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Description of Nature as an Act of Anticipation: Australia in Rosa Campbell Praed's My Australian Girlhood

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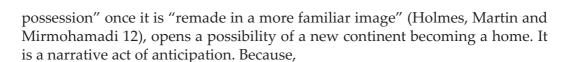
Writing My Australian Girlhood from the position of her "civilised existence" in 1902 London Rosa Campbell Praed remembers her "wild youth 'down under.'" In line with the dominant discourses of the period Praed describes Australia as a "young-old land", and additionally associates it with nature which stands in sharp opposition to culture, to "the smug English conventionalities." Her images of nature progress from "the grim spell of the bush," which overwhelms the traveller into the impenetrable "primeval forests" of Australia, via the slopes of the lush rose garden with vines along its fences, to the brown, scorched grass, and dry creeks under the "steaming grey blanket" of intense summer heat, and the "flaming scorpions of fires" racing down the mountains, thus providing emotional sustenance required to create a home in an unknown land. As such Praed's text is a "protest against the direct actions of [her] masculine counterparts" who were involved in the process of taming of the wilderness identifying the clearing of the land as a preparation for its "true possession" once it is "remade in a more familiar image" (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi).

"Planting a garden is an act of anticipation," argue Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi (3). Equally so, worlding¹ of space by protesting against the traditional male model of the clearing of the land as a preparation for its "true





In her reading of Colonial Office dispatches Spivak gives three example of othering. The first is the process of "worlding" whereby an English captain riding across the Indian countryside can be seen "'consolidating the self of Europe,' that is representing Europe as the Other in terms of which colonial subjectivity of the inhabitants will be produced." The second "is an example of debasement whereby the ... tribes are described in terms of 'depravity', 'treachery', 'brutality' and 'perfidy', and the surrender of their land an 'obligation.' It can be observed, says Spivak, in the act of creating the



Settlement was not simply an activity by which land was taken, houses established and a living made, or not, from the various colonial enterprises. The success of these enterprises in Australia also depended upon people making connections with the land and the people around them, creating emotional as well as economic investments in this place (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 41).

Rosa Praed's descriptions of the transformation of the land formulate an act of anticipation; "provide sensory and emotional sustenance" (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 3) that the Australian settlers required to be able to begin to create a home in the unknown land.

Rosa Caroline Praed (1851 – 1935) was born at Bromelton on the Logan River, in Queensland. There and at her father's stations in the Burnett district she spent her childhood. Her father's subsequent political career took her to Brisbane, at the exciting time of the proclamation of the colony of Queensland, a process in which Rosa took great interest. In 1872 she married Arthur Campbell Bulkley Praed who had come to Australia to make a pastoral fortune. He bought a cattle run, Monte Christo, on Curtis Island near Gladstone where Rosa spent two unhappy years. Triggered by her 1894-95 visit to Australia, in 1902, at that time writing from the position of an established author, and a London celebrity, Rosa Praed described these experiences in the autobiographical *My Australian Girlhood*.

The narrative exhibits no signs of "cultural cringe", rather it reveals Praed proudly exploiting her professedly Australian identity to give England a story of adventure in the antipodes, yet a story which was "on the fringes of polite English fiction" (Spender in Adelaide 202). Namely, working on the borders of the genre by exploring the axis between autobiography and travel writing which is in itself "animated by desire to achieve self-understanding" (Huggan in Gilbert Moore 83), Praed, like her fellow female writer, Ada Cambridge,² aspires to present a





colonized 'other(s)' by making them the 'object(s) of imperialism.'" The third is an example of "the separation of native states and 'our (colonial) governments' in the reprimand given the general ... for allowing half-pay subalterns to serve with the regular troops in Native governments" (Spivak 224-225).

² Ada Cambridge writes in her autobiography *Thirty Years in Australia*, that she "knew nothing whatsoever of Australia" except what she had read in the books, and the books were "mostly old ones, the tales the same. *Geoffrey Hamlyn* was my sheet anchor, but did not seem to be supported by the scraps of prosaic history obtainable; we could not verify those charming homes and social customs. On the other hand, cannibal blacks and convict bushrangers appeared to be grim facts. As for the physical characteristics of the country, there were but the scentless flowers, the songless birds, the cherries



"true" picture of Australia. She told her father, Thomas Murray-Prior in a letter of 14 January 1869 that she was trying to write simply about "mere everyday experiences" and "'truthfully' ... without any false sentimentalism" (Clarke 25).

