

## The Self and the Other Beyond Landscape and Language A review of *Concrete Horizons: Romantic Irony in the Poetry of David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson* by Ruth Barratt-Peacock

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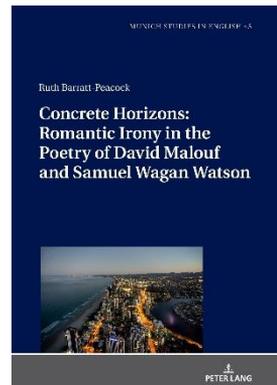
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### Abstract

*Concrete Horizons: Romantic Irony in the Poetry of David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson* by Ruth Barratt-Peacock is a multidimensional study devoted to the poetic output of two contemporary Australian poets. The book is an essential publication in which the main motifs and themes of David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson's poetry are analysed. Moreover, by applying the concept of Romantic irony, Barratt-Peacock develops a new approach towards the poetry of the Antipodes.

**Keywords:** Australian poetry; Romantic irony; Indigenous writing; David Malouf; Samuel Wagan Watson; Ruth Barratt-Peacock

Ruth Barratt-Peacock's *Concrete Horizons: Romantic Irony in the Poetry of David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson* is a recent study, analysing thoroughly the poetic output of two Australian authors. Published in 2020 as the 45<sup>th</sup> issue of *Munich Studies in English*, the book is an attempt to examine the main motifs of David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson's selected poems, using the concepts present in literary Romanticism of the nineteenth century, including Romantic irony.

Barratt-Peacock situates the theoretical aspects of her study within the framework of literary Romanticism in Australia and the model of Romantic irony as a starting point for further analysis. According to the author, the problematic nature of Australian landscape, which is entirely different from the European one, led to what Judith Wright named the "double vision" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, pp. 31-32). This is related to "a sense of dislocation between the environment and the imported language now used to describe it, a gap between the 'experienced' place and the descriptions the language provides," which Ashcroft et al. (2009, p. 161) describe when referring to the concept of (post)colonial place. That specific perspective of the Australian newcomers, who found the English language inappropriate for naming severe conditions and unknown flora and fauna, had an enormous impact on writers and scholars, even the contemporary ones, like Malouf (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, pp. 31-32). It should be noticed that, in terms of literary periods, there was not a recognisable "Australian Romanticism" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 38), although some impact of "Romantic [...] style" could be seen in the "poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centur[y]" (p. 35). However, some scholars introduced by Barratt-Peacock, such as Judith Wright, claim that a short period of "Australian Romanticism" existed, "characterised by a Wordsworthian understanding of the poet's function and an appreciation of the rustic life in nature" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 38). On the other hand, Paul Kane identifies some traces of Romanticism in Australian literature in the motif of "absence of an indigenous romantic movement" (Kane, 1996, p. 5; cf. Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 40). Barratt-Peacock (2020) connects Kane's perception of absence with the concept of Romantic irony, as both focus on "[the] gap between word (consciousness) and object" (p. 40). Thus, the purpose for using the concept of Romantic irony is to create a point of reference "which allows contemporary Australian authors to write about the hybrid subject and the hybrid landscape without the need to resolve its contradictions and layers" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 33).

Barratt-Peacock (2020) begins her examination of the theoretical model of Romantic irony by referring to the Romantic perception of space, defined as "the problem of consciousness and subjectivity," and to the matter of "how the ego can determine itself while at the same time being determined by the Other, or being simultaneously subject and object" (p. 46). The scholar incorporates in her discussion Bärbel Frischmann's (2009, p. 85; cf. Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 48) ideas about Romantic irony as "the process of gaining an understanding" about oneself and the outside world, which cannot be accomplished. Barratt-Peacock (2020) also identifies Romantic irony as a constant process of "deconstruction and construction" that would not have "a final meaning" (p. 49). In her commentary, the critic considers Friedrich Schlegel's concept of Romantic irony as a kind of allegory aiming to represent the gap between abstract concepts and their representation, which is always inadequate (Schlegel 1967, p. 133; cf. Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 54). Barratt-Peacock also comments on Johan Gottlieb Fichte's

“dialectic model” of antithesis, thesis and synthesis, with the last concept identified as opposed to Romantic irony (Fichte, 1975, p. 7, 1965, p. 259; *cf.* Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 55).

