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Michelle De Kretser, *Questions of Travel*

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*There are too many waterfalls here...*<sup>1</sup>

This review was meant to be a companion piece to the review/essay of Drusilla Modjeska's *The Mountain*<sup>2</sup> but vagaries of time and place, editorial deadlines etc. have prevented this. The comparisons would have been obvious and fruitful: both are long books divided into two sections concerning the past and present; both use epigraphs from Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'Questions of Travel' and both deal with tourism, post colonialism, exile and belonging. However, while Modjeska's book is written from a historical/political perspective, De Kretser is more interested in the contemporary, how the small contingencies and apparently insignificant choices in life shape the individual future.

At the time of this writing I am aware that *Questions of Travel* has recently won the Miles Franklin Award (*The Mountain* perhaps having not enough "Australian" content), which makes my task easier but also more onerous<sup>3</sup>. And how strange that I should be writing from a place of "exile" while the *tiniest green hummingbird[s]* fly around my head as I sit under dark pine trees, having driven through a gorge riven with waterfalls to get here. De Kretser's is a big book. With such a complex novel one is conscious that there are innumerable aspects that could be discussed but as always, given the space, only a few can be addressed. The first might be why this book has been chosen for our highest literary recognition and, from what I understand, has been a popular choice. There are, I think, two main reasons for this: one is that the book provides an extraordinary insight into Australia, Australian culture and global immigration—for it would seem that now many, if not the majority, of Australians have called other places "home". The second is De Kretser's prose. A.S. Byatt comments in the cover blurb that

De Kretser “writes quickly and lightly of wonderful and terrible things”. “Quickly and lightly” are the operative terms here. Hers is a brilliant and mesmerising dance of words that constantly surprises and delights. Metaphors beguile with their accuracy: “Ravi was a box of birds” (68). It is impossible to give a sense of this style; one could quote for pages and still not succeed. Hopefully the following will provide the reader with some idea of De Kretser’s magic.

*Questions Of Travel* is a parallel narrative structured in “chapters” alternating between the two main characters, Laura, an Australian, and Ravi, a Sri Lankan, beginning with their childhoods in the 1960-70’s: “When Laura was two, the twins decided to kill her” (3); “The sea tugged patiently at the land, a child plucking at a sluggish parent. That was the sound behind all other sounds. Ravi’s life ran to the murmur of change” (9). The first section of the novel details Laura’s growing-up in Sydney inflected by the early death of her mother and the unusual upbringing by her eccentric “long faced and amber-eyed” aunt Hester who “brought to mind...a benevolent goat”(5). From her Laura learns the charm of travel and story telling. Despite the dysfunctional family and her father’s disinterest, she experiences love and companionship with Hester until her father remarries. Laura has a facility for drawing and attempts an artistic career. Failing in this because of her lack of real talent, she flees Australia with money left by her aunt and thus begins a period of travel and cosmopolitan homelessness. “Dreaming of travel, Laura had pictured a swift slideshow of scenes...But no one mentioned the sheer tedium of being a tourist”(45). And although Laura is a “large plain” girl, she finds she has other, more pleasurable talents.

Ravi’s life cannot be more different: the beloved only son of loving parents, he is surrounded by an extended family in a small town where he knows everyone. Existence here is lush and comfortable. A clever student, he develops an interest in Geography, influenced by his teacher who proclaims, “History is only a byproduct of geography... Geography is destiny” (20-21). This is perhaps one of the most significant insights in the book, but as Brother Ignatius admits “there is not much future in it” (23). Ravi goes on to eventually discover the brave new world of computer and internet technology.

