

*From Notebook to Novel and from Diary to Dante:
Reading Robert Dessaix's Night Letters*

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Abstract: This paper has developed out of a larger work in progress, which focuses on representations of Italy in contemporary Australian fiction and non-fiction prose. This larger project aims to add to an established body of work on travel writing by considering Australian texts that describe Australian travel in Italy, Italian people and Italian places. In this paper, I will specifically focus on the representations of Italy in Robert Dessaix's novel *Night Letters* (1996). My paper will explore the relationship between the writer's actual journey in Italy and that of the creative work's main character. The novel offers the protagonist's account in the form of letters, which describe his travel from Switzerland across Northern Italy to Venice. I will begin by briefly outlining the Italian itinerary followed by Dessaix that would eventually inspire the novel. I will then explore the relationship between Dessaix's notebooks recording his two journeys in Italy and the literary accomplishment of *Night Letters*. My aim is to show ways in which an itinerary becomes a story, a complex narrative. Reference will be made to factual accounts and descriptions in the author's own diaries with an analysis of their generative role as key sources for the fictional work. This will be done through a close reading of particular passages, in the diaries and in the novel, concerning the same event. A comparative analysis of the notebooks and *Night Letters* can show that Dessaix's diary entries relating to Italian places are woven into the fictional fabric of the 'night letters' according to a unifying principle.

Keywords: Australian travel in Italy. The representations of Italy in Robert Dessaix's novel *Night Letters* (1996). The relationship between Dessaix's notebooks recording his two journeys in Italy and the literary accomplishment of *Night Letters*.

This paper has developed out of a larger work in progress, which focuses on representations of Italy in contemporary Australian fiction and non-fiction prose. The overall concern of my research consists in exploring Australian ways of approaching and responding to Italy in journeys made by a specific category of travellers: writers and artists who have left a record of their experience in creative works from the early 1990s. I have chosen to focus on the representations of Italy in Robert Dessaix's *Night Letters* (1996), an epistolary novel divided into three sections that mark the stages of the protagonist's train journey from Switzerland, across Northern Italy to Venice. The narrator-protagonist is an Australian man called R., who has recently been diagnosed with an incurable disease. Every night for twenty consecutive nights, R. writes letters

home to a friend from a hotel room in Venice. These letters encompass his whole journey.

Night Letters presents two narrative levels: the first unfolds through the protagonist R.'s recollection of the journey from Zurich to Venice, through his nightly letter-writing. The second level consists in narrations by two other characters: Rachel, an English woman in her sixties or seventies whom R. meets on a train, and, secondly, a German professor, Eschenbaum, who is a guest in the same hotel as R. in Venice. Rachel and Eschenbaum's narrations can be defined as pure story-telling.¹ As it is appropriate to an epistolary novel, *Night Letters* has a fictive editor, Igor Miazmov, who provides a very brief preface to the letters as well as endnotes to each chapter. His derogatory evaluation of the letters stages Dessaix's wink at a postmodern, metafictional use of parody.

In an interview Dessaix kindly granted me in Hobart in February 2007, he reviewed the autobiographical matrix of the novel: he had travelled to Italy in 1991, while in Europe for a series of interviews for a literature focused radio program on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. In 1994 he was diagnosed with a terminal disease, and six months later began writing *Night Letters*. In the novel the diagnosis of the illness precedes the narrator's trip to Italy, but in reality the trip that inspired the book had taken place three years before. When Dessaix began writing the novel in 1995, he soon realized that he had to return to Italy to check facts and names, and so he returned that very year, and kept a diary while he was writing the book.²

In this paper, I intend to explore the relationship between Dessaix's notebooks recording his two journeys in Italy and the literary accomplishment of *Night Letters*. My aim is to show ways in which an itinerary becomes a story, a multi-layered and complex narrative. Reference will be made to factual accounts and descriptions in the author's own diaries with an analysis of their generative role as key sources for the fictional work. This will be done through a close reading of particular passages, in the diaries and in the novel, concerning the same event. More specifically, I will quote first one of the entries from the 1995 journey notebook, introducing Dessaix's encounter with Italy; I will then quote a passage from the 1991 notebook, that portrays the night Dessaix spent in Vicenza and at its railway station. The author obviously considered this event a crucial experience in his 1991 journey; he decided to clean it and type it up for possible future references.

