

*“A comfortable distance”: Weird Melancholy and Escapism in Casella’s  
The Sensualist*

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**Abstract:** This article deals with Casella’s re-reading of the representation of Sicily as a bucolic land. In his novel *The Sensualist*, he interprets the pastoral and picturesque representation of the Island as a form of escapism from the sterile and dead centre of the outback on which feelings of weird melancholy are projected. Deeply melancholic, its characters have a double feeling of hate towards a colonial past that continues to haunt them due to the lost innocence of the Australian colonial dream which turned into a discourse of violence, and love due to the hope of recreating that lost innocence and optimism and wash away the polluting memories of the past. However, there is no possibility of recreating such an innocence and for the melancholic subject the only way out is to search for it in a land which is spatially and temporally distant. By drawing on Freud and Kristeva, it will also be suggested that Casella seems to suggest that the white subjects of the novel, but also Australia’s society, will always be haunted by their loss of innocence unless they rethink their white identity as fragmented and acknowledge the polluting memories of the past. And as a consequence, they will always need a place like Sicily as a fetish that recreates their fantasy of superiority.

**Keywords:** melancholy, escapism, Sicily, colonialism

The margins have long been a laboratory for a double representation of love and hate, menace and desire or, in other words, for both a monstrous and bucolic, exotic place. However, if the monstrous element of the margins has been the object of psychoanalytic studies from a vast body of literature in relation to the centre’s search for identity, the same cannot be said for its bucolic representation. In this article, I will illustrate the idyllic vision of Sicily in Antonio Casella’s *The Sensualist* as a form of escapism from the “void” of the white characters’ lives, metaphorically expressed by the spatial “centre” of Australia, and as a fetish that will substitute the same void in the attempt at reconstructing a new identitarian unity. In order to explain the above “void”, I will draw on Freud’s and Kristeva’s theories on melancholy and I will point out how the characters in Casella’s novel nurture a double feeling of love and hate towards a lost object (innocence), and how this is projected onto the land in Gothic terms through what can be defined “weird” melancholic symptoms. In brief, I will try to answer the following set of questions: in the novel, has Australia’s bucolic perception of Sicily a psychoanalytic explanation besides the one that this land is nostalgically and simply

beautiful? Does the novel suggest that the bucolic representation stands as a real possibility for the centre to achieve a sort of “identitarian unity”? Or does the centre have to come to terms with a fragmented identity? However, before dealing with these aspects in relation to the novel, I will introduce the literary work itself and how the idea of a land as paradise and home to demonic islanders has developed temporally and geographically.

Antonio Casella migrated to Australia when he was only fifteen and started his writing career deciding not to deal with immigration in his first novel, *Southfalia* (1980), testifying to his desire not to have his work “given the ‘ethnic’ label” but to be “judged on its ‘literary’ merits” (Casella 2008, 143). These cultural and identitarian choices, which remained on the margins of his first novel, became the main themes of his second work. With *The Sensualist*, first published in 1991 and written in an era that can be identified as a period of ambivalent multicultural mimicry,<sup>1</sup> Casella gives voice to a counter-discourse to those ideas accepted by mainstream society and which led the book to enter the literary market as an already “read” text. In an interview about his second novel Casella states:

I would prefer that people concentrate on the book rather than on my background, because in the long run the book has to stand on its own merits. It’s very much about identity, who we are, what we are. [...] The migrant factor is important in one sense but on the other hand it isn’t and *I certainly don’t consider this to be a migrant story*. (McLeod 8; emphasis added)

And, in a 1996 interview granted to Greco Stefania, Casella states that *The Sensualist* develops a sort of “hit-back-at” theme;<sup>2</sup>

There were problems of language and of assimilation. *These days* migrants in Australia are encouraged, *at least at an official level*, to maintain their culture. In the 1960s you were meant to assimilate; that is blend in with the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture. My reaction was to assimilate externally, but *to resist at an internal level*. [...] a contrary force worked in me, that is the desire to affirm my Italian origins and in the process, *to hit back at a socio-political environment which I considered antagonistic towards my culture*. [...] In *The Sensualist* I came out of my cultural closet and I laid bare the world of my ancestors [...]. (Greco 185-86; emphasis added)

Sharply critical of assimilation, Casella implicitly points out that the problem is not specific only to the 1960s. The encouragement of multiculturalism takes place in “[t]hese days [in the early and late 1980s when the novel is set and was written, respectively, and in the 1990s, the year of the interview being 1996] at an official level”. Multiculturalism and assimilation have more in common than might be supposed at first sight.