One of De Kretser’s main concerns in the novel is to tease out all the possible definitions and ramifications of being a tourist in the twenty-first century. “Wanderlust on which the *Wayfarer* [magazine] fed, was only lust, after all, lustily excited by penetration and veils” (200). The subtle inference here is to the Imperial

designs of the major European powers and their colonial expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the expense of millions of indigenous peoples. Ali Behdad argues that because of the “lateness” (that is, following after what came before) of Western travellers, their discursive practices are split. These are marked by their anxiety over the transformation of the “exoticist referent into the familiar sign of Western hegemony”<sup>4</sup>, inscribed both by the colonial economy and by their desire for the disappearing Other. “Time after time, Laura would learn that she had missed the moment; to be a tourist was always to arrive too late. Paradise was lost: prosperity had intervened, or politics” (48). The resulting ambivalence and uncertainty is characteristic of these “belated” travellers who find themselves caught between the Orientalist desire for power and knowledge and the “subtle critique of western superiority and modes of cultural association with the Other that recognizes the latter’s subjectivity”<sup>5</sup>. This ambiguity has its roots in the travellers’ *desire* for the Orient, a condition which affects travellers who go to foreign lands for any reason. Therefore travellers, and by extension, tourists, are implicated in both the economies of desire and power.

“Have you noticed, the only word you ever hear around this place is ‘tourism’? Because tourism’s about dollars, no argument. But ‘travel’ lets you pretend. Travel has an aura. It allows us to believe that publishing guidebooks is, you know, a good thing. We can tell ourselves that we do contribute to global harmony, international understanding, you know the stuff I mean. It’s understood without being spelled out”. She paused for breath. Robyn blinked (314).

Interestingly James Clifford proposes that the term “theory” be returned to its etymological root, *theorin*; that is, “a practice of travel and observation, a man [sic] sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony”<sup>6</sup>. This notion of discovery and observation may open up theoretical space for the concept of travel itself and informs at least one aspect of De Kretser’s project. Tourism has become a fact of life in outback Australia as well as Africa, and part of a new global economy. One (tourism) does not *ipso facto* produce the other (colonial power) although this does not take in the complicated metamorphosis of colonialism to “neo-colonialism”—that is, the power of international conglomerates in non-Western countries.

Because Ravi's town on the west coast is only twenty-three miles from Colombo, he has experienced his fair share of tourists or travellers (as most like to call themselves); those strange people from strange lands with their strange habits and complaints. Feeling mostly contempt for them (they "went about with practically nothing on, and didn't wash their feet at night before climbing into bed" (37), Ravi is also aware that for them, he and his family are only experiences, the "real thing" touted in the travel guide: "studying the map, [Ravi] saw that what he knew of existence, the reality he experienced as boundless and full of incident, had been reduced to the mapmaker to a trifle. If the island were to slide into a crack in the ocean and be lost forever, the map would scarcely change" (21). Ironically, as De Kretser gleefully shows in the second half of the novel, with improvements in the speed and amount of information on the internet, these travel guides are virtually out of date before they are even printed.

Using whatever money she earns to travel, Laura lives in London and works at odd jobs until she begins to realise that she is getting older and still has no career. She drifts into the area in which she has a great deal of experience and begins writing for a travel magazine. "What was the modern age if not movement, travel, change?" (124). Ravi's father dies and things "totter and plunge". After the typical romances of a young man, he marries and brings his new wife back to the blue house to live with his mother and sisters. In due course a son is born. All is blissful despite the wrangling between mother and daughter-in-law who becomes more and more involved with human rights, refugee and victims' relief, corresponding to the escalation of the political upheavals and civil war that rends the country.<sup>7</sup> Examining this conflict is not De Kretser's main objective although it darkly shadows the latter half of the novel. Except for a brief and horrifying eruption, it remains background to the protagonists' lives. This moment (and the ending of the novel), Byatt's "quickly and lightly of terrible things", reminds one of Shirley Hazzard's subtlety in *Transit of Venus*, where one has to read and reread in order to comprehend the unthinkable, the unimaginable. As a result, Ravi, after a tortuous (literally) process, finds himself an official refugee "[s]omewhere between Singapore and Sydney... [he] woke and sat up straight. The cabin was in darkness. [He] looked out the window: the plane was suspended in an enormous night" (242). Simultaneously on the other side of the world in London, Laura, "watching the footage of the Sydney Olympics", opens her laptop and googles "london sydney one way"(234). Thus the first

section of the novel concludes: Laura ends her exile and returns “home” to “the blue fern-leaf of that harbour” (94), Ravi leaves home and begins his exile in Australia. The year is 2000.