The entries of the 1991 diary allow to reconstruct Dessaix's journey to Europe: he arrived in London on 16 September from Australia. He went to Amsterdam, to Paris and then took trains to Berne, Zurich, Geneva and back to Zurich. The Italian journey narrated in *Night Letters* starts from here. On 1st October he took the train to Locarno. The following days he visited Ascona, and went to Tegna. Then he visited Brissago Islands and in the afternoon took the train to Bologna, Verona, Vicenza. Dessaix stayed in Vicenza and took a train to Venice the following day. From Venice he visited Padua and by train went to Rome from where he flew back to Melbourne. In 1995, back in Europe while writing the novel, Dessaix followed a similar itinerary. In April (it's in April that the fictional journey in *Night Letters* take place) he flew Melbourne to London and then to Zurich. Then he took trains to Locarno (Ascona, Brissago Islands) and, on the following day, to Milan and Venice. After side trips to Padua, Vicenza and Verona, he left Venice for Barcelona, to take part as a speaker at the University of Barcelona Centre of Australian Studies 1995 Conference.

A comparative reading of the notebooks and *Night Letters* can show that Dessaix's diary entries relating to Italian places are woven into the fictional fabric of the 'night letters' according to a unifying principle. I will try to define this principle through comparative analysis of the two passages from the 1995 and 1991 diaries respectively and the corresponding parts in the novel.

Dessaix's 1995 notebook consists of daily entries; it is a diary mainly written in the form of brief factual accounts and epigrammatic descriptions.

Wed 12th April 1995 (p. 24)

Northern Italy is a disaster zone – factories, blocks of featureless flats, autostradas, smoky air, dilapidated farmhouses, nature extinguished completely, not a single forest or wood, people fishing at a commercial fishing pond. Wearing and depressing. [...] Brown skies in northern Italy.

From here the author will derive the vividly effective presentation of contemporary Italy, which represents one of the original qualities of *Night Letters*. The diary entry turns out as a much more complex description in the novel:

Venice, 9th April

The moment you cross the border into Italy, you realize something is deeply wrong. You coast down into Como on your expensive upholstered seat and suddenly, through the tinted glass, you see the First Circle of Hell. Crowded around the lake in a brownish haze are scores of tower-blocks, pitted with tiny, box-like balconies like a pox. High up above the car-choked streets you can see women leaning out from amongst their washing, staring dismally down at the garish jumble of concrete and glass hemming them in. (NL, p. 118)

[I]n its more primal form you soon discover that Nature has virtually disappeared. As you roll down towards Milan, an hour or so south of the border, the scene of devastation becomes almost overwhelming. [...] the industrial parks, the shabby forests of high-rise apartments, the abandoned wrecks, the dilapidated farmsteads and stinking, steel-grey rivers. [...] this land has been macadamised and concreted over, ploughed and cropped, built on, sprayed, polluted and poisoned to the point where Nature has been entirely obliterated. (NL, p. 120)

The brief diary entry rather compactly describes the ugliness of a flat, grey and polluted northern Italy. There are evident analogies between the imagery used in the diary and that which appears in the novel, in some cases through the same words:

<i>diary</i>	<i>novel</i>
disaster zone	devastation
factories	industrial parks
smoky air	car-choked streets
blocks of featureless flats	scores of tower-blocks
	the shabby forests of high-rise apartments
dilapidated farmhouses	dilapidated farmsteads
nature extinguished completely	Nature has virtually disappeared

brown skies

Nature has been entirely obliterated
brownish haze

Dessaix used the materials from the notebooks imaginatively in his fiction-writing. He also used them as a kind of originary structuring device: it is interesting to notice that the letters in the novel resemble the diary form in the fact that the letters are supposed to have been written one after the other, every night, as a diary would be, and that there is no inscribed recipient with an active role. The letters are travel memoir of R.'s journey, told in the form of past experiences.

How is the representation of Italy in the novel constructed from the brief entry in the diary? The first representation of Italy in *Night Letters* – corresponding to the diary entry quoted above – is the description of the area surrounding Lake Como. The perception of Italian places is the exclusive prerogative of the fictive author of the letters, R., the protagonist of the journey, and takes place in those ‘interruptions in the syntagmatics of the narration’ which, as Philippe Hamon reminds us, are the descriptions.³ Introducing the descriptions through the protagonist's eye, as a prolongation of his act of looking, Dessaix uses the you-form, inviting the reader to share his character's astonished and disappointed gazing at his surroundings. R. is moving – travelling on a train – and observes a complex scene. The verb of perception presenting the object described is introduced by an expression that identifies a transparent medium: ‘and suddenly, through the tinted glass, you see [...]’ More precisely, this medium is transparent, but ‘tinted’, and the object is qualified through a revealing metaphor: ‘[t]hrough the tinted glass you see the First Circle of Hell.’ The coloured filter through which the images of Italy are re-presented is made immediately explicit – R. is reading the *Divine Comedy* in an English translation while travelling. Endless blocks of flats with tiny square holes crowd around the lake. In a ‘brownish haze’ women lean out from above as in a *girone* in Dante's *Inferno*: they look down on tawdry heaps of concrete and glass, suffocated by the rising exhaust fumes, entrapped and imprisoned in this misery.

