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A Sacred Journey to Naples: Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel**

Abstract I: All'interno del tema del viaggio australiano in Italia, l'articolo analizzerà le immagini di Napoli nel romanzo di Michelle de Kretser *Questions of Travel* (2012). Inizierà con una breve introduzione alla storia del viaggio australiano e con un resoconto dei viaggi in Italia di de Kretser, accompagnato dai suoi commenti sulla sua esperienza (Trapè 2015). Proseguirà con il trattamento dell'Italia nel romanzo. Analizzerà quali immagini dell'Italia la scrittrice presenta in *Questions of Travel* al fine di definire il suo atteggiamento nei confronti di questo paese. L'analisi verrà condotta con il supporto teorico dello studio di Philippe Hamon sulla descrizione.

Abstract II: Within the theme of Australian Travel to Italy, the article will analyse images of Naples in Michelle de Kretser's novel *Questions of Travel* (2012). It will begin with a short introduction to Australian travel and an outline of de Kretser's journeys in Italy, as well as her comments on her Italian experiences (Trapè 2015). It will then move on to the treatment of Italy in her novel. I will analyse which views of Italy the writer presents in *Questions of Travel* in order to define her way of approaching and responding to this country. I will do this by focusing on her descriptions of Italy and will avail myself of the theoretical discussions of description provided by Philippe Hamon.

In the nineteenth century, affluent travellers from the "New Worlds", first from the United States and later from Australia, added to the flow of visitors who for centuries had journeyed to Italy to quench their thirst for history, art and beauty. For my purposes, writers and artists will be considered the most important category of travellers, since they are the ones who usually leave the most articulate and eloquent records of their travel experience. Not surprisingly, during the first two phases of Australian travel to Italy – from the first settlement in 1778 up to the 1950s¹ – the responses of Australian travellers had much in common

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¹ Three different phases may be distinguished. The first lasted over one hundred years, from the first settlement in 1778 to the 1890s. In this period, Britain, or "Home" (either literally or metaphorically), was the

with those that the British and the Americans gave until the 1920s; “[t]heir images of Italy derived from English literature and travel guides as did the widely, but not universally held assumption that Italians were a people inferior to the British race” (Pesman 1994: 96). Like their American counterparts, the majority of Australians in Italy had little doubt as to the superiority of their own country in terms of material progress, people’s health and happiness and their country’s wonderful prospects for the future. Therefore, they shared most of the common perceptions of Italy and of Italians that are found in British and American travel literature and fiction: complaints concerning the physical hardships of travelling in Italy, diffidence concerning the sort of Italians with whom travellers were obliged to come into daily contact, the blooming of the traveller’s sensuality thanks to the country’s mild climate, the haughty derision of Italian superstitions, and the disconcerted discovery of the importance placed on ‘appearances’ in Italy (Prampolini 2007: 200). Most Australians also commented on the supposed lack of industriousness of Italians, the oppressive preponderance of the past over the present, and the all-pervasive decay overpowering a long-gone grandeur.

After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and up to the 1960s, for the majority of Australians travelling to Europe Naples was the first port of call or a disembarkation: “[a]s the point of entry and exit, Naples was for Australians the boundary of Europe just as London was the centre. It was also a kind of synecdoche for Italy, for Southern Europe, for Mediterranean society” (Pesman 1991: 46). For some travellers intent only on Britain, a day in Naples was their only experience of Italy, the only basis for the views which they expressed. For others, it was the most important segment of the Continental tour, the place where more time was spent, and the place which absorbed more space in the accounts of their travels. Therefore, to Australian tourists travelling by ship, it was Naples that usually represented Italy and confirmed all their preconceptions:

[a]ll the common images and stereotypes which Australians associate with Italy – noise, colour, dirt, passion, excitability, sensuality, indolence, devotion to pleasure – could be confirmed in the south. Thus Italy becomes Naples; and the *Italianità* of the rest of Italy was judged by its degree of conformity to the Neapolitan norm. In Naples the travellers from the land of sun and warmth of the south met southern Europe and the Mediterranean. And it is possible that part of the explanation for their hostility and rejection might be that when the Australians confronted the Other in Naples, they confronted their hidden fears of the impact of a seductive southern sun and warmth on the moral fibre of their people – of indolence, sloth, sensuality, pleasure-seeking (Pesman 1991: 46).

longed-for goal of the trip and the continental tour was usually a popular addiction. In the nineteenth century, the typical Australian visitors to Italy were members of the wealthy colonial elite who could afford extended and leisurely tours; sojourns of several weeks in Rome or Florence were not uncommon. With the rapid demographic and economic expansion of Australia in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the rise of a prosperous middle class, the number of Australians going ‘overseas’ increased and so a second phase of Australian travel to Italy can be identified lasting from the 1890s up to the 1950s. In this phase, Australians began coming to Italy also in order to study the language, literature, history, art, architecture, archaeology and music of the country. A third phase started at the beginning of the 1950s. In retracing Australian travel to Italy, I have referred to Roslyn Pesman’s contributions to the study of the subject.

Sensuality, pleasure, but also dirt and indolence were associated with this warm South, and contemporary Naples and its people were judged – and usually condemned – by most Australian travellers by the standards of the British colonial bourgeoisie: sobriety, order, cleanliness, comfort, industriousness and material progress. In their view, filth and dirt were associated with immorality and decadence; working-class Neapolitans were often described as dishonest, impulsive and lazy. Disgusted by filth and squalor, the bourgeois travellers do not appear to have grasped the main cause of such flaws: poverty. On the other hand, it is worthwhile noticing that some Australian travellers already showed a genuine interest in Italian history, and people as well, and a strong hostility towards British imperialism². However, it was not until the late 1930s that an awareness of the country's poverty began to emerge in Australian writing on Italy in the works of writers and artists who lived in the Italian South in the twentieth century³.

The South of Italy and the Mediterranean were portrayed in a new light in British travel writing between the two world wars; Paul Fussell argues for the unique character and literary quality of the works by author such as D. H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, Robert Byron, Norman Douglas and E. M. Fortser (Fussell 1980). The chronic bad weather, restrictions from the Defense of the Realm Act (DORA), the implementation of passport and the proliferation of nation-state borders are well-documented as both inhibitors and catalysts for travel. "After 1918 it is as the weather worsens to make England all but uninhabitable to the imaginative and sensitive" (Fussell 1980: 21); among the young men of the twenties the cult of travel became an obsession. The Mediterranean becomes the model for the concept south, embodied by the south of Italy and France. In the 1920s and 30s the sun was redeemed from the social stigma it had carried in the nineteenth century; in the twentieth century the sun brought health, strength and mystical emanations. "John Weightman has called [it] the Solar Revolution, and it is one of the most startling reversals in modern intellectual and emotional history" (Fussell 1980: 137). Lawrence can be seen as merely the vanguard of the British Literary Diaspora, the great flight of writers from England in the 1920s and the 30s. The post war flight from the Middle West of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Sinclair Lewis is the American counterpart of these European flights from a real or fancied narrowing of horizons (Fussell 1980: 10-11).