While "truthfully" might on the one hand point to the emerging Australian literary tradition of documentary realism which looks for legitimation in the author's lived experience, and which formed the basis of Australian masculine literary tradition, for Praed it meant tackling a number of issues over which her male counterparts kept silent. Hence *My Australian Girlhood* attaches no easy blame when it describes the brutalities committed by both blacks and whites on the frontier (the Frazer Massacre), which won Praed the attribute of an "unpopular radical" (Spender in Adelaide 203). Thus, for example she completely supported Attorney-General Plunkett's declaration that "not only should these men be hanged, but that any white man who could be proved to have killed a blackfellow not in self-defence should be held guilty of murder" (Praed 16). Not only that, she also praised Plunkett for treating blacks as human beings: "All hail to thee, Plunkett! Had there been more like thee, the national conscience would have less cause for self-reproach" (Praed 17).

Even as she was describing the experience of the Aborigines, Praed was aware of the weakness of her voice, hence she writes: "There has been no one to write the Black's epic; not many have said words in their defence; and this is but a poor little plea that I lay down for my old friends" (Praed 73). One of the consequences of Praed's writing being absent from Australian literary mainstream is that these and similar thoughts and views went unacknowledged for decades in Australian culture.

Praed also gives a female perspective of the bush, de-centring herself (Gilbert-Moore 17) to make room for other family voices. The focus is thus shifted from individual towards a collective auto/biography of bush women. The mother emerges as a girl who had to worry about a drought on the station; the 'bush' being burnt down, waterholes being dry, and horses and cattle dying in bogs having no strength to extricate themselves (Pread 39), because all the while her "Papa" was sitting "in the little parlour writing poetry" (Praed 40). The narrative also brings a touching description of her young mother's self getting ready for childbirth in a bush hut: "'Having neither doctor nor nurse,' the young mother writes, 'and knowing that I might die before there was any hope of medical assistance, I endeavoured to prepare my mind for leaving thing world.' Poor little bride of nineteen!" (Pread 51). Lastly, the woman was affected by sandy blight:





with their stones outside (none of which, actually, is the rule, and I have found nothing to resemble the description of the latter), and the kangaroo that carries its family in a breast-pocket, which we felt able to take for granted. These things we did believe in, because all our authorities mentioned them" (Cambridge 2). Australia so misrepresented, Cambridge, too wanted to produce "a story about the colony, written from within" (Cambridge 133) which would give a true picture of the country.

Those dark-lashed blue eyes of the girl-wife at Bungroopim – Irish eyes which were so large and soft – became contracted and watery, and spoiled by reddened lids, and thinned lashes from the frequent use of lotions. For two years she had to live in a room from which every particle of light had been excluded, by hanging up blue blankets over the windows – the only curtains procurable in the bush (Pread 108-109).

The collective focus is evident as Pread recounts the story of archetypal fear of settler women, that of a women lost in the bush separated from her child, the child subsequently found dead by the search party: "...the woman lost her reason, and died soon afterwards, in the asylum of the district" (Pread 107). Finally, Rosa' own memories of the bush, formulate her in a representative role of a bush Australian. She discusses the want of good domestic help, a frequent complaint among bushwomen (in reference to Unbroken Filly, "a child of nature who wasn't much of a servant," Pread 205), as well as refers to the battle with the ants, pests, flies, snakes, centipedes and scorpions while keeping the household in order: "The legs of the dining table had to be put in pint pots filled with water, to prevent the white ants from climbing up and devouring our food" (Pread 108). The years Praed spent on Curtis Island "played such a crucial part in determining her values and her voice - could hardly be described as middle-class, indulgent or privileged,"3 (Spender in Adelaide 211): "The house had not been cleaned for months, the boards in the best bed-room were inch-deep in mire, and a plank across two chairs served as a washstand, while the incongruity between lace-frilled cambric and the duties of maid-of-all-work was distressing" (Pread 263). Praed's memories of her life on the Curtis Island also give "a picture of the amateur cook, ... subsiding in tears upon a three-legged stool in front of the open American oven ... The fire was made of logs of wood, often inadequately chopped and of inconvenient angles" (Pread 267).