Casella’s counter-discourse is developed by describing the last three days of the main character’s life. Like Christ’s death and resurrection, Nick-Nicola’s is a journey of rediscovery of his hybrid identity that unhinges whatever binary oppositions were promoted by assimilationist, fake multicultural and even colonial policies. Besides rediscovering the cultural background of the past through the main character’s nostalgia, Casella’s second novel points to the stereotypical double representation of his Sicilian island as a demonic and bucolic world serving the definitions of the “centre”.

Sicily, and the South, have always been an anthropological and historical laboratory for the definition of a “centre”, whether figured as Europe, Northern Italy or the Antipodes. And each time, the plethora of representations from Cicero to Edrisi (“pearl of the century for abundance and beauty”), and travel writers such as Newman (“view was the nearest approach to seeing Eden”), has found a common ground in constructing an exotic perception of the Mediterranean island as a “terrestrial paradise” (Hart 213). Others such as Frances Elliot, however, reduced and dehumanised its inhabitants to the level of “demons” (Hart 214). Besides a body of works including novels, diaries,<sup>3</sup> the literature of anthropological and sociological case-studies<sup>4</sup> and movies,<sup>5</sup> a magazine such as the Milanese *Illustrazione Italiana* perfectly illustrates those cultural forms that contributed to this double representation of the island. Thanks to its photo reporters the weekly illustrated magazine, running from 1873 to 1962 and addressed to the upper-middle class, provided excellent source-material encouraging an illusory idea that accommodated the pastoral aspect of the South within the bourgeois aesthetic framework of Italianness—“white” and middle class. Its inhabitants were represented in a bucolic innocent timeless setting, nostalgically trapped in the past in which poverty and social disadvantage were romanticised and deprived of any political power. For example, in the illustration entitled “I figli di Capri” (16 July 1882) the South became the “stage”<sup>6</sup> on which a bucolic experience was performed by the “charming and indolent sons of Capri”, those “[...] dirty children, half covered with rags, [...] sitting in various picturesque poses and enjoying the breeze and the sun [living] on sweet idleness” (*Illustrazione Italiana* 39). The climate determinism behind the above representation also resulted in “the sweet idleness of the beautiful southern climate [which] takes away both your energy and your will, leaving only a desire for the pure country air, for sleep and love” (*Illustrazione Italiana* 38). The picturesque expressed the middle-class frame of mind distancing the uncultivated and, yet, perceiving the South as a place away from chaos and civilisation where spiritual recovery was and still is possible for Northern people only. The South had become the subject of those paintings which were “necessary ornament[s] of our drawing rooms.” (qtd in Dickie 132)<sup>7</sup>

The picturesque promoted by the above Italian magazine—as well as Lombroso’s studies, and paintings (for example Salvator Rosa’s)—was the same as in British arts such as travel literature, paintings<sup>8</sup> and literary works from which Australia’s perception of Sicily partly stemmed. The bucolic mode and the Sicilian type image are part of a cultural tourism exoticising the “native informants” safely located “outside” the nation—so as to dilute their unsettling past<sup>9</sup> as well as disempowering them by means of a sentimentalising strategy (Hatzimanolis 147). The “idyllic” landscapes of the pastoral mode (spring/summer; song performances; never-ending love; lack of danger) served to represent the country-life of shepherds as “simple”, innocent and carefree, yet overlooking the difficulty of their labour.<sup>10</sup> Such a perception of the Island as a lost Eden is shared by reviewers and popular culture alike and associated, through an exoticising process, to ideas of primitiveness, savageness, and cultural entrapment in the past.<sup>11</sup> This is implicitly asserted by *The Volcano*, in which the second generation Australian-Sicilian writer Venero Armano is well aware of the idyllic representation of the Sicilian Island. In fact, the exotic reading of the pastoral mode is subverted in his novels since Sicily is not presented as a romantic land of idleness or easiness. In the bucolic scene of the encounter between Emilio and Desideria, the disruptive element of the latter’s enchanting Medusa face features an everlasting love. Besides, the same idyllic landscape is in sharp contrast to a land bringing about oppression and death. As for Casella’s *The Sensualist*, it is worth mentioning two reviews suggesting that the novel entered Australia’s literary market as an already-read text. On the one hand, Patricia Rolfe’s review in which she states that “Nicola Amedeo likes listening to disgruntled immigrants, mostly from his native Sicily; they remind him how lucky he has been. Amedeo sees himself as a

hungry young savage who has become a top dog in Australia” (Rolfe 98-99); on the other hand, Josephine Barcelon’s review in which she defines Nick’s early childhood as “exotic” (Barcelon 62). These reviews testify to the representation of Sicily as an exotic land and its inhabitants as primitive, simpletons and savages.