From the moving train R.'s eyes continue gazing at the Italian places:

You pull into Milano Centrale in a state of shock, or at least I did. [...] I hung over the lowered window in the corridor and stared out into the echoing gloom of the cavernous station. [...] we started to slide out of Milano Centrale into the orange glow outside. The scabby, blighted buildings creaked past [...] all bathed in a hellish red-yellow glare that seemed to leave no shadows [...] The livid-looking sun set quickly in its sky of fiery chemicals and the world went dark. (NL, pp. 121-122)

While in the first unit the inter-textual reference to Dante is made explicit, here it is implicit, but visible in ‘the cavernous station,’ ‘the orange glow,’ ‘a hellish red-yellow glare’; in the Third *Canto* ‘[...] the gloomy plain shook/with such force [...] from the weeping ground there sprang a wind/flaming with vermillion light’ (ll. 130-133).⁴ In the novel the portrayal of Italy's devastation takes on all the details captured in the diary notes and amplifies them; the ugliness is intensified, yet simultaneously sublimated through explicit and implicit references to Dante. The descriptions emphasize a certain kind of beauty, which emerges in striking ways.

The second passage that I have chosen to analyze in this paper is taken from Dessaix's 1991 diary:

October 1991 Notes on Vicenza

[...] At Vicenza, a small station [...] I was told to walk 'just a few hundreds yards' straight ahead and then turn right and there I'd find hotels. An hour later, almost in a state of collapse [...] I arrived at the central square, all hotels having been fully booked [...] I decided I just didn't have the energy to walk back to the station, I'd just have to find a doorway and sit there all night. I found a shop entrance on the square and settled down. [...]. I sat there for half an hour or so, barely able to think, and then took a decision: I had to go back to the station, where at least I'd be safer and warmer. [...] It took me an hour to get back to the station. I found a waiting-room which was actually clean [...]. The police arrested four people in the toilets during the night. So I stayed in the waiting-room where it seemed safer. (Dessaix's 1991 notebook)

These notes from 1991 relate Dessaix's experiences during the 'terrible night' he spent looking for a hotel in the streets of Vicenza, dragging his broken luggage, and then at the railway station. In the diary there are no detailed descriptions of places, only brief accounts of facts. For *Night Letters* Dessaix relied on the 1991 notes, and elaborated upon them in recounting the facts; however, he added descriptions of Vicenza railway station, mainly of the people crowded there; that is, of the setting for R.'s experiences and encounters.

Venice 12th April

I felt I'd entered the Doleful City that night in Vicenza [...]. When you emerge from the passageway under the railway tracks, you find yourself in a sort of drafty vestibule [...]. I was alone once more in the yellowish gloom amongst knots of smoking, staring men in windcheaters and jeans [...]. Pushing my case past the clumps of men, I reached the doorway onto the street and peered out. The next thing to do was to grab hold of the suitcase and drag it out into the night towards the city, and so I did it. (*NL*, pp. 179-180)

The description of the night R. spends in Vicenza mirrors the night that Dessaix reported in his diary:

After about an hour of lurching forward with the case and stopping, lurching forward again and standing heaving while I regained my strength, I came to the Hotel Vicenza. [...] No, no rooms. None in Vicenza. Another fair. The city was crammed with visitors. [...] Alright. I'd sleep in a doorway, curl up in a portico [...] I curled up on the ground beside my suitcase in an alcove leading into a men's clothing shop right on the square. Hardly had I closed my eyes, though, when two policemen came and stood beside me. [...] I explained there were no rooms to be had. 'Then you must go back to the railway station' he said 'You'll be safer there than here [...].' So back I went [...] After a very long time I came out of the gathering fog into the echoing vestibule of Vicenza railway station. (*NL*, pp. 183-184)

The first description introduces the city of Vicenza through another revealing metaphor: 'I felt I'd entered the Doleful City that night in Vicenza.' The inter-textual reference to Dante's *Inferno* is made explicit in 'the Doleful City.' When R. arrives at Vicenza railway station he describes it as 'a sort of drafty vestibule,' and again when he goes back there he enters 'the echoing vestibule of Vicenza railway station.' In the Third *Canto* of the *Inferno* the two poets, Virgil and Dante, enter the vestibule that leads to Hell; this is what R. is reading at this point in his journey.