In spite of her subversive impulse evidenced in working on the borders of the autobiographical genre and addressing "controversial" issues, Praed still undertakes to represent Australia in ways that "engage with" (Pratt 7) the British imperialist terms which reveals her narrative as "autoethnographic" (Pratt 7).

Thus she associates youth and nature with Australia.⁴ Her "wild youth 'down under'" (Pread 1) brought to bear on her life, she claims, one important



Namely, this is how she was positioned within the Australian Tradition. "Marriage to an Englishman with literary connections, and expatriation after 1876, allowed Praed a ready access to British publishers, at the expense of neglect by later Australian readers and critics," writes Elizabeth Webby (71). Until well after World War II critics characterised Praed as a colonial writer "on strength of [her] overseas publication as much as [her] use of romance formulas" (Webby 71).

The idea of a colonial subject as a child can on the one hand, be traced back to Locke's metaphor of a child as a *tabula rasa*, and on the other to Rousseau's thesis of a child possessing understanding, curiosity and spontaneity which needs to be preserved, as in childhood we are closest to nature. Most importantly, however, both of these views get successfully incorporated in the imperial discourse as they "justify the paternal actions of imperial formation" (Ashcroft 2001:41).



influence: "My Australian girlhood taught me to love Nature, and to find in the old nurse ever my best friend" (Pread 1). Hence references to Australian nature are abundant in the descriptions of Praed's early childhood, as she believed that it is in childhood that man is closest to nature: "... to the clear soul of childhood, Nature would set ajar for a few immortal moments the gates of her enchanted kingdom" (Pread 141). By associating life close to Nature with drawing nearest to God and truth (Pread 141), Praed represents Australia in line with the dominant British imperial image – that of a young-old land. The idea is elaborated in the first chapter where the Australian bush is described as miles of

primeval forest; interminable vistas of melancholy gum-trees, ravines, along the sides of which the long-bladed grass grown rankly; level, untimbered plains alternating with undulating tracts of pasture, here and there, broken by steep gully, stony ridge, or dried-up creek. All wild and utterly desolate ... (Pread 9).

Antediluvian animals, like the platypus, also contribute to the land being perceived as old, which leads Praed to place its beginnings before the Atlantis, associating it with Lemuria (Pread 11). Praed also gives us the opinion of a "ranger at the Fitzroy Falls" who felt that Australia was "as old as the world before Adam, and that it was just forgotten, when the Creator parcelled out men afresh, after the Flood" (Pread 12). He substantiates the claim by showing the narrator the rocks far down a cliff, "all black as if they had been fired" (Pread 12-13), proof that there must have been "a terrible earthquake here sometime" (Pread 12).8





⁵ Unaware of Rousseau's work, Praed traces the idea to Thoreau's *Walden* (Pread 141).

Praed continues: "Happy they to whom the forest has been a nursery, the wild things playmates, the trees, and streams, and mountains most intimate friends. Happy they whom in the silent hours, the great blue has canopied, and who have lain down to rest, gazing up into the world's infinite space. Those heavenly rays, shed then upon their souls, can never be wholly extinguished; and though torch-lights may, by and by, be mistaken for stars, the true stars always shine in God's sky, and will lead the children back once more to the old nurse Nature's arms" (Praed 142).

Ultimately, as Praed describes her young self living in harmony with Aboriginal children, and, indeed, a "half-caste boy called Ringo" was "the fist object of [her] youthful affections" (65), the narrative may also be seen as contributing to an integrated future of the black and the white peoples on the continent. Praed writes: "I also made acquaintance, under Ringo's auspices, with the flesh of the iguana and that especial delicacy, the eggs of the black snake. I learned, too, at the camp to play dilly-bags, to chop sugar bags (otherwise hives of native bees) out of trees, to make drinking vessels from gourds, and to play the jew's-harp..." (66).