Casella’s *The Sensualist* is well informed of this double representation, which is embraced by his Anglo-Celtic characters, specifically Florence and Desmond. On the one hand, in the letter to her sister Joyce written while visiting Sicily in the 1970s, Florence depicts the countryside as “quite inspiring” (Casella, *The Sensualist* 88), with “more arrogance than a beauty queen” (88) while its people are “dull and sedentary”, “without style, without energy, closed and obtuse”, even though they are “inheritors of millennia of noble civilisations” (87). Flo’s letter vividly recalls travel literature, which often adopted both an epistolary structure lending credibility to its content and an ethnographic approach. Hers is an essentialised backward Sicily that Nicola “left early enough in his life to have absorbed so little of ... [its] depression and squalor” (87), and which she depicts in opposition to Australia, the fair-go land where Nick became a “top dog”.

On the other hand, Desmond pictures the Sicilian island of WWII as the cradle of an ancient and great civilisation and, therefore, only in mythical and exotic terms:

“I’ve been to our cultural roots,” he said, “I’ve trodden the ground where began the origins of Western civilisation,” [...] “it’s a feeling ... a feeling ... it can’t be described” (178).

He spoke with a mixture of genuine passion and civilized condescension of “high, broad foreheads of Greek figures and eyes that seemed to look at you out of classic marble statues”. (21)

The direct reference to the Greek origins of Western civilisation and of Australia—as Lombroso’s narration of Italy after the unification—aims at ambivalently assimilating what was perceived as connected to and compatible with “white” culture.

Nevertheless, Casella re-reads this ambivalent fabrication suggesting the exotic understanding of the island as a form of escapism by the white characters populating the novel, and redefines through the margins the centre’s continuous struggle for identity. In this light, Desmond’s own words convey the feelings of a modern Ulysses, as he sees himself (290), when he refers to being “trapped by time, and the physical space that encloses us, while the imagination free-ranges through other times and other spaces. [...] We all want to be someone else, something else, somewhere else: the somewhere else of our dreams” (178). His desire to live in a somewhere-else place is shared by other characters of the novel, such as Joyce and her mother, Millie, who are enraptured by his stories of the Mediterranean island. Indeed, Joyce escapes from a feeling of imprisonment by marrying Nicola, the Sicilian shepherd who reminds her of the bucolic innocence of her uncle’s stories. However even for Florence, who does not feel the same connection to Sicily as the rest of the family, the Mediterranean island is still a “paradise” which, though only temporarily, overpowers her and on which she projects those feelings of loneliness associated with the Australian outback of her childhood from which she escapes:<sup>12</sup> “And yet its white stone ridges that remind me of desiccated bones are as lonely as our outback” (88).

But what are these characters really escaping from? What does the outback mean for them? At first one might think that these characters all desire to escape from a Gothic outback that

can be described with the same words Gerry Turcotte uses to define its perception by the first colonisers: “a grotesque space, a land peopled by monsters” (1). However, if we take into consideration the emotional terms used to convey its “imprisonment, claustrophobia, and emptiness” (Casella 2008, 290), its “desolation” (4), “heat and thirst” (177), the immensity of its changeless land (176), its isolation and the overpowering sunlight which “does something to your brain ...” (177),<sup>13</sup> and the “silences” of unseen presences (4), we can assume the function of the Gothic to be one that does not simply mirror the features of the outback but rather a melancholic projection of deeper and uncanny identitarian truths that are wilfully disavowed. The Gothic perception is one of the symptoms of melancholic subjects which serves to build a “comfortable distance between themselves and that space of red earth and blue sky” (293). In this framework, at least as far as Casella’s characters are concerned, escapism seems to be a consequence of melancholia and the easy way out to silence uncomfortable truths.

In order to understand the Gothic as a symptom of melancholy and unveil what is hidden behind, it is useful to investigate the nature of this sensibility imprinted on the landscape. For this reason, I will briefly recall Freud’s theory of melancholia and situate it in relation to the first colonisers and their connection to the outback, since the latter is a discursive *locus* of paramount importance to Australia’s search for identity. In his essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud defines melancholy as the psychic process of those subjects that harbour unconscious ambivalent feelings of love and hatred towards the lost object. The melancholic manifests this loss through self-hatred which means that the ego becomes poor and empty and has the function of disguising the above ambivalent feelings. In order to repair “this loss in fantasy” (Thurschwell 91), the melancholic introjects it (a shadow is cast on the ego) and puts at bay his/her own feelings of guilt. Yet, as a consequence of the above introjection, the melancholic subject brings the lost object back to life and starts being haunted by it.