In her study, Barratt-Peacock analyses the poetic output of two Australian authors connected with Brisbane – David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson – taking into consideration different contexts of their poems. David Malouf, born in Brisbane in the 1930s, is, to some extent, the descendant of the settlers – his mother was English, whereas his father was an Australian (Barratt-Peacock, p. 65). His literary output as a novelist is mostly connected with postcolonialism, postmodernism and postromanticism (Heinke, 2005, p. 10; *cf.* Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 68). Barratt-Peacock (2020) refers to the statements of other scholars (among others Patrick Buckridge, Vivienne Hamilton, Phillip Neilsen or Bridget Grogan) that tend to classify his works as Romantic or Postromantic, considering such aspects as the sublime, transcendence, nature and myth (pp. 69-71). Samuel Wagan Watson is an Indigenous poet of mixed “Munanjali, Biri Gubba, German and Irish” origin (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 170). Barratt-Peacock (2020) classifies his poetry as mostly concerned with “the hybrid subject, language and place in (sub)urban Australia” (p. 167). Watson is perceived as a poet of the “second generation,” commenting on the complex social reality of Australia in the form of “protest” writing (McCooley, 2017, p. 77; *cf.* Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 179). Indigenous writing is confronted with the problem of liberating itself from the colonial influence: postcolonial writers need to challenge, to some extent, the structures imposed by the colonisers, which can be done via discourse “abrogation” (Griffiths, 1987, p. 15). Placing Watson among the “second generation” of “protest” poets, McCooley (2017, p. 77) emphasises the fact that his poetry portrays “Australia as a place haunted by its own (denied) Indigeneity” as well as presents a distorted image of “popular culture” to expose postcolonial practices. In Watson’s poetry, Barratt-Peacock (2020) identifies irony as “a reaction to social pressures in which relationships between subject/language and subject/world are of central importance” (p. 183).

For the purpose of her study, Barratt-Peacock divides Malouf’s selected poetic output into four different categories, which she then thoroughly examines and interprets. These classifications reflect the main motifs that David Malouf uses in his poems. Named by Barratt-Peacock as “Water,” “Interiors,” “(Sub)urban” and “Of Earth and Clay,” they serve mainly to examine the relationship between Australian landscape and its inhabitants as well as the division of the self and the other, with reference to the concepts present in Romantic literature and Romantic irony (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, pp. 66, 71-72).

The first concept in Malouf’s poetry is water, which holds a special place in Australian culture and forms its island identity (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, pp. 79, 106). As the author argues, water creates the borders of the continent and of individual’s consciousness, which is related to the nation’s integrity (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 79). Related to borders are the symbols of “centre and edge,” which, as Dale and Gilbert notice (1994), Malouf frequently uses to express various interactions “between bodies and landscapes” (p. 86). Throughout her analysis, Barratt-Peacock refers to Schlegel’s ideas about the concept of truth “as the movement between extremes” (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 82) and the motifs present in the literature of the Romantic period, such as the sublime (p. 83). Another important aspect of Barratt-Peacock’s analysis in terms

of Romanticism is the reference to the concept of transcendence; in Malouf's poems, an attempt to achieve transcendence is portrayed through the union between a human being and the other, represented as a sea creature (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, pp. 92, 95).