A new vigour is also traceable at the beginning of the 1950s in Australian travel to Italy; it marks the starting of a new phase. Australia entered a period of unprecedented prosperity at the end of the Second World War, and cheap berths on the returning migrant ships opened the possibility of travel abroad to a wider group of Australians. This third phase was characterized by a consistent increase in the number of travellers, including many writers, painters and intellectuals who rejected and fled, at least for a while, an overwhelmingly Anglophile and conservative Australia. From the 1950s on, a growing number of Australian writers and artists chose to live in Italy in search of a place where they could express themselves more freely. To artists and writers, travelling to Italy meant reclaiming a European

² Among them Randolph Bedford (1868-1941); James Smith (1820-1919); Samuel Griffith (1845-1920).

³ Writers Christina Stead (1902-1983) and Morris West (1916-1999), and painter Alan Mc Culloch (1907-1992).

heritage which did not necessarily coincide with Great Britain⁴. Martin Boyd's Italianate novels project traditional British images of Italy as well as images that correspond to the new awareness of Australia's European cultural roots in the nineteen-fifties, as expressed in A. D. Hope's "A letter from Rome" (Bader 1922: 277): "The source is Italy, and hers is Rome / The *fons* and *origo* of Western man; / [...] Here the great venture of the heart began. / Here simply with a sense of coming home / I have returned with no explicit plan / [...] to find / Something once dear, long lost and left behind" (Hope 1966 [1958]: 143). The powerful recognition of Italy as the source of Western European – and therefore also Australian – culture in this phase of travel, generates a longing for return, reinforced by the distance of Australia from this ancient civilized world. During this phase, which can be seen as distinguishably Australian, the common attitude towards Italy was of a dreamland fostering transformation, discovery or construction of a new self or new aspects of the self; in their recognition of the Italian cultural heritage Australian writers and artists represent that awareness of the importance of Classical antiquity and Italian cultural roots for Western culture and civilization which were so prominent in the Australian post-war literature on Italy (Bader 1922: 316). In Italy they found a home not only of the spirit, but also of the senses, because the Italy they discovered offered areas of experience which in the English-speaking world were not as easily accessible.

Jeffrey Smart and Shirley Hazzard can be considered two of the last major representatives of this traditional Australian attitude towards Italy; despite being aware of the deep transformations industrialization and mass tourism have brought to the country, for them Italy continued to be the source of an aesthetic experience not to be found anywhere else.

⁴ Most of them returned home, some remained abroad for years, some others never went back. Martin Boyd (1893-1972), A. D. Hope (1907-2000), Morris West (1916-1999), Shirley Hazzard (b.1931) and David Malouf (b.1934) travelled to or resided in Italy in the 1950s. Morris West's novel *Children of the Sun. The Slum Dwellers of Naples*, published in 1957, goes against the nineteenth-century colonialist stereotyping of Naples focusing on the reasons of the city's poverty. Peter Porter (b.1929), who moved to London in 1951, also travelled to Italy in the 1960s and continued to visit frequently. In 1958 Patrick White was staying in Italy as well. A great number of young Australian scholars, artists and writers went to Italy in the 1960s and in the 1970s: Jeffrey Smart (1921-2013) moved permanently to Italy in 1964; Robert Hughes left Australia for Europe in 1964, and lived for a time in Porto Ercole, Tuscany; Germaine Greer (b. 1938) acquired a property in a valley in Tuscany; Tom Shapcott (b.1935), Judith Rodriguez (b.1936), Janine Burke (b. 1952) travelled to Italy and were inspired by this country in their work. Artists and writers became a significant presence in Italy also as a result of generous scholarship schemes and the expansion of Australian universities. In the early 1970s there was in fact a sense of new vigour in Australian culture, also due to the foundation of the Literature Board of the Australia Council in 1973, whose main purpose was to support artists and writers in developing their work. In December 1972 Gough Whitlam was elected Prime Minister of Australia, reinstating Labour Party rule after twenty-three years of Liberal party dominance. This political change created a new confidence and a new hope among Australian artists and writers; they believed that arts and culture in Australia would at last have genuine government support under Whitlam. Whitlam himself has felt a life-long fascination with the history of Italy; he went there first in 1962 and continued to visit regularly. *My Italian Notebook* (2002) covering art, architecture and politics, is the record of his profound interest in this country. The 1980s saw other writers significantly affected by their journeys in Italy: Leon Trainor (b.1945); Kate Grenville (b.1950), who resided in a Tuscan farmhouse, and David Foster (1944). Poet Diane Fahey (b.1945) travelled to Italy in 1987 and 1989, moving from Venice through Florence to Rome. Peter Robb (b.1946) visited Italy in 1974, returned in 1978 and lived in Naples for fifteen years. Robert Dessaix visited Italy a number of times in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Smart moved to Italy in 1964 and since then found in this country a place where he could be free to develop his art and realize his self without inhibitions; until his death in 2013 he found in Italy the nourishment coming from the light and purity of high Renaissance. Hazzard was sent on a year's mission to Naples in 1956 while she was working in New York at the UN Secretariat, and since then she has continued to spend her time between Manhattan and Italy, mainly on Capri and in Naples. She wrote a novel inspired by her sojourn in this city: *The Bay of Noon* published in 1970, and a collection of essays *The Ancient Shore. Dispatches from Naples* (2008). Notwithstanding the still only too visible scars left by World War Two, Hazzard's first encounter with the city and its surroundings was ecstatic, and none of the subsequent visits and stays had her revise and change her original response. The approach and the response to Italy take on quite a different form with Australian writers of younger generations, among them Peter Robb and Robert Dessaix. Robb's life in Naples had considerable bearing on his remarkable books set in Italy: *Midnight in Sicily* (1996), *M.* (1998), and *Street Fights in Naples* (2010), which offer poignant images of the city. Robert Dessaix sets his novel *Night Letters* (1996) in Venice and closes his book *Arabesques* (2008) with a chapter set in Naples. Whether the home of fifteen-year-long residence – as for Robb – or mainly a place of transit – as for Dessaix – for neither writer was Italy the final, dreamed-of goal of pilgrimage to discover their roots or an attempt to re-connect with the source of Australian culture. Neither of them saw Italy as the ground for a transformation of their own identities, as many of their Australian predecessors did. Neither Robb nor Dessaix come to Italy in search of antiquity and art. The images of Italy which emerge from their works are starkly different from the one that prevailed in the writings deriving from the entire tradition of Australian travel to Italy; so different, indeed, that one is tempted to see these writings as marking the beginning of a new phase (Trapè 2012: 167). In Robb's *Midnight in Sicily*, despite the author's passionate attachment to the Italian South, the descriptions of the cities of Naples and Palermo he revisits in 1995 depict a country at the mercy of criminal organizations abetted by unprincipled politicians; in *Night Letters* Dessaix portrays late 20th century Northern Italy as disfigured beyond recognition by savage anthropization. While in Hazzard's *The Ancient Shore* Naples still exerts the powerful fascination with which her 'Italian' writings, from the earliest to the most recent ones, are infused, Robb and Dessaix introduce elements of novelty in the treatment of Italy, which I also detected in Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel*.