It is not inappropriate to put Freud’s melancholic subject in relation to Kristeva’s idea on melancholy. On the one hand, Kristeva claims that the love/hate feelings towards the lost object ensure an aggressiveness towards oneself up to the point of thinking that because “that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself” (11). However the death drive, “overshadowed by the fear of losing the object” (25), leads the subject away from suicide and towards a new “unity” in sadness and melancholia. However, this new unity is still lived as a continuous unconscious struggle (as the novel suggests). In the light of this, escapism represents the way out from the struggling “unity” of the melancholic subject who tries to come to terms with the love/hate feelings towards a lost object by re-living and resurrecting the past innocence.

The novel provides several examples in support of its characters’ melancholic projections onto the outback as a symptom of dual feelings and their perception of Sicily as an innocent land to mentally escape to. Besides, it continuously reminds us of the struggle to cope with a fragile identitarian unity even for future generations: to the tragedies and creeping secrets of Australia’s (colonial) life in the outback, the white characters and the reader alike are continuously asked to lend their ears. This struggle is mirrored in the novel through Nick who can be considered a “transvestite” Anglo-Australian subject. His experiences are full of silences that substitute what is absent: “spectres” (299) claiming their very existence. Nick is haunted by those displaced silences of a past he does not give voice to; silences return as realised metaphors or, in other words, attempts at realising what is absent through personification or objectification, what is untranslatable or unspeakable: “the sleepy silence around” (22), “pockets of uncomfortable silence” (73), “silence is the cruellest thing” (229),

“silence threatens” (261), “the silence of the big house” (62), “listen to silence” (83), “frightened of scraping against it [quiet]” (174), “filling the silence” (180). It is no coincidence that these silences are related to Nick’s work in the bush where he “cleared thousands of acres, thought nothing of it” (297), as happened in the colonial era, and thus inviting the “white” subjects of the novel to listen to those “silences”. For the “white” subject, those silences represent the “loss” of both innocence and a “certain kind of colonial optimism”; a loss conveyed through “weird melancholy” (Gelder 117) and resembling a ghost story. The outback is the locus of the decentred “white” subject; a place of encounter where some identities are “erased” and others risk erasure. Ken Gelder, in his essay “Australian Gothic”, claims that the first colonisers and explorers projected feelings of enclosure, void and entrapment onto the landscape as symptoms of the loss of innocence resulting from the violence of the colonial project for which even future generations were doomed to pay (115-23). In the same way, in Casella’s novel, the connection with the past is testified to by two narrative elements. Firstly, the colonial violence which is evidenced through the social properties of the vertical and hierarchical language used to describe the outback and the white-black encounter—an encounter epitomised by the bush-garden opposition, the aristocratic symbol of the roses as a colonial flower and the use of past participles such as “reshaped”, “altered” (76), “violated and subdued” (182); secondly, the fact that the Anglo-Celtic characters are made to live part of their lives in the outback in order to link their family history to the colonial past in a cause-effect relationship with respect to their own actions will recall, though only partly, those of the first colonisers. However, Casella’s characters’ melancholy is more complex than Ken Gelder’s analysis of the colonisers since they try to reconstruct in their fantasy the feelings of innocence through an escapist imprinting on the Sicilian island of those lost traits of the colonial project.

As mentioned above, the violence of the colonial project, which still articulates anxieties over questions of identity and a subconscious intergenerational guilt, is conveyed through the metaphorical opposition between the garden and the bush, structurally expressed by the conjunction “but” in the following description of the Hathaways’ life in the 1930s on the outback station:

There [Binji Cross], the elements conspired to devastate the land. All morning the wind tore over the flats and bent the trees so that they stood uniformly on an incline. Further south, in Greenough, the reclining trees were a sight that characterized the area. Then, with the midday stillness, the land rolled on a float of dust as the sun became unmerciful.

But the station at Binji Cross had a garden too. It was a tiny garden with a latticed fence and she-oaks planted along the eastern and western edges to stop the winds. It reassured her [Joyce] in the mornings, when she looked out from the veranda to that drum-roll landscape of hump chasing hump to the furthest horizon, to know that she could counter it with intimacy, with the familiar smell of roses. The roses more than anything else reassured her. (176)

The garden at Binji Cross station with its “intimacy” and “familiar smell” recalls the safeness of civilisation against the bush which is, on the contrary, inhabited by “arrogant living things” (76), “impenetrable”, “solitary, stoical” (182) and which is doomed to be “reshaped”, “altered” (76), “violated and subdued” (182).