It has to be recognized that the motif of the Australian land being the result of big tectonic movements is frequent in Australian literature from the very beginnings. Thus in his *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia* (1849) Charles Sturt writes of his "supposition that the continent of Australia was formerly an archipelago of islands, but that *some convulsion*, by which the central land has been raised, has caused the changes" (33) [my italics]. Whereas the motif in Sturt implies ugliness, Pread attributes positive value to the ancient character of the land.



On the other hand, Australia is a young land, Sydney Bay being described as "a smooth, beautiful, apparently landlocked bay, with trees growing down to the water's edge, and not a house in sight" (Pread 5), with early explorers, such as Ludwig Leichardt, only beginning inland exploration, with no roads from one colony to another, with squatters only beginning to clear the wilderness.

In the depiction of landscape Praed appropriates the imperialist idiom. The land is portrayed as "wild and uncivilised, almost indistinguishable from the Indigenous inhabitants" (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 11):

It used to take a whole day getting through Dugandine Scrub, for though its width was not great, progress was extremely slow. A blackboy had to go in front with his tomahawk to chop away vines and remove logs: and sometimes a huge tree would have fallen, which necessitated camping a while, and the clearing of a fresh track round it. Behind, other blackboys led spare horses which were buckled on as leaders when the buggy came to a deep gulley or a slippery pinch. We children – the elders of us – would walk on each side of the buggy ready with large sticks or stones to prop the wheels when the horses jibbed... (Pread 123).

In spite of the fact that Praed did not share the prevailing settler attitude to native vegetation, often describing its beauty, she was still not critical of the practice of clearing of the land. Namely, although she does muse on the march of civilisation and sadly comments that "the scrub is gone – the lonely, beautiful scrub which can never be made again" (Pread 132), as her fellow countrymen, Praed, too, believed that "every tree felled was a step closer to their vision of a civilised and domesticated landscape" (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 13) since she takes pleasure in the fulfilment of the prophecy of a flourishing country being "reclaimed from the wilderness" (Pread 49): "riverside is dotted with selector's homesteads; there are townships everywhere, and a railway brings, in a few hours, the supplies which bullock drays were often twelve weeks carrying from Brisbane-town to Bungroopim" (Pread 49).

The endowment of "the new landscape with crucial significance" (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 1) was also the establishment of a garden. Like clearing, "gardening became increasingly associated with home" (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 1), with domestication of the land. Thus, the description of her mother's bush garden at the beginning of her narrative Praed's garden is a testimony of memories of home which bring past into the present (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 15). It has "gum-sapling posts, round which roses, passion-flower, and sweet verbena grow" (Praed 42). It slopes down

to the water hole – the grass plat with three beds, a trumpet-tree, bearing its strong-scented, bell-shaped flower in the centre one; vines along the fence, and organs and lemons, pomegranates and fig-trees, and many lilies (Pread 42).



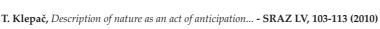


Although the garden can be seen as a site of hybridization as it incorporates the native plants, too, it is still not an Australian garden yet. The incongruity is revealed in the employment of the imperial rubric in its description. Thus, for example, the garden "slopes down" towards the water.

Praed's description of the Marroon garden, on the other hand, even if a site of hybridization which seems the only plausible future in settler geographies, reveals Australia that is home; not only in the use of the local rubric, but also in the self-assured description of the beauty of the change of seasons in the Australian bush garden. Spring is "glorious" as "orange blossoms scent the air, the wistaria [sic] and spirea begin their short lives; the banksia and cloth of gold roses are in splendid bloom," and "rock lilies" bloom "on the trees and in the clefts of stones; a cactus plant with red flowers climbs a dead gum" (Pread 147). Beginning of summer brings the threat of bush fires when "Mount Marroon is outlines black against a burning sky, " and "all along the Border Mountains, great flaming scorpions race each other" (Pread 148-149). The grass is "brown and scorched, the creeks dry," the "intense sultry heat weighs upon the world, wrapping it as in a steamy grey blanket" (Pread 149). Soon, blankets "turn to the colour of coal smoke" and thunders begin to "growl like a beast," and hailstones "clatter on the roof," and "when it is over, the whole earth, with all upon it, lifts up its voice in rejoicing" (Pread 149-150). Late summer finds "curtains to the verandah of bougainvilleas and roses and Cape jasmine." Quinces and pears ripe in autumn, the "sky is sapphire blue and cloudless" and "a soft breeze blows from the mountains" (Pread 152). In winter the wind blows "capricious of temper, often boisterous and angry, at times sweetly wooing, always with his own wild fascination" (Pread 152). Not only has Praed come a long way from a "gentle slope," in a garden that blooms abundantly, she gave a promise of a future (cf. Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 10).