Nowadays, artists and writers no longer form the larger component in the flow of travellers to Italy. However, contemporary Australian literature clearly suggests that travel to Italy remains a phenomenon of great significance. From the beginning of the 1990s onwards there has been a sizeable output of books set in or having to do with Italy, adding to a considerable corpus of texts by Australian writers based on their travel experiences in this country⁵. In the same period there has been a spate of best sellers, written mainly by

⁵ Among them books by scholar Paul Carter (*Baroque Memories*, 1994; *Metabolism. The Exhibition of the Unseen*, 2015) and writer and translator Robert Dessaix (*Night Letters*, 1996; *Corfu*, 2001; *Arabesques*, 2008); David Malouf's short story "Around Midnight" (in *Every Move you Make*, 2007), but also Jeffrey Smart's autobiography (*Not Quite Straight. A Memoir*, 1996); Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* (1996), *M.* (1998), *Street Fight in Naples*

Australian journalists who have spent time in Italy. Basically meant to serve as guidebooks for tourists, these works focus on the pleasures of living in Italy⁶; they correspond to a sort of global genre, a new kind of travel book that is fast proliferating and to which Australia is contributing in a surprisingly large measure. This new kind of travel book has mainly originated from the great emphasis on lifestyle in global consumer culture and does not represent a peculiarity in Australian literature, although it powerfully proves the great curiosity felt by Australians for Italy and the fascination that this country still exerts on them.

In contemporary Australian literature inspired by Italy, Michelle de Kretser's novel *Questions of Travel* (2012) stands out for its depth and originality, also in the author's treatment of this country. Short sections of the novel are set in Naples. My study will analyse images of Naples in *Questions of Travel*; accordingly, it will begin with a short outline of de Kretser's journeys in Italy and with her comments on her Italian experiences. It will then move on to the treatment of Italy in her novel. I will analyse which views of Italy the writer presents in *Questions of Travel* in order to define her way of approaching and responding to this country. I will do this by focusing mainly on her descriptions of Italy and will avail myself of the theoretical discussions of description provided by Philippe Hamon.

Michelle de Kretser is an Australian novelist who was born in Sri Lanka in 1957, and migrated to Australia in 1972 when she was fourteen. She was educated in Colombo, Melbourne and Paris. In Australia she has worked as a university tutor, editor and book reviewer. From 1989 to 1992, de Kretser was a founding editor of the *Australian Women's Book Review*. While on a sabbatical in 1998 from Lonely Planet, where she worked as a publisher, she wrote her first novel, *The Rose Grower* (published in 1999). Her second novel, published in 2003, *The Hamilton Case*, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Southeast Asia and Pacific region), the Trans-Tasman Prize for Fiction and the Encore Prize. Her third novel, *The Lost Dog*, was published in 2007; it won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and was longlisted for the Man Booker and Orange Prize. Her fourth novel, *Questions of Travel*, won several awards, including the 2013 Miles Franklin Award, the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal (ALS Gold Medal), and the 2013 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction, and was shortlisted for the 2014 Dublin Impac Award. De Kretser's novel *The Life to Come* will be published in 2017.

At the University of Melbourne, de Kretser studied French and beginners' Italian. She remembers her first trip to Italy in 1981. While in Florence, she remembers how intensely she responded to the built landscape, to the history of the city. She recalls her stay in a *penzione* owned by three sisters; for the shower you needed a *gettone*. "I remember buying a *gettone* and the water was cold, and it was winter; and I was shocked, and screamed in the

(2010) and *Lives* (2012); Shirley Hazzard's *Greene on Capri. A Memoir* (2000) and *The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples* (2008); Gough Whitlam's *My Italian Notebook* (2002); Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* (2012).

⁶ I refer to such works as George Negus's *The World from Italy. Football, Food and Politics* (2001); Carla Coulson's *Italian Joy* (2005); Sara Benjamin's *A Castle in Tuscany* (2006); Penelope Green's *When in Rome: Chasing La Dolce Vita* (2006), *See Naples and Die* (2007) and *Girl by Sea: Life, Love and Food on an Italian Island* (2009); Peter Moore's *Vroom with a View. In Search of Italy's Dolce Vita on a '61 Vespa* (2003) and *Vroom by the Sea. The Sunny Parts of Italy on a Bright Orange Vespa* (2007). I have selected a few titles; the complete list is very long.

corridor 'acqua calda' (hot water), but I meant to say it was cold, confusing cold with *calda* (hot). The landlady calmly replied, 'Si, si calda'⁷. In the same year while de Kretser was working in Montpellier, as an *assistante* in a lycée, she and a friend travelled around Europe by train with a Europass ticket. She went back to Italy, visiting Venice, Bologna, Florence, Siena, San Gimignano, Perugia and Rome. They didn't visit the South.

Looking back on this trip, de Kretser says:

We started that trip in June. I remember travelling by train through Germany and Switzerland. It was cold and grey and rainy. Then, early one morning, the train pulled in to Venice, and it was summer. I remember how wonderful the sunshine was, and the warmth (de Kretser 2015).

This response is typical of travellers arriving in Italy from Northern Europe.

We wanted to go to Naples, but it was 1981, the year after the earthquake, and people said to us that it was not a safe city for two young girls on their own: that Naples was a difficult place, especially now, in the aftermath of the disaster. So we didn't go further south than Rome (de Kretser 2015).

After her first visits in 1981, de Kretser returned to Italy in the 1990s, always visiting the north and the centre, specifically Florence and Tuscany. In September 2008, she travelled to the South of Italy for the first time with her partner, Australian poet and translator Chris Andrews. They visited Sicily and Naples; they had never been to Italy together, having always travelled there separately. De Kretser found those places extraordinary, extremely moving, and loved them immediately. She felt as if she had travelled back in time.

Recollecting her emotional responses to Palermo and Naples, de Kretser remembers that in the city centre of Palermo, which had been gutted by bombs in 1943, she saw the ruins of the old city still there, decades after the war, and trees and plants growing among them. In Naples, she strongly felt that the city belonged to the people who lived there – to the poor as well as to the affluent, who lived side by side:

in Palermo and Naples, there is still a power which has disappeared in the rest of Europe. These are cities where the poor and the bourgeoisie live together. They are not like Paris, and not even like the north of Italy. I feel this is how Europe would have been in the 1950s or the early 1960s. These are cities that don't cater to tourism. I love Paris and Florence and Venice, but they perform themselves, they are spectacles, whereas I felt that Naples and Palermo were not like that. I felt that I was seeing the last glimmer of a world that had vanished elsewhere. My sense of bearing witness to last traces, to something passing was strong (de Kretser 2015).

⁷ Roberta Trapè. Unpublished interview with M. de Kretser, Sydney, 2 September 2015. Henceforth all the quotations referring to de Kretser's journeys in Italy will be taken from the above mentioned interview. I wish to express my most profound gratitude to Michelle de Kretser.