For both protagonists, their decisions (forced or not) involve predictable consequences. Both must find some kind of work (Laura becomes an editor at a travel guide publishers; Ravi finds employment in a Western suburb nursing home); the prodigal daughter must reengage in the complicated relations called family and “old” friends, the refugee must try to “acclimatise”, to find friends, anyone that might somehow understand his loneliness and confusion. Ravi soon experiences the hardest thing in an immigrant life: the unexpected long-distance phone call late at night, in this case delivering the news of his mother’s death.

But it was Varunika he hated. By the time they had spoken, there had been nothing left to say. Her voice had thickened, then quavered – but she had been there, the discovery had fallen to her. It was a pattern Ravi recognised: the fortunate youngest, shielded and spoiled. Old injustices clawed at him, paramount among them this: *Varunika had got away with refusing to eat tripe* (336).

One of the notions *Questions of Travel* plays with is that of the gaze<sup>8</sup>. Like most newcomers and tourists Ravi takes photographs but there is no film in the camera. As a Sri Lankan refugee without resident status, is he unable to appropriate Westerners’ images and this cosmopolitan city? Or is it a metaphor for his homesickness, his inability to accept and settle? Like the camera lens, we see Sydney through Ravi’s eyes: “He marvelled at the ease with which Sydney shrugged off drudgery, slinging a towel over its shoulder, heading for the waves” (350); “[s]ometimes it seemed to Ravi the city and all its inhabitants sought only the untrammelled blue terminus – the Australian mind slid towards it on shining rails” (398).

Ravi might have been at Hungry Jack’s at Central. In the west, too, people came from everywhere to consume, snatch a bargain, sink into dreams. They pushed strollers before them, trundling their vigorous, greedy Australian children into the future.

Laura, too, provides another view on Australia both as an insider and a foreigner. “The second flight of stairs was little more than a ladder. She opened the door at the

top and went out onto the roof. The bridge, the boats, the boisterous light, the whole glam, prancing knockout show” (297).

Through half-closed eyes, Laura was watching the tingle of light on the water. And fearing she might be slipping, slipping into the Great Australian Smugness produced by the blandishments of climate and scenery, not to mention world-class varietals you could pick up in any bottle shop these days. With the special fervency of the unbeliever, she prayed, Keep me from *It's great for a while but* (305).

By now it should be fairly obvious that De Kretser has been moving these characters on a collision course with the skill of a master chess player. Without giving the game away, however, let me say that readers who think they can predict the outcome had rather not try. Ravi does eventually find work in IT, through a strange set of happenstance, at Laura's guidebook publishers. And yes they do meet in this *strangest of theatres*.

The second section of the novel mainly deals with Ravi's exploration of Sydney and Laura's life there – which includes her workplace.<sup>9</sup> De Kretser's depiction of Ravi's home town in Sri Lanka in the first section is brilliant, her descriptions of Ramsay are equally so: both hilarious and an accurate critique of the travel business as a microcosm of Sydney itself. With the savagery of our best satirists and the humanity of a poet, De Kretser details the office routine, the endless meetings and boring e-mails, the casual affairs, downloading porn, the typical and quirky colleagues like Crystal in her bronze stiletto sandals and kneesocks who reminds Ravi of his favourite supermarket desert: “Bronte. If you're more than five minutes from the beach, you might as well live in Melbourne...It's a lifestyle thing” (401). Then there's the earnest do-gooder, the pot-smoking CEO and the owner with a Croatian-underwear-model-wife half his age. Ramsay is in the business of up to the minute information and depends largely on the facility of the internet to collect it.