The above mentioned move from the imperial to the local rubric in the description of new landscape is most evident in the description of the bush of Praed's childhood which was wilderness that was only beginning to be cleared, a trip into the bush being "a dream journey through the witches' forest" (Pread 11). Namely, in the beginning of the narrative Praed adds explanations for the names of native plants, and animals: " ... there were the mulgams – native raspberries peculiar to the Logan; and there was the chucky-chucky, a most pleasant-tasting wild plum" (Pread 50). The sugar-bag is defined in brackets as the "hive of native bees" (Pread 66). It is an example of language failing the British coloniser, the writer resorting to any one or all of the tree solutions found in early travel literature: describing the unknown with the nearest equivalent in Britain, use of descriptive names (water pheasant), and introduction of native terms. It is an attempt to describe the place actually experienced, an attempt to "fancy a language and even the interpretation [of the tree's voice], in these whisperings and groaning and creakings and jocund rustlings, and the plaintive swellings of the breeze that are as deep-drawn human sighs" (Pread 140). It is required because, as Kamau Braithwaite formulated it in his study *History of the Voice: The* Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry (1984):

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The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem; how do you get a rhythm which approximates the natural experience. ... It may be English: but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or the wave. It is also like the blues (Brathwaite in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 283).

The additions, however, are fewer as the narrative progresses, Praed confidently using an emerging english to describe the bush of her childhood years in Chapter Nine, "Through the Scrub:"

Here, where the sun never penetrated, the rich soil and decaying vegetation gave out an earthy and unforgettable smell. The trees had glossy leaves, and mostly bore berries – some poisonous; others, like the chucky-chukies and the wild purple plum, wholesome and luscious. The quandongs were tall and green, and there were trees with straight stems and bare branches – the leafage all courting the sun at the top ... Moreton Bay fig – would shoot up snaky stems... Flowers dotted the green – big blossoms of creepers, pale yellow and cream and mauve and sometimes blood red, and occasionally one might see through the interlacing tangle, a flame-tree as though it were a burning bush. ...

There is a soft hush in the scrub. ... there is no deafening rattle. Sometimes you may hear a bell-bird ... and then there are the whip birds There is too the tender "Hoo-hoo" of the Wonga-Wonga pigeon: then at four o-clock, the wallabies stir, and towards dusk, the curlews begin their melancholy wail, and if there's a water-hole near, the swamp pheasant gives its' throaty gurgle (Pread 123-125).

In addition to her engagement with the imperialist ideology in representation of landscape, a few instances can be detected wherein Praed formulates the native population in line with the metropolitan representations, in spite of her otherwise enlightened views on Aborigines. It is most evidently so in the description of what she claims is her earliest memory of Naraigin station which creates the image of archetypal white woman's fear - that "of a black's face, with its very white eyeballs and shining eyes, peering in out of the darkness between the halfclosed shutters" (Praed 60). It is also evident in the description of the Aboriginal corroboree preceding the Frazer massacre wherein native population is othered in an orientalist description: "The blacks thread the flames, bending this way and that in rhythmic motion, and the maddened faces with distended eye-balls and glistening teeth are as the faces of demons" (Praed 92).

Still, even though Praed does in certain instances enter into dialogue with metropolitan representations of Australia, in many others she produces a "racy" and "exotic" (Spender in Adelaide 202) narrative verging on radicalism when







assessed by the contemporary English readership, or too uncomfortable to be placed within the Australian male tradition in spite of the abundance of "bush realism" because of the female perspective described. Still investment of the land with beauty and pride formulates imaginary space into which emotional sustenance of home can be placed.