They were places that reminded me a little bit of Colombo, where I lived as a child. In September, when I visited Naples, it was humid, and there was a lushness and a fecundity in the vegetation that seemed tropical; there were palms and bougainvillea, tropical plants. The buildings had not been cleaned: they were often filthy, grand but dilapidated, falling down but fabulous, fantastic. I know it's not good that they are falling down, but this decrepitude, which makes them moving, also gives them beauty (de Kretser 2015).

Baroque in Rome can sometimes be too overwhelming; it's beautiful but designed specifically to make you feel small. Of course it originally served the same purpose in Palermo and Naples, but now, after centuries of neglect, the buildings there no longer feel grandiose and crushing. The opposite: I found them moving because they seemed in need of protection. Often, all of a sudden, you come across marvellous churches or wonderful, huge blackened monasteries or convents, in a state of decay; they arrive with no warning. In Naples along the Roman streets like Spaccanapoli, there are stunning buildings, but you don't have a clear view of them because you can't step back far enough to see them whole, the streets are narrow and so crowded with buildings (de Kretser 2015).

De Kretser, as Hazzard had noticed before her, thinks of Naples as a city of surprises: when you least expect it, you discover one of its many treasures. Like Hazzard, de Kretser is fascinated by the millennial history of Naples. She can't help but recall that this is a city that has existed since before the birth of Jesus, for three thousand years. She mentions Hazzard's point that Naples is the only Classical city to have survived to the present day. De Kretser also mentions Peter Robb, admiring both authors' skills in portraying Naples.

De Kretser shares Robb's view of Naples when he wrote in *Midnight in Sicily* that Naples seems to belong to the people who live in it; the richness and splendour of the city, the spirituality, culture, and sensuality of Naples depend on its people, who noisily shape the life and rhythm of their city. De Kretser observes:

Naples seemed to me a place that was marvellously alive and very moving; and the people, especially the poor, play a large role in this. I don't intend to idealise poverty. But I noticed in Naples that people, poor people, value simple things, and that is another reason that it reminded me of Sri Lanka. You still see families living in a single room, and their children playing in the streets with a plastic bottle – that's their toy. That's another reason why it reminded me of the Sri Lanka of my childhood. It wasn't a place given over to consumption (de Kretser 2015).

De Kretser comments that before visiting Naples she had known the city only through the pages of Hazzard's and Robb's books, and did not know as much about it as she knew about other Italian cities. During her first visit to Naples, she thought the city was like a treasure trove. You have to earn the city's treasures – they are not given to you. There is wonderful art, but several buildings are falling down. She recalls wandering through the streets of the city and coming across beautiful things – a fresco or a classical column, for ex-

ample – stuck in a side street, without a sign to point the way. “While Paris, Venice, Florence parade their treasures”, she comments:

in Naples you have to look for the city’s precious secrets. They are not displayed, you have to discover them. I felt as if I was discovering a secret when I went to that place: the whole city was like a secret. It’s there and has been there for a very long time, but it’s not yet been discovered by mass tourism because the city’s reputation for danger and crime keeps tourists away. Naples is not on the touristic routes. In guidebooks, it is often associated with rubbish, dirt, danger and robbery, and consequently not many foreign tourists go there. That kind of bad reputation protects the city in a way - not that I mean to glamorize crime. I remember that at the hotel where we were staying in Naples they told us not to wear jewellery in the street. I had been to Rome on the same trip, and the number of tourists there was incredible; there weren’t nearly as many in Naples. Talking to other tourists in Rome, I realized that many of them didn’t stop off in Naples even when going to visit Pompeii (de Kretser 2015).

Going south from Rome, de Kretser encountered a society that had been a lot less transformed by the post-war boom than the North, and also a society that was less visited by foreigners, like Naples. She adds: “I felt that we are getting the last glimpse of Western Europe as it was before it became Disneyfied” (de Kretser 2015). It is worth considering that while for the majority of Australian visitors travelling by ship to Europe through the Suez canal Naples was first port of call, the shift to air travel – safe and efficient international jet service began in earnest in 1957 – moved the travellers to Italy northwards to Rome and Milan.

De Kretser has always travelled in Italy for short periods only, but this notwithstanding, her experience has been of great use to her in writing part of her truly valuable novel. *Questions of Travel* charts two very different lives. It has two main characters separated by time and space – Laura, born in Australia in the 1960s, and Ravi, born in Sri Lanka, first seen as a child in the 1970s. Laura travels the world before returning to Sydney, Ravi dreams of being a tourist until he is forced to leave his country. The novel twines structurally – Laura and Ravi each have near-alternating chapters through forty years of separate travels, restlessness, and movement. The story proceeds in a series of episodes, over the years to 2004, changing location in history and geography.

The counterpointing of Laura’s story with Ravi’s throws a particular critical light on the former; this is central to the novel as a whole. While Laura is not a tourist in Naples, she lives the relatively privileged life of an expat: she can leave any time she doesn’t like it. And of course elsewhere she is a tourist; she travels for pleasure. Travel is generally easy for Laura, since she has the money to do so and her passport carries her easily over borders, whereas it’s difficult for Ravi, who is poor and whose Sri Lankan passport is not looked on favourably. De Kretser wanted to show that tourism is based on privilege: on leisure and money and possessing a ‘desirable’ passport. Central to the novel is the contrast between those who travel for pleasure and those who are forced to travel. When we speak of travel we tend to think of tourism, and the number of tourists around the world currently stands

at more than one billion. But most of the people moving around the world for purposes other than tourism are extremely poor. This group includes guest workers – typically doing menial work in a host country – as well as seasonal workers – usually employed in agriculture. It includes asylum-seekers fleeing war or persecution or famine, and it includes illegal immigrants, who will typically spend years, perhaps their whole life, with no formal status in their new country.

Laura settles for some time in London, and here she has the chance to write for a travel magazine, *The Wayfarer*, and the brand-new editor Meera Bryden, knowing she is going to Naples, asks her to write about the city.

The shrewdly devised paratext of which the title is a part includes two epigraphs. De Kretser's book is entitled *Questions of Travel* as a tribute to Elizabeth Bishop's poem of the same name which de Kretser quotes as one of two epigraphs, the second being from E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. The epigraphs question each other. The Forster quote, which comes first, is, "Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle ...". Forster was using cosmopolitanism to mean a personal style or a future intellectual type into which we will ultimately all be shaped as we abandon nationality and become global or, as the OED defines it – being the condition of free from national limitations or attachments. The Bishop poem is quite long. The lines used by de Kretser are: "But surely it would have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road / really exaggerated in their beauty". They hint at the theatrical exaggeration of the travel experience, especially when we return to tell travellers' tales. About the book, de Kretser points out that

this is a book which is not anti-tourism, but which questions tourism. I didn't want to do the kind of writing that is required from Laura by Meera, a kind of writing which accentuates the positive, the beautiful, the fascinating, and is aimed at attracting visitors to a place. I wanted to explore both the pleasure of tourism, a good sense of pleasurable 'disorientation', and also the loneliness and estrangement that it brings. You readily feel estranged when you're a tourist, you don't have any deep connection to the places you're visiting, and you feel alone (de Kretser 2015).