Even the flora of the two spaces suggests this opposition: roses, together with daffodils, typical Western flowers which are defined as the “aristocrats” of the garden (Holmes 160;

Jones 34, 36), and considered quintessentially English,<sup>14</sup> are opposed to the hakeas and blackboys of the bush. The extension of the *metaphoricity* of the garden is confirmed by the she-oaks, typical Australian bush-trees that on Binji Cross station are made part of its flora and tamed. In fact, they are “*planted along* the [...] edges to stop the winds” (Casella 176; emphasis added) so as to “impose order on a chaotic environment” (Tracy 10). As William Elliot claimed at the beginning of the last century, “should indigenous trees be planted, they should not be grouped as though they had grown up naturally, but planted singly and allow so much space to develop that they would be at once recognised as having come under the dominion of art.” (23) Through the flattening of the landscape’s humpy aspect and the fencing of its vastness—as Thomas Turner’s water colour *Albion House, Augusta* (1836) perfectly illustrates—the garden not only shows the perpetuation of the past colonial violence but also works, in a setting that bespeaks loneliness and courage, as a spatial and epistemic metaphor for an identity still in the making: civilisation, racial and class superiority, progress, good citizenship and Western cognitive frameworks.

The implications of the colonial land-clearing are testified to by Joyce’s parents who, on the one hand, reiterate the colonisers’ attitude and, on the other hand, are—both themselves and their children—doomed to pay for the past. As Paul Carter claims, the land-clearing signifies the colonisers’ unwillingness to communicate with the natives (6). An incommunicability resulting in a substitution of

a new silence for the old one. In fact, the “silence” that is attributed to the ancient landscape is an important rhetorical weapon in the silencing process [...] The lie of the land is associated with a noise that must be silenced. To inhabit the country is to lay rest its echoes. And these strategies do not belong uniquely to remote episodes in the history of European imperialism [...] they continue to be the traumatic weapons we use to quieten down the voices of the old ground. (8)

The dispossession of a land that Aboriginal communities have inhabited for more than forty thousand years involves an identitarian erasure and silencing—which does not occur through death necessarily—of what was perceived as an already vanished race, at least from the dominant perspective. An attitude towards Aborigines which persists in the novel. Besides being culturally stereotyped as lazy (Casella 176), their presence on the station is a nameless one or occurs through English names reflecting, ironically, of how little importance their history and identity were regarded by Joyce’s father’s, Cecil:

But Dad’s biggest success came with the Aborigines. Cecil Hathaway’s Aborigines were relatively well-treated, worked hard and, most importantly, stayed with him. His best friend was an older Aborigine they called Len. That was a name of convenience standing for something else, although what that something else was Dad never bothered to find out; his regard did not extend that far. (177)

The natives were treated in a similar way by Joyce’s mother. Although the reader is told, through Joyce’s confessions to her psychiatrist Dr Camberwell, that

she was positively fond of Aboriginal children and felt very protective towards them. With the adults she was reserved, distant, but never mocking or patronizing as were most of the whites.

[...] the very fact that she feared them implies a respect for their culture that was missing among the whites those days [,] (47-48)

When she drives away those natives begging at their door, because “you’ll always have them back otherwise ” (293), it appears that her fear has nothing to do with a respect for their culture. Sympathetic as it first might have seemed, her behaviour reveals a compromise between a philanthropic and a utilitarian approach. In fact, the way of life of those Aborigines that beg at her door and her standard of life and privileged position are closely colonially interconnected consequences.

The burden of this incommunicability and past colonial atrocities results in complete and utter desolation. The narrator registers his characters’ fragmentation and identitarian sterility as one strictly linked to the outback: “A country that still mourned its sparse down of she-oaks and salmon gums; a landscape that listened for the music of black-boys played like zithers by the easterlies. And the devastated land marked the desolation of men and women.” (4) Living in “that space of red earth and blue sky” has profound negative consequences: Joyce’s mother dreams of moving to Melbourne and eventually commits suicide; in addition, she shows a lack of interest in the garden and its roses which, on the one hand, stands for her dysfunctional family (since she will have an affair with an Aboriginal man and bear him a child) and, on the other hand, for the failure of the civilising project; Cecil is trapped in nostalgia and does not get along with his wife; Florence couldn’t care less about the station as she says in her letter to Joyce: “And you know that neither of us could muster up enough attachment to the country to keep Dad’s station in the family” (Casella 88); and Joyce fears the outback which, Casella states in an interview, “wasn’t hers, she was not part of it and didn’t establish the important bond with her childhood” (McLeod 8). It is no surprise that her feelings are conveyed by the metaphor of those “windows [...] forever recreating themselves, projected a few paces ahead. For some who dare cross that threshold [...] it does not take long for the outside to become the inside, for new walls to come up, for new windows to frame the space and shut them in again” (289).