Namely, even though she lived and wrote in a colonial period, for Praed "home" is not a shifting signifier as was the case with her literary contemporaries – for her Australia was always her emotional home. Thus after years of "civilised existence" (Pread 1) in Britain, Praed quotes Brunton Stephens's reply to an Australian arguing that if he "could just take a trip to Europe, and get a squint at some of the pictures and statues and the old castles and the Alps... and the Rhine" he could "do something yet," that "the Rhine is commonplace compared to *that* [the gum-trees]. *That's* the grandest thing of its kind I've ever seen. *That's* worth coming all the way from Europe to look at" [original italics] (Pread 183). Nostalgia for the gum-trees seems to have been the dominant note in her later years:

I never see a gum tree whether it be in a flourishing plantation in Cannes, or a sickly denaturalised clump on the Roman Campagna or one of those melancholy suckers in an English hothouse without being seized by an untranslatable emotion. I never smell the pungent aromatic scent which for twenty three years was as the breath of my nostrils, without being carried back to the old vivid world, so much more real than this in which most things have happened to me (Pread 1-2).

Years later Praed was to write: "I have never felt either English or Irish though nearly all my life has been spent in the British Isles. Always have I had the sensation of being an alien in London crowds whether fashionable or vulgar, & have in my fancy borne the stamp of the Bush" (Clarke 41). Lastly, in a letter written to her step-sister Dorothy Murray-Prior on 10 March 1932 as she was waiting for death Rosa Praed again fondly remembered the Australian bush:

Even I after these long years of absence, my whole life formed of totally different associations, can never get away from the Australian Bush – Now in my old age & utter loneliness as I wait for death which tarries too long – I seem to see more vividly than ever the view from the Marroon verandah – the old racecourse & paddock and the river with its still deep pools. But it had all greatly changed even when I went back nearly 30 years ago, and not it is all to be so built over that I should not know the old ride to the Springs (Clarke 210).

Reclaiming Praed's "truthful" description Australia, and the self-assured pride in the land would mean getting "valuable alternative insights and understandings" (Spender in Adelaide 204) which have been absent from





mainstream Australian literature and culture, the Australian tradition having performed "cultural apartheid" (Summers 35) over female content. Praed's understanding and presentation of Australian nature challenges the male model and, narrates a different history of settlement, and being "an imaginative act" overlays the landscape of the continent with different meanings (cf. Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 4).

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OPIS PRIRODE KAO ČIN PREDVIĐANJA: AUSTRALIJA U AUTOBIOGRAFIJI ROSE CAMPBELL PRAED MOJE AUSTRALSKO DJEVOJAŠTVO

Pišući Moje australsko djevojaštvo iz pozicije «civiliziranog života» u Londonu godine 1902, Rosa Campbell Pread se prisjeća svog «divljeg djetinjstva, tamo dolje». U skladu s onodobnim dominantnim diskursom Praed u svojoj pripovijesti Australiju opisuje kao «mlado-staru zemlju» istodobno je povezujući s mladošću, čak djetinjstvom, odnosno s njenom sijedom kosom i «konvulzijama koje su je donijele na svijet». Također ju povezuje s prirodom koja se nalazi u opreci s kulturom, odnosno «samodopadnim engleskim konvencionalostima». Njezine slike australske prirode nižu se od anglo-australskih opisa «turobne očaranosti šikarom» koja nadjačava putnika u neprobojne «djevičanske šume» toga kontinenta, preko brežuljaka s bujnim ružičnjacima i viticama uz ograde, do istinski australske smeđe, opržene trave i suhih korita potoka pod «zaparenim sivim pokrivačem» intenzivne ljetne vrućine i «užarenih vatrenih škorpiona» koji jure niz planine, na taj način pružajući emocionalni sadržaj potreban za stvaranje doma u nepoznatoj zemlji, odnosno u slučaju same Pread, da bi se u kasnoj životnoj dobi osjetila «nostalgija za eukaliptusima». Stoga njezin tekst predstavlja «protest protiv izravnog djelovanja [njezinih] muških kolega» koji su bili uključeni u proces pripitomljavanja divljine poistovjećujući raščišćavanje zemlje s pripremom za «stvarno posjedovanje» jednom «kada se ona preoblikuje u poznatiju sliku» (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi).

Key words: Rosa Praed, My Austalian Girlhood, representation of nature

Ključne riječi: Rosa Pread, Moje australsko djevojaštvo, prikaz prirode