In questioning tourism de Kretser implicitly explores the issue of tourism and travel, and shows the 'snobbery' about places spoiled or not by tourists that runs through both the novel and her interview. The author's conscious desire to critique the tourist industry in the novel is set against an unavoidable complicity in the tourist experience. Fussell discusses the snobbery shown by tourists: "It is hard to be a snob and a tourist at the same time. A way to combine both roles is to become anti-tourist [...]. But the anti-tourist deludes only himself. We are all tourists now, and there is no escape" (Fussell 1980: 46-49).

Laura Fraser is born in Sydney in 1964; her story opens with her eight-year-old twin brothers deciding to drown her in a swimming pool when she is two; when she is four their mother dies. Her father's aunt, Hester, who has spent seven years of her life in India and is recently back in Sydney after half a lifetime in London, comes to look after Laura and her two older brothers. She stays until Laura leaves school. She brings with her the "sky-blue

travel case in which Hester kept her souvenirs of the Continent" (de Kretser 2012: 5); "Laura would beg for the stories attached to these marvels. Because otherwise they merely thrilled [...]. Hester saw a small, plain face that pleaded and couldn't be refused" (de Kretser 2012: 6). This is Laura's first contact with the idea of travelling, with the fascination of distant countries and the stories attached to them.

Donald Fraser, Laura's father, thinks of her as "the repository of all that was massive and defective in Donald's lineage;" "he couldn't conceive of the absence of beauty in a woman as anything other than a misfortune" (de Kretser 2012: 14). Laura enrolls at an art school, but after her first year she decides she is not good enough, and withdraws her enrolment. All of a sudden Hester dies, and leaves her "a surprising sum"; "[a]nd so, like a heroine, Laura came into an inheritance. There was only one thing to do. She set out to see the world" (de Kretser 2012: 44).

At the beginning of each chapter, the decade in which the narrative takes place is indicated. In the 1980s Laura first travels to Bali; a man staying in the same lodgings in Ubud, who has been spending his holidays in Bali since 1971, addresses Laura speaking of the forested acres felled since he had first come to the island, the multiplication of hotels, the destruction of reefs, the corruption of values, the poisoning of water and air (de Kretser 2012: 46).

What she couldn't know was that Darrell was only a prefiguration. Across the world, the world-weary were waiting. 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. The earthquake had finished off Naples. Giuliani has wrecked New York. Immigrants ruined wherever they squatted (de Kretser 2012: 48).

Through a prolepsis the narrator introduces the idea of the traveller's inevitable experience of present-day changes and losses. The offences that tourists in ever-increasing swarms, greedy developers and politics have caused speak of a lost beauty which will be never recovered; it will always be too late. This is the first time Naples is mentioned in the book, and it is as an example of 'lost paradise'. The recourse to anachronic distortions, and specifically of prolepsis, is systematic in the narration of Laura's story. It is worth noticing that Naples is mentioned in a context where de Kretser questions travel and tourism using, often ironically, the typical, most common views on places being spoiled over time: "Laura would learn that she had missed the moment; to be a tourist was always to arrive too late" (de Kretser 2012: 48).

The perception of places is mostly the prerogative of the main character, and occurs in those "interruption[s] in the syntagmatics of the narration" (Hamon 1982: 150) which provide descriptions. A description is often the result of the combining of one character with a setting, a *milieu*, a landscape. When the story comes to a temporary halt a description stands out against the narrative background; it is an interruption in the narration and thus a prolongation of the act of looking of the character/narrator who is assigned the description (Hamon 1982: 150). When in *Questions of Travel* Laura looks at a certain place, speaks of it, or acts on it, the description is felt by the reader to depend on the view and vision of the char-

acter, on her ability to see; the character's prolonged gazing at her surroundings appeals to a desire and a capacity to see.. The reader supposes that the character is 'absorbed', 'fascinated', 'loses track' of time because of what she is looking at, and that she has been able to abstract herself for a while from the plot. Two possibilities are especially common: a stationary character/narrator (leaning on something, laying down, sitting, standing motionless) before a panorama or an object which is moving or changing; a moving character (walking, visiting, a tourist, an explorer) observing a fixed but complex scene, for instance a street, a landscape, a flat (Hamon 1982: 150).

In the 1980s, after travelling to India, Laura goes to London; she makes up her mind to find a job when Hester's money runs out; she imagines herself staying there, but in the 1990s

[w]hen it became clear that January intended to go on forever, a ticket from a bucket shop carried Laura over clotted skies. Two hours from London, a sunlit planet was waiting. There was trudging and happiness. [...] There were angels in the architecture, and cypresses and tombs, and strangers with known faces: they had floated free of seventeenth-century paintings. It was true that to try crossing the street was to be plunged into terror. And there was that day she saw a girl lean from a pillion to detach a bag from a negligent arm. But for the space of a whole morning, street led to street and brought nothing that didn't please. She had to look at everything. [...] In every direction, buildings were ochre, burnt orange, the rosy-red of crushed berries (2012: 71).

The first experience of Italy for Laura is staying in a *pensione* in Rome. She found herself in a "[s]unlit planet" which immediately brings "[t]rudging and happiness": sunshine, slow time and joy. They are counterbalanced by the character's perception of Rome's dangerous traffic and robbery in the streets. From this first short description of Rome and Italy, beauty and flaws emerge, and beauty and pleasure prevail. Laura compares herself to a toddler she sees in a café in an Italian *piazza* exploring the surroundings with elated statements: "they were not so different, really, each marvelling at the wonders of the world" (de Kretser 2012: 72). A typical scene in descriptions is the character intruding upon an unknown place, a plausible padding which justifies the introduction of the description (Hamon 1982: 157); "trudging" "street led to street". The character's psychological motivations, curiosity and interest, are clear: "she had to look at everything" (de Kretser 2012: 71).

The sunny morning of Laura's arrival in Italy is followed by "[a] sunless afternoon [which] brought the pitiless arches of the Colosseum".

Out-of-place figures, shivering in synthetics, came slipping out. They offered carvings, and beads hefty as sorrows. One elongated, knife-thin form, a Giacometti sculpted from ebony, knelt to release a white bird at Laura's feet. Together they watched it whirr heaven-wards, a soaring no less full of hope or being mechanical. They could only try to replicate it later in a room at the end of a bus line, far from the relics of emperor and saints.

Afterwards, Laura stood at a terminus in a road where rubbish blew. [...] The people passing had cheap coats, and eyes full of calculations. But unlike Laura, they were

hurrying home. The stout African waiting for the bus, her hair bound in a gaudy cloth, was privy to knowledge enjoyed equally by the apricot-complexioned rich admiring each other on the via Condotti. It was the reason why tourists read travel guides like missals. If they chose the correct street, dined on a particular terrace, went through a crucial door, everything would be different. Laura felt in her bag for her guidebook; she needed to check that it hadn't been left behind, along with the starburst of joy, in the room with the exposed wiring and the single, cold-water tap (de Kretser 2012: 72).

