships or sexual relationships - they are immanent in them (5).

With his second thesis he attempts to focus on what is distinctively Australian in his topic:

What Australian novelists seem to be saying when they write about sex is that its pleasures have less to do with the factors which usually come to mind, such as love, tenderness or, at the extreme physical performance and release, and more with a sense of being in control of one's desires, free of domination and compulsion (6).

He continues that this is a very suitable perspective in a postcolonial culture for the above mentioned reasons (colonial attitudes of whites, treatment of Aborigines etc.).

The study can be divided into four sections (Pons has only three): In the first three chapters it sets out to focus on establishing relevant concepts, i.e. desire, transgression, perversion, or obscenity. The second part (chapters four to eight) focuses again on particularly Australian concepts, i.e.

- Australian Fantasies: focusing on the work on Henry Lawson and Australian hedonism or Ockerism as well as the oppressive sexual culture of bushmen – a country devoid of desire and passion;
- the Australian Masculinities: concentrating on contemporary women authors in a strongly masculine land of mateship as revealed by the Australian Legend;

- Dance of the Emotional Void: focusing on contemporary erotic fiction, i.e. Ettler, McGregor and Jaivin, starting with a quotation by David Foster saying that "sentimentality is more offensive than porn" (121), how lesbian fiction tends to emphasize male hostility and that romance no longer plays a major role in contemporary fiction: "we jump straight into the sex, and then – if we feel like it – we start worrying about the relationship" (Foster). The reader encounters feelings of sexual alienation. Australia and things Australian mean deprivation and frustration (132);
- the Joys of Irresponsible Sex: introducing Norman Lindsay as one of the few writers who promoted sex as a creative and enjoyable activity (139) and desire as an important prerequisite if one wants to live up to its creative potential. That Pons seeks the support of Nietzsche's philosophy in one subordinate clause seems rather pointless.
- the Great Dirty Joke Black Velvet: white authors focusing on the treatment of the Aborigines, i.e. Prichard and Herbert; this is a solid interpretation of their famous novels *Capricornia* and *Coonardoo* focusing once again on the dignity of Aborigines and white Australian racism. Part of his analysis is hard to follow, especially when writing that Prichard was prepared to address Aboriginal sexuality but not its white counterpart (171). It is exactly because Prichard succeeds in describing how the white protagonist's passion for the Aboriginal girl is suppressed (nature imagery once again is important for this) that she succeeds.

The third section, chapters nine to fourteen, focuses on single novels or individual authors and their approach to specific sexual themes, as most of the chapter titles show. Pons interprets at some length: Beverly Farmer's *The Seal Woman* (a Danish woman in a personal crisis finds regeneration in Australia, becomes pregnant and is thus ready to carry on), and Christos Tsiolkas first novel *Loaded* (the not very Australian postmodern condition of a 19 year-old gay Greek Australian). The poems of A.D. Hope, according to Pons and Candida Baker, owe a greater part of their inspiration to Eros. In Hope's "celebration of sensuality" (241) metaphors and classical allusions make the purely sexual acceptable and "palatable" as earthly love (228f.): "Woman ! She is the earth: he digs his grave in her ..." (223). The female body promises visionary knowledge. Thus Hope often uses landscape imagery to describe women. Sex becomes a temporary escape from man's relentless isolation and is in itself a creative activity (235, 240.)

Pons is concerned not only with an emotional void but with sexual abjection, child abuse, self-loathing and incestuous sex acts which become an almost symbolic representation of a corrupt society in *The Tax Inspector* by Peter Cary (Chapter thirteen: "The Angels are not winning"). In addition the fiction of David Malouf, who as Pons admits, hardly uses representations of sex in his writings but presents a world bathed in a homoerotic atmosphere, which he equates with Malouf's homosexuality. This seems a rather problematic approach when Pons explains deep emotional bonds between Malouf's protagonists as follows:

There is always a danger that male bonding might be construed as homosexuality – this must of course be strenuously denied through homophobic statements and attitudes and through the turning of women into sex objects (272).

The danger starts once Pons tries to impose on each male relationship aspects of suppressed homosexual tendencies. Would he simply call them manifestations of deep friendships if the author was not gay? It is almost a little absurd how Pons tries to explain Malouf's reticence in tackling the sexual topic and his own homosexuality in his fiction. Why not presume that Malouf is simply not interested in these topics or finds them unhelpful? (see Knox cited on p. 24). It may be a more valid conclusion that a writer of Malouf's distinction is simply more interested in strong figures of identification for his readers and not interested in representations of sex. Like Patrick White before him, he explores other themes; for example the representation of psyche and imaginative insights through nature imagery. The inspiring chapter ten "Sex Encounters of the Strange Kind" focuses on three novels to concentrate on British colonialism in Australia and a struggle for domination with a paradigm of perverted human relations: Thomas Keneally's *Bring Lars and Heroes*, Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* and Philip Mc Laren's *Sweet Water ... Stolen Land*.

The last three chapters focus on multiculturalism, "of having the exotic at home" (305), i.e. authors of - again Greek - or Chinese origin ("Exotic Pleasures") and indigenous writing ("Blackfella Loving") and the conclusion: "Letting it all Hang out".

What about the relationship between sex and literature? This is what chapter three sets out to explore. Pons starts with a quotation from David Lodge: "Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round" (61) Pons shows how an "array of discursive weapons", i.e. stylistic means like metaphor, understatement and so on, are used to write about the "unwritable".

A bit annoying is the fact that Pons sometimes maintains facts without really elucidating them, as for instance that in Beverly Farmer's novel ancient and modern mythologies converge to assert that the cosmos is both one and multiple, and everything is connected with everything else (185). He sometimes seems to get carried away with his interpretation and forgets his main topic as in the same chapter on *The Seal Woman* where he shows how the major paradigm of death and destruction is represented by blood and water. In this chapter he also asserts that Farmer achieves

a sensuous, organic quality ... which male writing seldom attains, and which appears for instance in the loving attention paid to visual details. Much of it has to do with the use of imagery (190).

This is certainly not a literary trait which is necessarily female.

The study finishes with the voices of the Aborigines before coming to its conclusion. This is a really good chapter which mollified this reader. It is a well-written and perceptive chapter on the representation of sex in Aboriginal literature. Pons makes it very clear that they represent more than "(s)exploitation". He shows how these authors struggle to come to terms with the violation inflicted on their women by white invaders and their own men, too. Romance seems to be out of place here. Pons shows how indigenous authors use magic realism to address topics that are too painful for a realist depiction.

Pons renders many insights lucidly and intelligently to the non-specialist. He would have achieved a long lasting effect if he had used these findings about indigenous literature as the final point of his examination. As it is he states in the conclusion that the study traces an evolution from the "puritanical reticence of the Victorian age to the contemporary explicitness, if not crudity" (341). This "result" is not

exclusively or even typically Australian, which in a way makes his study of AusLit futile. It seems simply wrong if we consider the many Australian authors who would certainly not fit into this scheme (David Malouf to name only one, as Pons has himself shown). Pons' real insight in what authors gain in representing Eros and feelings in general is depicted with the image of Sisyphus and Albert Camus' remark that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (346). Sisyphus knew it was in vain but he still kept on trying to put that rock up the hill. There is not much space for happiness in this image. This is where, according to Pons, "artists come into their own, playing as they do a motor part in expanding our intellectual and emotional understanding of the world ... and this goes for the morality of sexual representations too" (ibid.)

Works cited:

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