Even the city, where Joyce desires to live, is another colonial “encounter” ambivalently defining the white subject’s identity against the land—“a new city [is built] on the banks of this old, curling river” (271)—and therefore haunted by the past:

[Joyce] has entered the narrow King Street towards the forsaken deadness of St George’s Terrace. The offices have been vacated for the weekend. Tall, identically rectangular, identically smooth-surfaced in glass and steel, they look like upright coffins.

[Nella] searches straight back down King Street, towards the ghostly terrace buildings she was glad to leave behind. Her eyes rise to the skyline pierced by the phantom buildings. Nella’s imagination takes to fossicking among the crevices and nooks.

[...] There is so much [Joyce] wanted to confess, but there’s nobody. The giant ghosts of the ghostly city are left behind. (146, 147)

The representation of the Australian city with its hauntings seems to unhinge Florence’s opposition between the Sicilian landscape and the modern cities with which she feels a deeper identitarian connection.

The time of the novel writing proves the above intergenerational guilt. One has to keep in



mind that both the colonisers and Casella's characters reproach, but only unconsciously, the colonial project for its violence; their disavowal is functional to avoid those uncanny aspects that would deconstruct their idea of whiteness deeply connected to the bush, or in other words its mateship legend, its fair-go value, and the egalitarianism of the colonial project. This historical disavowal is part of Australia's search for identity in general. Not only is it typical of Casella's characters for it haunts their personal history at different times—the 1930s, the 1970s and the present time of narration—but also when one takes into consideration those documents that, even in a multicultural period, have stressed a rigid set of shared values which makes up the “essence” of being Australian, and either suppressed those traumatic founding moments grounded on antagonism and barbarity or avoided admitting any intergenerational guilt (Hage 70-73; Mcleay 42-43; Goldsworthy 219). Among these documents, one might quote from the government's 1982 white paper, *Multiculturalism for all Australians: our Developing Nationhood*, aimed at “mirroring” a homogeneous dominant culture, to Howard's several speeches, among which the 1997 “Address at the Launch of ‘Multicultural Australia: the Way Forward’” where he states that Australia is “a projection and outpost, if you like, of the best of Western civilisation in this part of the world” (Howard 3).

In conclusion, as is clearly argued in the novel, the “comfortable distance” kept from the outback is an emotional and psychological distance maintained from the “dead centre” which epitomises an interior void, a condition of loneliness, a lost innocence. The idea of a sterile centre metaphorically suggesting an uncanny identity is conveyed by the connection between Joyce's identitarian “confusion” and “sterility” (3) and the land where she lived her childhood—unsettling elements already present in the Prologue to the novel and resembling T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In this light, as long as for Casella's characters the centre remains the only form of national self-determination (the reiteration of colonial discourses), the only identity possible is paradoxically the one uncannily expressed through metaphors of other spaces where innocence can be melancholically reconstructed. Taking it further, one might speculate that unless the white subjects of the novel rethink their white identity as fragmented, and acknowledge the polluting memories of the past, they will always be haunted by their loss of innocence. And as a consequence, they will always need a place like Sicily as a fetish that recreates the fantasy of innocence. After all, Freud claims that only by through accepting those ambivalent feelings can the melancholic subject “loosen the stranglehold that the dead other seems to hold over” the self (Thurschwell 91).

## Notes

1. While (unconsciously) supporting difference, “Whiteness” simultaneously and ambivalently claims its erasure in the name of sameness. An ambivalence that Bhabha has well expressed in his theory of colonial mimicry with its uncanny implications and that, as a result of the relation between colonialism and multiculturalism sketched in the previous section, can be seen as an expression of Australian multiculturalism. Bhabha states that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*, in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.” (Bhabha 122) As is clear from this, colonial mimicry/multiculturalism is an “ironic” compromise, it manifests an irreducible ambivalent—not contradictory—form of identification; an ideological ambivalence between sameness and difference, “almost the same, but not quite”, revealing the shaky foundations of

stereotypes but indispensable both to put anxiety at bay and to sustain the discourse of power.

2. In *The Sensualist*, a well-off builder named Nick—defined as a “top dog” by Australians and a “kangaroo” by Italians (already a diasporic subject, even though he is not aware of it yet)—is married to an Anglo-Australian woman and has two children, Nella and John. The novel is divided into five parts (following the classical division of Greek drama) and develops in three days—from Friday to Sunday—recalling Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. In fact, at the age of fifty-four, Nick experiences the “death” of his present identity and the uncanny return of his past through ghosts and projections of his mind. The projection of a pair of black trousers is the uncanny element through which the truths of the past (that his uncle Saru is his biological father and that his grandfather shot his mother) come back. However, these truths bring about his awareness that he is a foreigner living “on leased land”; that is, in a *liminal* space.