The image of the *piazza* in the city centre is juxtaposed to an image of the suburbs where immigrants live, "far from the relics of emperor and saints". A contrast is skilfully offered between wealthy people admiring each other in Via Condotti, and poor ones, with cheap coats and "eyes full of calculations" in the suburban areas of the city. Reading travel guides like missals becomes something strictly connected to a certain way of travelling and consuming food in our increasingly consumerist postindustrial western world. The idea is introduced that visiting certain cities and consuming certain food in certain places can contribute to the realisation of a 'meaningful' self⁸. With a railway pass Laura travels to France:

[t]he windows of meandering *diretti* framed towns and towers and rounded hills. They were teasingly familiar, touched with *déjà-vu*. After a while, Laura realised that she was looking at the bland, pretty vistas with which the minor masters of the Quattrocento filled in their backgrounds (de Kretser 2012: 73).

As happened in the description of Rome with the 'known faces' she met, in the surrounding environment Laura sees landscapes familiar from Italian paintings, which reveal the protagonist's fascination with Italian visual arts. From France she travels to Madrid, then Portugal. Laura's money is running out; she goes back to London, where she meets Theo Newman, twenty-seven, son of a German refugee from the Second World War, who is three years younger than Laura. Theo is working on a DPhil about nostalgia in the twentieth-century European novel; "Theo loved men. He loved the unrepentantly hetero, men who had wives or girlfriends, men who didn't love him in return" (de Kretser 2012: 108). At one of the Sunday evening gatherings Theo likes to host, Laura meets Bea Morley. "Laura found her way to friendship with Bea, a bedrock attachment that would last all her days" (de Kretser 2012: 119). During her travels Laura has flings, affairs with married men, but

⁸ Various theorists of cultural criticism have explored the issue of how people in postindustrial societies strive to form 'meaningful' selves through both the consumption and production of material culture in leisure. Among them: David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989); Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism* (1991) and Zygmunt Bauman in *Consuming Life* (2007). They have widely examined, within the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the process of capital as the reproduction of social life through commodity production, and the continuous creation of new desires, wants and needs. The acquisition of an image (through the purchase of a sign system such as designer clothes and the right car, or eating or cooking the right food in the right place) becomes a singularly important element in the presentation of the self in the market and, by extension, becomes integral in the quest for individual identity, self-realization and meaning.

nothing lasting. Love is absent, or reduced to sudden, short outbursts of joy. Bea's cousin Vivienne, who lives in Naples, is returning to England because her father is ill. She doesn't want to give up her apartment or the students with whom she is paid to converse in English; Bea reports all this idly to Laura, and Laura decides to leave for Naples.

Two nights before she leaves, Meera Bryden, one of Theo's friends, calls her. Laura had written a piece on the cathedral in Strasburg for her magazine, a piece which Meera found "utterly chilly" and "so original. She loved it and was sorry they couldn't run it [...]".

But now it appeared that Laura was going to Naples, how clever of her, the Mezzogiorno was the coming destination. Meera would love to run a feature on Puglia or Sicily – something a trifle less cerebral than Laura's Strasburg piece, a touch more sensual? At the magazine they had been thinking about food, the simple, earthy dishes of the south, people adored reading about eating in exotic locations and you could run such glorious photos. Was Laura by any chance tempted ... ? (de Kretser 2012: 153).

This section emphasises Meera's touristic gaze on the South of Italy and on its food⁹, the ideal of Italy as a beautiful place where to enjoy 'pleasure and simplicity' through 'the simple, earthy dishes of the south' to be eaten in exotic locations¹⁰. At the airport in Naples

[t]he last bag from the London flight was claimed [...], and Laura was left alone ... A uniformed figure approached, officials spoke into walkie-talkies; Laura filled out forms; it was foolish, she was telling herself, to think in terms of signs. Then a panel in the wall slid open like magic: a man in overalls emerged. He handed Laura the case. It had been retrieved from the tarmac, where it had fallen, unnoticed, from a trailer (de Kretser 2012: 155).

As soon Laura arrives, she realises that her luggage has not arrived, but "like magic" the problem is solved.

By the time the airport bus pulled in, Naples stood in a brownish, benzene dusk. What had Laura expected? Arias, gunfire, the ghosts of centurions perhaps? Certainly her pocket explored by expert hand. Circles of traffic tightened and hummed. *Just a*

⁹ In *The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion* (2013) Virginia Postrel points out that nowadays tourists travelling to Italy "yearn [...] for *pleasure* and *simplicity*: good, fresh food in a beautiful place without too much bustle. So now they dream of Italy, minus the inefficiencies and frustrations of real Italian life and, of course, without the other tourists" (Postrel 2013: 20).

¹⁰ In *How Italian Food Conquered the World* (2011) John Mariani tells the story of how Italian cuisine rose to its place as the most beloved fare in the world. By the 1990s Italian food was gaining real stature, status and class: "[t]he Italian food gospel was being spread more enthusiastically than ever by the media in the twenty-first century, not least among book publishers [...]. Television also jumped on the Italian food bandwagon, both in Italy and abroad" (Mariani 2011: 235-236). Cooking shows on Italian cuisine became immensely popular in English-speaking countries. Within this phenomenon it has to be stressed that in the 1980s a spectacular visual presentation of cooking or eating in advertisements, magazines and cookery books, cooking shows or other visual media as TV programmes and cinema started to emerge. It offered perfectly lit details of dishes which were meant to arouse a desire to eat them or wish for them.

short walk, said the letter Vivienne had sent with a map. She began to make her way through the crowd, between folding tables on which were set out socks, combs, pocketknives, cheap, useful things. A shadow came whispering of hashish and a hotel. Laura walked faster, tried to look purposeful and knowing. An enormous square had been dug up and barriers erected around the excavations. She had to cross it – but how? An iron hand seized her arm: it had prevented her from stepping in front of a bus. Laura thanked, wanted to cry, fled into a narrow street (de Kretser 2012: 155-156).

Laura's arrival in Naples from the airport takes places in "brownish, benzene dusk". The alliteration underlines the unpleasant combination of darkness and the stench of polluted air; the other alliteration "hashish and a hotel" talks of a sinister presence in the streets at night. Laura's expectations of Naples are connected to expert robbers. Entering an unknown place is one of the typical demarches used in literature to justify the description of the place itself, while arousing suspenseful curiosity in the reader (Hamon 1982: 156). What is described is traffic circling closely around Laura, the crowd, and folding tables with useful things. She sees barriers that stopped her from crossing the streets, and is saved by "an iron hand" when about to step in front of a bus; this reiterates the idea of protection introduced with the magic appearance of her piece of luggage. From the very first description, Naples is associated with problems but also solutions, danger but also protection and magic, the elements that characterise this new unknown place at the beginning. Laura is walking through the city at night; the descriptions follow the shifts of her gaze. They are short and fragmented; these glimpses of Italian settings are not simply lovely backdrops: significant details tend to take on a symbolic power and reveal the character's emotions.