In the next section, "Interiors," the focal point of Barratt-Peacock's analysis is the problem of "[t]he deconstruction of [...] place," which may be identified either as a straightforward process or "the intrusion of the fantastic into the domestic sphere" (2020, p. 107). In her discussion, the author refers to various works on Malouf's literary output and Schlegel's remarks about the relationship between the self and Other (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 109). An interesting and innovative idea is the introduction of "the Australian Gothic" motif, which was initially associated with Australian bizarre landscape (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 110), to the analysis of grandmother's home in one of the studied poems, in order to emphasise that the house is a place filled with unpleasant childhood memories (pp. 110-111). In her further study, Barratt-Peacock (2020) also mentions the motifs present in English Romantic poetry (by William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge) either to emphasise the ironic elements in Malouf's poetry (p. 112) or to show the "distinction between fancy and the imagination [that] provides a framework for understanding the differences between these two [...] views of language" (p. 114). Another interesting aspect of the analysis of "Interiors" is the author's emphasis on the "Romantic understanding of language as an arbitrary system of signs, of words" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 116) and the poet's inability to return to the innocent perception characteristic of a child. The section on "Interiors" also provides an analysis of the juxtaposition of "tamed" suburbia and wilderness, developed around Schlegel's reflections on "dialectical relationship" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 118) and the ironic aspect of "mythemes," placed in the context of "suburban" landscape (p. 120).

The "(Sub)urban" section contains the author's introductory remarks about Australian suburbs that provide a useful theoretical background for further analysis of Malouf's poems. It should be mentioned here that Barratt-Peacock (2020) adopts a different attitude from those that link Romanticism with "Nature" (p. 123) for the sake of interpreting nature in terms of "Malouf's model of Romantic Irony," as "the detailed poetic expression of lived, everyday experience" (p. 129). Throughout the analysis, some concepts receive special attention, among others a "mythical" union of human beings (associated with order) and wild animals (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 129), as well as the search for transcendence that is not reserved only for particular beings but is "universal" (p. 136) and dreams that share common traits with the sublime experience (pp. 135-136). All these concepts contribute to the Romantic idea of using "language to find the wild and the transcendent" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 141), which is one of the key aspects analysed by the author.

In the last chapter devoted to David Malouf's poetry, "Of Earth and Clay," Barratt-Peacock (2020) explores the relations between body, nature and "the material and the transcendent" (p. 143). One of the most interesting remarks made by the author is the interpretation of the "soil" as a text (pp. 143-144) and "the act of eating" its products as an action that allows the individual to integrate with the Australian continent (pp. 144-145, 148). Barratt-Peacock (2020) indicates that the specific language of the land can be easily understood without speech, in contrast with the English language, which is an alien element brought by the first settlers (p. 148). The author's remarks about the role of different aspects of language present in

Malouf's poems is connected with Friedrich Schelling's concept that associates language with "the living word" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 146). Another significant comment made by the author in her analysis is the comparison of the body to language in terms of their "possibilities and limitations" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 148); with reference to the "Australian identity," the body can change and thus "is never stable, [...] always reaching for a true connection (to land, to sea, to nature, and to ourselves and Others)" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 155).

One of the most important aspects studied by Barratt-Peacock in Watson's poetry is the problem of relationships between the Indigenous people and the settlers' ancestors in Australia, highlighted in "Two Realities, One City." The author emphasises particularly the idea of a hostile colonisation and alien English language brought to the continent (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 191). As an introduction to the analysis of Watson's poems, Barratt-Peacock begins with Bridie McCarthy's concepts of the hyperreal and the Aboriginal Gothic. The former, connected with the postcolonial aspect, may be perceived – with reference to Watson's literary output – as "a fundamental alterity within Australianness, as well as the impossibility of community in postcolonial Australia" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 41). The latter, on the other hand, undermines the dominant voice of "white Australia," making use of "the European Gothic's fascination with transgression" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 194). That aspect is particularly visible in Barratt-Peacock's analysis of Watson's poems, where the elements of Aboriginal Gothic are used to emphasise "a critique of commercialism" (p. 195) and also, to some extent, the irony of "white" people's encounter with "dreamtime figures and Indigenous names" (p. 196). Throughout the analysis of other poems, the author also indicates the specific function of darkness as a metaphor of "Indigenous place[s]" that "exist [...] beyond language" of the colonisers (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 198). Barratt-Peacock (2020) points out that Watson changes the initial use of protest poetry "to create his own particular ironic approach": he uses the Gothic as well as rhetorical irony to portray Australia "as a hydra-headed place of irresolvable tensions and injustices" in order to "find [...] hope" (p. 203). An interesting conclusion is that certain elements (e.g. the past and present and the sacred and the land) are unified and influence each other (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 216).