3. Violence, sexism, jealousy, laziness and superstition were part of a stereotypical representation of Sicilians expressed by travellers such as Creuzé de Lesser, the Scottish Patrick Brydone and W.H. Thompson—just to name a few. P.D. Smecca also argues that travellers and sociologists gave completely different visions even of a Sicily visited or studied in the course of the same years (98-104).

4. Among the anthropologists promoting the idea of the atavistic criminals the most famous was Cesare Lombroso with his works *In Calabria* (1862) and *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alle discipline carcerarie*, vol. 3 (1896-97). Other *meridionalists*, to recall Said’s orientalist and tell them apart from the *meridionali* who stood for Southern people (Gaetano Salvemini and Napoleone Colajanni), were Alfredo Niceforo and Giuseppe Sergi. The former drew a connection between the Hamitic stock of North Africa and Southern Italians and the latter claimed that Southerners had an ethnic predilection for criminality.

5. As far as movies are concerned, although the Latin lover has been associated with Italian men, as in films such as *Roman Holiday*, its threatening “excesses” are still geographically displaced in an attempt at exorcising them (Hart 214, 222-223). The image of the Latin lover, widely perceived as an Italian male prerogative, was linked to the less developed part of Mediterranean societies when it came to its negative aspects: men were earthier in their passions, sexist, ignorant, patriarchal controlling men of the feudal period; and, consequently, women passive and doomed to the domestic sphere. Movies and fictions such as *The Godfather* trilogy, *I carabinieri*, *Squadra antimafia*, respectively depict a land that can be represented only by the Mafia, inhabited by stereotyped ignorant Sicilians or a passive society in need of an external hero to free it from the Mafia. Only recently, directors such as Ferzan Ozpetek and Giuseppe Tornatore have paved the way to dismantling such stereotypes, respectively in *Le fate ignoranti* (2001) and *L'uomo delle stelle* (1995).

6. In *Orientalism* Said used the theatre as a metaphor for the epistemological and ontological essentialist reading of *the other/the puppet*: “On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe” (63).

7. Juxtaposed to a paradisiacal and pastoral setting the *Illustrazione Italiana* gave an orientalist representation of the so-called Sicilian types having Middle-Eastern features. Alfonso Muzii’s plate (“Sicilian Types”, 11 October 1885), produced during the cholera epidemic, depicts Sicilians as second-class Italians in contrast to the cultural classical origins symbolised by the remains of the Temple of Olympian Jupiter in Syracuse in the upper-left corner (*Illustrazione Italiana* 234). The plate fostered the image of the uncivilised Sicilian in essentialist terms: violent, criminal, lazy, sexist, jealous and superstitious. This perception was not foregrounded exclusively by *Illustrazione Italiana*. As for Sicilians’ proneness to

violence, Cesare Lombroso formulated the theory of the “born criminal”, namely the assertion that race shaped social behaviour. Sicilians were framed within a discourse of authenticity with the aim of justifying the civilising mission of the “white” towards the inferior “black” after the unification of Italy in 1871: “It is to the African and eastern elements (except the Greeks), that Italy owes, fundamentally, the greater frequency of homicides in Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia, while the least occur where the Nordic races predominate (Lombardy)” (30). However, in order to save the concept of the superiority of Aryan culture Lombroso provided a floating and slippery representation of the South to ambivalently assimilate what was compatible with “white” culture and reject the rest—its inhabitants. Practically speaking, he provided a geographical mapping of ethnic violence that revealed those living in Catania and its surroundings to be the least criminal in crimes of blood “only”. Linked to the historic fact that this part of the Island had been the cradle of Greek civilisation, Lombroso, similarly to *Illustrazione Italiana*, preserved the roots of Northern Italy’s Aryan civilisation. Said, discussing the “narrated” meaning (a concept useful for a postmodernist reading) of the past, refers to Martin Bernal’s work *Black Athena* where Bernal argues that whenever Greek civilisation was linked to southern or eastern cultures it was resignified as “Aryan” (*Culture and Imperialism*16).

8. Examples of the influence of the influence of Rosa’s picturesque are the *voyages pittoresques* devoted to Sicily, such as *Sicilian Scenery* (1823) by the water-colour painter Peter De Wint (1748-1849) and *Sicily, its scenery and its antiquities* (1853), by William Henry Barlett.