The evening had deepened. Large spots of rain came padding. A bouquet of umbrella materialised, thrust at her by a dark man. There were few streetlights and no pavement. She put up the hood of her jacket. A cat cried thinly under a parked car. The rain slanted and steadied. Laura's shoes were sodden, then her feet. Her wheeled case lurched over flagstones, always one heavy step behind, a club-footed stalker from an evil dream. A shining electric eye flew straight at her – she flattened herself against hard-hearted stone. The Vespa sped past, spraying laughter. Then there was a shrine enclosing a rouged and solid Infant: a trashy brooch pinned to a wet, black façade. Its neon illuminated the name of a *piazza* that Laura spent minutes failing to find on her map. She went on past the sound of someone coughing. [...] there was always a scooter coming fast out of the dark (de Kretser 2012: 156).

The difficulties in approaching the place continue: there are few streetlights and no pavement; she is wet from the pouring rain; her heavy suitcase, bumping as it is dragged over the pavestones, resembles "a club-footed stalker from an evil dream"; scooters come fast out of the dark with dashes of light and laughter. She passes by a crowded pizzeria; she doesn't enter and trudges on. Despite all this, "Laura turned a corner and before her like a vision, a flight of shallow steps led to an archway surmounted by a bell. She knew that she was lost. She knew that she loved the place" (de Kretser 2012: 156).

When she arrives in Naples, Laura is disturbed by the traffic and chaos, but what

emerges is her immediate fascination with the city; she feels that things won't be easy, but that there is beauty. Laura's ambivalent attitude towards Naples is expressed through the reiterated opposition of beauty and decay. Beauty is not easily detectable, since the flaws of the city seem to overcome it; but she sees it, and discovers it continuously in the coexistence of an ancient grandeur with a decadent present in this millennial city: "Vivienne's flat, reached across a courtyard filled with motorbikes and cars, was on the fourth floor of a former palazzo. A mechanic's workshop gave on to the street" (de Kretser 2012: 157).

Laura had time and occasion enough, during the months that followed, when she was lonely, when the temperature and her spirits dipped, to marvel at her sympathy with the city. It was inexplicable. Naples was indefensible: a callous city, a raddled grande dame with filth under her nails (de Kretser 2012: 157).

The opposition between defects and lures is continuously reiterated. While showing the city to her friend Bea who visits her in Naples, Laura intends to speak of the city's attractions but lists its flaws instead, believing that Bea disapproves of Naples because she stalks about the streets saying little.

The traffic didn't stop for pedestrians, the post office had run out of stamps, she had lost her sunglasses to a pickpocket, damp afternoons brought the scent of drains, the traffic didn't stop for red lights, there were battalions of stray dogs, she had lost her keys to a pickpocket, rubbish lay rotting on the pavements, the traffic didn't stop for ambulances, the headlines were proclaiming another Mafia murder, and the window of Vivienne's bathroom was stuck (de Kretser 2012: 157).

On Bea's last morning

[t]hey were on their way to a collection of pictures housed in a monastery. Afterwards, Laura opened a door at the foot of a flight of stairs. They went through into a cloister. It was lush with *overgrown oranges, loquats, figs*. Weather, *working at the walls*, had turned them a creamy yellow – the colour of fading gardenias, said Laura. The leaves of the orange trees were as glossy and distinct as if cut from green tin. That evening, on the station platform, surrounded by shouts, clanking, an aria oozing from the tannoy, the squeak of sneakered feet, Bea said that she would always remember the cloister. 'A wonderful place.' She couldn't understand why Laura kept complaining about Naples. 'You're so lucky to live here,' said Bea (de Kretser 2012: 158, *my italics*).

We notice de Kretser's meticulous choice of words in the vocabulary that capitalizes on phonic and every other sensory connotation so as to intensify the juxtaposition of the marvel at the magnificent cloister they saw in the morning, conveyed through vowel sounds, and the effect of chaos and noise at the station.

Other cities – Venice, Rome, Florence – offered riches to the casual eye. Naples chose secrets and revelations. Laura learned to follow the dingy street, to descend the un-

promising stair. There would be a vaulted ceiling, or a family feasting on melons under a *pergola*, there would be the trace of a fresco or a damaged stone face. A dull thoroughfare brought a red-robed saint with an arrow in her breast- Laura turned her head and saw the painting propped in the window of a bank. So it was to be a day bracketed by Caravaggios: she had sat before another in the cold blast of a church that morning. There was no end, it seemed to these stagings of discoveries. Wrong turnings took Laura to an industrial zone near the port; every truck, slow with freight, coughed in her face. Then came a row of grimy archways and waiting in the depths of each one, the sea. It was polluted and shining. Laura remembered the treasure hunts of childhood: mysteries, astonishments, gifts that weren't delivered but earned (de Kretser 2012: 158).

Laura makes the effort to follow Naples' 'unpromising' signs and is rewarded by finding beauty. The dichotomy of decay and beauty is reinforced by the ingenious and recurrent use of antithetical adjectives: for example, the sea is polluted and shining. The most 'expected' linguistic grouping in a description is the combination adjective and noun; in *Questions of Travel* recurrently the adjectives used in descriptions express the character's view. Descriptions in fact are also the point in the text at which, in the most 'natural' way possible, an ideological competence may be inserted. This is evidenced by the incorporation in the text of evaluative comments: the character's seeing is often the occasion for the aesthetic evaluation of what she is looking at; comments about the effect of the sight on the looker are introduced (Hamon 1982: 155). Meanwhile, Vivienne Morley has fallen in love and wishes to remain in England. Laura accepts Vivienne's offer to prolong her stay in Naples.

An anniversary came, the first day of Laura's thirty-four year. Birthdays are a time of reckoning and wishes. Laura spent hers writing about marzipan and a cake called the Triumph of Gluttony. [...], Laura's thoughts were still of *transience* and sugar. [...]. The evening held the knowledge of *passing unnoticed in the world*. Where was the gaze that would gather up her worthlessness and invest it with loving sense? (de Kretser 2012: 161, my italics).

The idea of transience and fleetingness creeps in. Vivienne had spoken to Laura of a "whispering wall in the flat"; she explained that it means that Signora Florescu watches soap operas in the adjacent room at all hours with the sound turned right up; "[s]he's from Romania or one of those places – harmless and quite mad" (de Kretser 2012: 157). On Bea's last day in Naples, walking past newsstands patch-worked with images of a dead woman, Bea has described the hillock of flowers outside Kensington Palace after Princess Diana's death, marvelling at the way in which the British had reacted to this event: "[y]ou couldn't joke about it. People you'd have sworn were sane took offence. But the funeral was brilliant – about the time they were getting to the abbey, I drove from Notting Hill to Battersea in only fifteen minutes. I must say I wouldn't mind a royal shuffling off every week" (de Kretser 2012: 157-58). Laura remembers that on the day the world learned of Diana's death, someone had banged on her door.