The scene R. observes on his return to the station after his failed attempt to find a hotel bed in Vicenza constitutes another vivid description. It is not transposed from the diaries, but freely invented according to the theme of the vestibule of Hell and of the Fifth *Canto*:

Pandaemonium. In the middle of the hall two tall black women in red hot-pants were screeching and clawing at each other. Packs of smiling men were gathering around them, hands in pockets, tense and elated. [...] A black wind from tracks billowed through the hall, sending grit and paper whirling. And circling through the mêlée, wheeling and turning, restless like panthers, were young men with shaven bullet-heads [...]. They all had that night look in their eyes, eyeing, eyeing. [...] Three or four girls drifted over to me, coming at me in husky, faded voices. They clustered around me, sour-smelling and breathy [...]. On the corner of the vestibule opened out onto the platform was a glassed-box of a room. [...] It was the First Class Waiting Room. [...] Was I at the bottom yet? [...] Pressing myself against the glass I could see a figure in the far doorway, silhouetted against the reddish glow of the foggy city [...]. (NL, pp. 185-186)

Again the *Comedy*'s intense visual imagery colours the protagonist R.'s descriptions. The scenes portrayed at Vicenza railway station have colours which seem to repeat those of Dante's *Inferno*: grim red and dead black – 'black wind', 'the reddish glow'. '[T]he reddish glow' reiterates the imagery already introduced in R.'s first encounter with Italy; the source is once again the above quoted Third *Canto* '[...] from the weeping ground there sprang a wind/flaming with vermilion light' (ll. 132-133). 'The black wind [...] sending grit and paper whirling' echoes 'the black air' of the Second Circle of Hell in the Fifth *Canto*, where can be heard the wailing voices of the Lustful, for ever whirled about in a black, stormy wind. (l. 50) Dante asks his guide, Virgilio: 'Master, who are these/whom the black air lashes?'; the damned are described by Dante (lines 31-39): 'The hellish squall, which never rests/sweeps spirits in its headlong rush/tormenting, whirls and strikes them/ caught in that path of violence/ they shriek, weep, and lament/[...] I understood that to such torment/the carnal sinners are condemned/they who make reason subject to desire.'

From a glass-box-like 1st class waiting room where R. spends the night he observes the people outside; he is positioned within a safe place and examines the scene through a transparent medium, which protects him but allows him to see what is beyond. R. depicts the ambiguous, 'sour-smelling women' and sweating young men with the 'night look in their eyes' populating Vicenza railway station, which is sexually charged. In this scene there is a strong emphasis on the possibility of sexual liaisons but also an increasing sense of anguish, intensified by the implicit and explicit references to Dante's Fifth *Canto*.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that a comparative reading of the diaries and *Night Letters* enriches an appreciation of Dessaix's deft layering and emotive projection of R.'s experience. The representations of R.'s first encounter with Italy and of Vicenza railway station are incorporated in the narrative of the larger textual ensemble through a unifying element: the reference to Dante's *Inferno*. This reference represents a fundamental element of cohesion in the analysed descriptions portraying Italy; it provides intense visual power and sublimates the ugliness and misery of these modern Italian ruins. The notes from the diary give origin to the novel's elaborate and sophisticated descriptions through Dessaix's gaudy imagination, enflamed by the visual strength of the *Inferno*. In the *Divine Comedy* Virgil is the guide to Dante, in the representations of Italy I have analysed here Dante is the guide to Dessaix.

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¹ Rachel tells a long, captivating story of a baroness and her mysterious golden amulet, Prof. Eschenbaum narrates the story of a strikingly beautiful Venetian courtesan. In a speech given in Lyons in 2006, Dessaix said: "I threw in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Casanova, Lawrence Sterne and Marco Polo, as well as characters I'd never met on my actual journey (an Indian poet, a German professor, an Italian waiter called Emilio), I telescoped time, I told parts of the story back-to-front, created arabesques and spirals where in reality there had been just straight lines, concocted fantastic stories (one about a magical amulet, one about a Venetian courtesan) in order to make the truth of what I was writing seem truer. What that truth was, it's difficult to say."

² The author wishes to express her gratitude to Dessaix for giving her portions of his diaries of his 1991 and 1995 travels to Italy and the text of the Lyons speech, given in May 2007.

³ Hamon, P. What Is a Description? *French Literary Theory Today*. T. Todorov (ed), trans. by R. Carter, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, pp. 147-178, 1982.

⁴ Princeton Dante Project, Princeton University, Prof. Robert Hollander.