

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***The Shadow of the Precursor* edited by Diana Glenn, Md Rezaul Haque, Ben Kooyman and Nena Bierbaum (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012)**

*The Shadow of the Precursor* is a collection of essays which began life as papers delivered at one of the legendary Kangaroo Island conferences, which were inaugurated by Syd Harrex when he was Reader in English and Director of the Centre for Research into New Literatures in English at Flinders University. Syd is the dedicatee of this volume, which was edited by four members of the Flinders School of Humanities. They have put together a generous selection of seventeen essays on the topic of influence and intertextuality.

Several of the essays allude to Harold Bloom's book, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and, while anxiety and ambivalence are recurrent themes, most of the essays refer to more recent thinking about intertextuality, drawing especially on Julia Kristeva's use of that term in the context of the post-structuralist idea that every new text enters a network of pre-existing texts and meanings. The notion of the precursor's *shadow* is creatively used in many of the contributions, including attention to the way a writer might want to ensure that their own work 'casts a shadow'. The shadow idea proved to be a fruitful impetus to studies of post-colonial texts, employing the notion of 'writing back' to a whole imperial tradition – or varying that initial account of postcolonial writing with an emphasis on the heterogeneity to be found *within* that imperial tradition.

The essays cover a huge range of material, from the influence of Virgil on Christopher Marlowe (a contribution from Lucy Potter) to Truffaut's cinematic adaptation of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* (by Laura Carroll). They take on an equally large range of approaches to these questions of influence and intertextuality – some look at a writer's relationship to a particular precursor author, like the young Charlotte Brontë's devotion to Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, a very fine contribution by Christine Alexander. Others look at the effect on a writer's work of a whole tradition, such as Iris Murdoch's admiration for nineteenth-century realist novels – which, Gillian Dooley argues, was detrimental to her own novel writing. Others again discover a patchwork of intertexts in a single work, like Russell McDougall's attention to Xavier Herbert's massive novel, *Capricornia*.

In their excellent Introduction the editors describe and justify their arrangement of the essays into three sections. The first section consists of works which accommodate and indeed acknowledge their predecessors – in this section we have Rick Hosking's essay on Kipling and the possible influence on his work of the Australian writer John Lang, and editor Ben Kooyman's account of the current state of Shakespeare films, both productions of the plays and adaptations of their plots and characters. Here, too, is Ralph Spaulding's account of Syd Harrex's poetry in relation to precursors like Dylan Thomas, and to some of his Australian contemporaries, like James McAuley, as well as John McLaren on the 'Irish shadow' on Vincent Buckley's poetry.

The second section contains essays about forms of appropriation or adaptation of precursor texts. Here there is a strong representation of work in Italian studies, including editor Diana Glenn's essay, written with Irene Belperio, about Dante's ambivalent relationship with Ovid in his *Commedia*, and a fascinating essay on the playwright Dario Fo's 'invented quotations' by Luciana D'Arcangeli. Barbara Pezzotti contributes a study of two Sicilian crime writers who claim to have been influenced by their countryman, Pirandello but whose work is, she argues, more like a 'benevolent betrayal'. Here, too, are essays on film

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adaptations – Giselle Bastin on ‘Precursor Texts in the Novel and Film of *Atonement*’ and Laura Carroll on ‘*Fahrenheit 451* as Adaptation’.

In section 3 we find essays which look at more critical forms of adaptation, which amount to *resistance* to the precursor. Janet Wilson, in a discussion of ‘Antipodean Rewritings of *Great Expectations*’, finds that Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* and Lloyd Jones’ *Mister Pip* both reveal problems with the ‘counter discourse’ model of post-colonial writing. In her critical account of Richard Flanagan’s novel, *Wanting*, Gay Lynch finds a discordant relationship being dramatised between various historical texts. Editor Md Rezaul Haque’s essay on Amitav Ghosh’s first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, demonstrates the way in which the novelist’s appropriation of the magical realist style enables him to engage with and subvert the Enlightenment liberal tradition represented by his English-educated Indians. Linda Karell’s account of Louise Erdrich and Native American authorship shows that in this tradition of storytelling, precursors are an integral part of the novel, active presences. In this final essay of the collection, appropriately, the notion of the precursor as shadow is turned on its head by an oral narrative tradition where ‘individualism and mastery’ are alien concepts.

**Susan Sheridan**