Thus, if it were possible to pick one motif that runs through all of *Questions of Travel*, it would be the birth and acceleration of the digital revolution and its effect on society. As with the concepts of tourist/observer (Laura) and tourist destination/observed (Ravi), De Kretser's employment of two main characters from very different backgrounds allows her to examine this phenomenon from both sides.

Early on in the novel, Ravi quickly realises the potential of the internet which, when fully developed, will take him anywhere he wants to go in the world: “[s]oon everyone will be a tourist” (138). He is “haunted by the sense that he was witnessing the birth of a new world. ...He used a word that had become fashionable: *global*” (101). Laura, of course is no stranger to the web:

She remembered only four or five years earlier, ‘the information superhighway’ had been a fashionable term. *Information* encouraged thoughts of newsrooms and statisticians, of gravity and weight. But Laura’s experience of the internet was of invisibility, exoticism, discontinuity: a lightness. She moved from site to site in an exhilarating patternless dance. One step led to another, performance and choreography the same (340).

If, as it has often been said, information is power, then it is not surprising that people like Ravi living in a “third world” country, considered to be impoverished and backward (but a good tourist destination!) and those much less scrupulous, would desire such technology. Up until this point in our history Western powers have been able to decide who gets it (information) and who doesn’t. Colonial empires have been built by collecting data on the target “inferior” country and its population. (Think of *Description de l’Égypte* – which helped to obfuscate Napoleon’s Imperial aims – published between 1809 and 1821 in twenty-three volumes.) Now however, in at least the last fifty years, this control has been made less possible by the net, much to the disgruntlement of the main players.

The debate over cyberspace and virtual reality also concerns the issue of whether we as human beings are becoming more isolated – hunched over our computer screens or iPods – or becoming more engaged with, and knowledgeable about our world and our Others. Does intimacy lead to contempt? It is difficult to fathom Ravi’s compulsion to watch “cyber” Aimee, whom he “meets” in a chat room on-line, or her need to expose her life and body to strangers. As Ravi’s wife, Malini, comments with chilling perception in the first half of the novel, “daliness normalises everything, even slaughter” (101). But “[t]here was so much on the web that beguiled and blinked” (285). Ravi discovers RSS feeds, weblogs, “everything it seemed was for sale online...the web was like a city of strangers and connections....It thrilled with potential magic, risk” (284).

In the final pages of the book Laura and Ravi's paths are on a fatal trajectory. Laura is in Sri Lanka ("coconut palms at her window"); Ravi has returned home a week earlier. Laura (and the reader?) comes to a major realisation:

It was the unforeseen that returned tourism to travel. [but]...it was the soul that bled and composed accusations. It had learned that it was tourist – not an explorer, vagabond, nomad or adventurer...What ...wouldn't stun with busyness, lull with routine, infect with compromise like a slow, fatal blight?

The year is 2004.

I leave Elizabeth Bishop to express the final conundrum:

*Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places...*

*Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?...*

*But surely it would have been a pity  
not to have seen the trees along this road,  
really exaggerated in their beauty...*

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations in italics are from Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel" (1955), *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York: 1983, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> "Every Contact Leaves a Trace", *Southerly*, "Islands and Archipelagos", Vol. 72, No 3, 2012, pp187-196.

<sup>3</sup> All the writers on the short and long list are to be congratulated. Australian Literature, a "poor cousin" no longer, has much to celebrate this year.

<sup>4</sup> Ali, Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1994, p10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> James Clifford, "Notes on Theory and Travel", *Inscriptions*, 5, 1989, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> This conflict began in 1983 and ostensibly ended in 2009 when the Sri Lankan government defeated the insurgents, known as the Tamil Tigers. Accusations of horrific human rights violations have been made against both sides.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Jacques Lacan's "mirror phase"; *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1975); "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey (1975); *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972); "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity", Griselda Pollock (1988).

<sup>9</sup> The epigraph which opens the second section of the novel from "The Tourist and the Town" by Adrienne Rich should read: "To walk and suffer is to be at home./All else is scenery.../To work and suffer is to come to know/ the angles of a room, light in a square", *The Diamond Cutters* (1955).