9. Many novels and newspaper articles gave a zoological, barbaric and primitive image of the Meridionali. For example, O’Grady pictures the North-South relationship in Italy where Southern Italians are seen as “animals” to be looked at and studied (O’Grady 10-12). Another example is J. Waten’s “The Knife” in which the Meridionali are depicted as people solving problems by pulling out a knife. Newspaper articles played a great role in the de-humanising process of Sicilians. In the article “Aliens in the North” the population in the sugar fields was described as follows: “the present alien influx was largely Sicilian—not of the desirable class of Northern Italian, who had participated in the development of the sugar industry” (*The Brisbane Courier*, Wednesday 3 June 1925, p. 7); after the killing of two men, Mafia quarrels between Sicilians and Calabrians were spoken of, and a request emitted for more policemen for “closer supervision of the movements of all Sicilians and Calabrians in the area, particularly new arrivals”—“More Police May Go to North” (*The Courier-Mail*, Monday 7 March 1938, p. 2). The matter was examined in other works: in J. Lyng’s *Non-British in Australia. Influence on Population and Progress* he also dealt with the idea of the two races in Italy (Moraes-Gorecki 313); the Ferry Report (1925) distinguished Southern Italians as “the Chinese of Europe” and Northern Italians as “the Scotchmen of Italy” (Andreoni 86), which was to be the basis for the *Amending Immigration Act* in mid-1925 enabling the government to exclude those perceived as difficult to assimilate (Thompson 76). To the misconceptions of the Report answered the Prime Minister S. M. Bruce who disagreed with the idea of the incapability of assimilation of most Europeans and stated that, while there was no wish to encourage non-British immigration, Europeans would not be excluded (Dutton 52). One could ask whether non-encouragement has no common ground with discrimination.

10. For instance, in *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009) Armano’s *The Volcano* is presented through an excerpt from part four of his novel, “Sicilian Bandits”. One would have expected that a piece describing the “*abandonamento*” (*sic*) or the pre-emigration context (311) which had explained part of the character’s life in Australia, or the disillusionment with respect to Australian (false) egalitarianism (336-345), or the work on the Exhibition Station (464), just to name a few, had been chosen. Conversely, the chosen excerpt presents Australia as the land of “gifts” in which, on the one hand, the characters of

Santino and Antonio epitomise the dualistic romantic and violent qualities of Sicilian men and, on the other hand, Australia is a looking-forward country, modern, caring, in opposition to the migrant's homeland of starvation and backwardness. Although an excerpt can never fully give honour to a work of art, the ironic meaning of following quotation is grasped only when put in relation to the parts framing it: "these hot, hilly, night-time thoroughfares and avenues held the real gifts he'd earned by coming to this country. A people in constant forward motion; a population ready to propel itself into the next available party not to mention their all-too-plausible good future. The sight of his wife's new dress billowing against a sign that read 'EAT while you SLIM. Don't starve to reduce: BioChemic Laboratories (Aust), COMPLETE TREATMENT ONLY 47/6' lifted his spirits. Here you could worry about how fat you were getting, not how emaciated because of starvation, so why worry about the future?" (qtd in N. Jose (ed.) 1332). Even in a recent opportunity for a multicultural approach in compiling an anthology, "differences" are disavowed and "diversities" foregrounded. The chosen text becomes a new text, one of representation according to one's "positionality".

11. Among terms with racist implications such as "dull-witted" and "primitive" to refer to Italians, *The Bulletin* also termed them "bucolic", substantiating the idea of a simple, pastoral life in Italy (21 February 1907, pp. 6-7). Also the "developmental literary models" (Gardaphè and Tamburri) used to categorise "ethnic" writings in what can be defined *integrationist anthologies* (Markus 116-22), supported the idea of a linear development from primitive ("bucolic") forms of art to more sophisticated ones, which were thought to come with assimilation to the civilised host country.

12. Florence prefers the big cities to the outback, as Australia to Sicily. The connection between Sicily and the outback and her need to escape these worlds goes without saying: "As for myself, I prefer the more vibrant throb of a modern city.[...] The old cradle smells too much of must and cemeteries. I shall spend a few days in Paris." (Casella *The Sensualist* 88)

13. Roslynn Haynes specifies that what is valid for the desert was and still is for the bush, although to a lesser degree. In fact, the more the bush is cleared the more the Gothic comes to be associated with the desert, the only remaining wilderness (114).

14. *The Royal Readers* was a collection of books for children widespread in all British colonies and, thus, contributing to the colonisation not only of the new-found land but of the mind of its inhabitants (Tiffin 60-61, 70). Although Tiffin applies this to the Caribbean, it is also valid for those who descended from colonisers elsewhere, as a way of looking at the "new" land and naming it from a hegemonic perspective.

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