"Language: Beyond the Embrace of a Twisted Tongue," the next section on Watson's poetic output, is devoted to the issue of tracing relations between human beings, the land and the sacred (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 217). The language in Watson's works is both somehow limited by its conventions and dominated by English "power structures"; these are the matters the poet highlights and comments on (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 217). In her analysis, Barratt-Peacock (2020) offers an interesting juxtaposition of the muse in a female form as the metaphor of "the act of writing in the language of the coloniser" and the possibility that poetry creates to reduce the division of the self and the other (pp. 217-218). These are shown, for example, in a poetic metaphor of absorbing "fumes" that penetrate the speaker's body (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 219). "The act of writing" is also interpreted by the author as "a necessity and a curse" (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 221), connected with the colonial history of language and Watson's "Indigenous heritage," which influence each other (p. 222). Another important aspect of Barratt-Peacock's analysis is the emphasis on Watson's ironic attitude towards the fact that in the land that was marked by death and cruelty, there is a prospect of transcendence and the sacred (2020, p. 231).

The focal point of the last practical chapter “A New Way Forward” is Watson’s ironic approach towards the connection between “writing and place” (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 233). Barratt-Peacock (2020) introduces an idea typical for the poetry of the Old continent, that is, reading as a process in which “word and experience” may be linked (p. 233). The important aspects of the analysis are mainly the problem of cultural indifference that the “non-Indigenous reader[s]” present towards Australia as well as the suspension of postcolonial culture between its mythical and non-spiritual elements (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 236). The ironic element is hidden here in the writing practices in English (Barratt-Peacock, 2020, p. 236). Barratt-Peacock (2020) also identifies Romantic irony in Watson’s poetic output as “an interpretive lens which has been able to reveal the tensions at play in Watson’s poems, and which provides a clearer view of the approach the poet takes in his refusal to offer resolution” (p. 238).

Barratt-Peacock’s book is certainly a multidimensional analysis of contemporary Australian poetry. The study offers a broad historical and cultural background, not only in the theoretical part of the book, devoted to Australian Romanticism and Romantic irony, but also in an introduction to the analyses of particular motifs present in Malouf and Watson’s poems (e.g. the socio-historical perspective on the formation of Australian suburbs or the comments on Australian Aboriginal Literature). In both theoretical and analytical sections, the author refers to abundant research conducted mainly by English- and German-speaking scholars, which increases significantly the work’s critical value and makes it an important contribution to literary studies in general. Barratt-Peacock not only examines thoroughly the main motifs of the poems but also their structure (such as the use of italics, capital letters or punctuation), which makes her analysis comprehensive. The juxtaposition of the two authors, different in terms of their heritage and socio-cultural background, enables the author to take a multidimensional perspective on different concepts present in Malouf and Watson’s poems. However, the abundance of material analysed throughout the book (ca. sixty poems) and the dispersal and replication of several elements in its further parts (e.g. the analysis of “Cuisine” or “An Ordinary Evening at Hamilton”) may disrupt its reception in terms of coherence and distract attention from its main theme (i.e. Romantic irony).

To conclude, Ruth Barratt-Peacock’s book is an important study that offers a deep insight into the poetry of David Malouf and Samuel Wagan Watson. The volume is an interesting exploration of various (literary and non-literary) factors that influence practices of authoring and reading, and offers insightful comments on the contested terrain of authorship. Moreover, the detailed analysis of numerous poems, supported by an extensive theoretical framework, allows for taking a holistic approach towards the main motifs and themes present in the poetry of both authors. An additional advantage of the publication is the adoption of the concept of Romantic irony in the study, which not only is a different perspective in the analysis of contemporary Australian poetry in general, but also may contribute to further studies connected with this field.

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