Beyond the safety chain, an old woman scarcely taller than a child stood sobbing. Signora Florescu's Italian, stressed in all the wrong places, was a puzzle in which the dead woman's name recurred. She was crying for her: that much was plain. Laura put her arm around her neighbour – the bent neck was surprisingly thick. Placed in a chair and offered tea, the signora only cried harder. [...] Signora Florescu had reverted to her own tongue, but Laura knew exactly what she was saying. Diana didn't come into it: she was only shorthand for the unbearable sadness of being. Laura could tell, because the same shapeless grief was working in her (de Kretser 2012: 161-162).

Laura's neighbour living alone and continuously watching soaps brings in the idea of unbearable loneliness and sadness, which inevitably belong to life. These two women's worlds come together.

On Laura's birthday, the signora's TV kept up its whispered assault: *I may be your teacher, Massimo, but I am a woman first. And now another year has ended.* Laura countered it by cranking up the volume on Vivienne's boombox. A boy sang, *Hallelujah! Hallelujah!* His voice had always been unearthly; now he, too, had joined the dead. Laura Fraser sat alone, and turned her heavy rings, and wished what everyone wishes (de Kretser 2012: 162, my italics).

The idea of ending, of death is progressively introduced. Theo comes to Naples in the spring; “[h]e brought a star made of ruby-red glass [...]. The hinged central compartment swung open so that a tea light could be placed inside. That evening, they looked at it shining in the window” (de Kretser 2012: 170). Emphasis is given to beautiful little things, but also to cheap useful things, valuable meaningless clutter, from the beginning, when Laura, on her arrival in Naples, notices folding tables in the streets full of small objects. When walking with Theo, she observes that

[t]here was always rubbish for sale in the streets, someone sitting beside oddments of nylon lace or rickrack braid, broken-down shoes, chipped enamelware. It was one of the ways Naples affected her, said Laura, this wringing of worth from things that would be discarded in wealthier places. Scenes she had once associated with far, tropical countries flashed up throughout the south of Italy: concrete-slab tenements festooned with exposed wiring, women fetching water from a public standpipe, children whose games centred on a plastic bottle – a worldwide web of making do (de Kretser 2012: 171).

What de Kretser affirmed in the interview, where she connected Naples to Colombo, is the value given to worthless little objects. They keep on walking.

Streets laid down by the Romans were unflinching: narrow, *sunless*, slabs of *black* volcanic stone underfoot. A piazza or crossroad brought a shock of *light*. Theo was dawdling [...]. Theo made his way towards her, now *shadowed*, now *lit*, through the blindingly obvious: the origins of *chiaroscuro*, the cosmic on/off of *brilliance* and *dark* (de Kretser 2012: 171-172, my italics).

Progressively, Laura's perceptions of the city of Naples bring her to reflect on the eternal balance of darkness and light. Still walking, Laura and Theo find themselves in

[a] nineteenth-century arcade named for a king was colossal and derelict, historical as royalty [...]. She took his arm as they left the arcade, but the ice-cream cart intervened. A wish for closeness melted in indecision over pistachio or hazelnut, in Theo's remark that *all the things Neapolitans loved* – gelati, fireworks, music – *were fleeting*.

Theo wanted to buy a postcard. After a long search, a rack was found. All the legendary images – the bay, the volcano, the opera house – were out of focus. Naples could madden by refusing to perform itself. It was such a slovenly, neglectful place. The cat hit by a scooter remained in the street to flatten slowly, the best room in the museum was closed without explanation, the seventeenth-century courtyard had been turned over to cars. Laura said, 'I'd like to stay here forever'. [...]. They were having lunch in a restaurant that catered to the staff at a nearby hospital. Two doctors in their white coats had just come in; [...]. 'I know it's squalid', said Laura. 'And to be honest, I can't bear it a lot of the time'. '*It's squalid because it's still alive*', Theo said. 'Only the dead are perfect'. On their way home he returned to the theme. Paris, Florence, Rome were superb mausoleums. 'Europe's buried there. This is a deathbed'. He took Laura's hand, gripped. 'Every time I walk down a street here I feel I might burst into tears' (de Kretser 2012: 173, my italics).

Theo is about to go back to London. He is sleeping on the pull-out sofa. Laura notices that he has neglected to blow out the tea light; the upper part of the star still gleams. She wonders if she should do something about the candle. She closes her eyes; when she opens them, the reddish glow looks weaker. It will soon wear itself out, she thinks.

The ideas of things dying or wearing out is reiterated. Laura finds herself in the grip of nostalgia; Naples' sultry dampness recalls childhood and triggers her joyful Australian anticipation of rain. The twentieth century is coming to an end. Laura leaves Naples; in Prague she receives a phone call telling her that Theo has died. It's 2000, Laura is back in London, but continuously travelling for her work; she decides to go back to Sydney.

In the descriptions of Naples, which convey Laura and Theo's gaze when walking together through the city, there is an important factor of cohesion (Hamon 1982: 159) which should not be overlooked: the theme of life and death, which functions to 'seed' the descriptions it introduces becomes progressively more profound. The role these descriptions play in the narrative is fundamental. In fact a description is the point where the narrative stops, is suspended, but also the indispensable point where it is 'preserved', where its information is 'pulled together', where it sets and is reduplicated, where the setting participates in a redundancy (Hamon 1982: 167). Here the setting confirms, sharpens and reveals the characters' thoughts, and one of the main themes of the novel, a reflection on life and death.

What did Laura find in Naples? The decadence of Naples that moved Theo to tears is gradually associated with life, the city is alive, but we understand, it is also connected to the sense of death, of things dying. From Laura's perception of European places we gather that she sees cities like Venice and Paris as frozen, mummified and embalmed, preserved, but the life has gone. Naples is alive, and just because it is alive, it reminds Theo and Laura (and

the reader) that life is moving towards death; that's why they find it touching. In Naples the inescapable condition of mortality looms in the dialogues of Laura with Bea, with Theo, and in the encounter with Signora Florescu. Laura's 'sacred journey' to Naples is related to the occasion for coming to terms with the awareness of death, with the recognition of mortality, the necessity of living with mortality.

It is worth noticing that the descriptions of Naples in *Questions of Travel* rarely perform the 'decorative function' Hamon identified in any decorative unit meant as a functional element in a coherent, overall system. In fact, because of the protagonist's perceptual activity, the narrative never comes to a standstill during the descriptions of places: they are less descriptions of what is contemplated than narratives of the perceptual effort of the observer, of her impressions, progressive discoveries, enthusiasms or disappointments; a very active contemplation indeed, containing a whole story. The descriptions of Naples are not moments of ecstatic recollection in tranquillity: describing is an activity, mental and physical at the same time – it is an action just like any other in the narrative. This diegetic function of descriptions conveys a fascinated attraction to the South but also denunciation of its present decay, interwoven throughout *Questions of Travel*.

How much do Laura's attitude and responses to Italy correspond to de Kretser's? We have to consider that *Questions of Travel* is a work of fiction and that consequently there must be some distance between de Kretser, the historical, empirical person of the traveller and writer, and Laura, the former's creation. However, if we refer to the interview with the author, we clearly perceive that Laura's experiences in Italy are very similar to her creator's; in Laura's account of the city the flaws are more accentuated than in de Kretser's perception of Naples, but in both cases the author's and her character's sympathy for the city is powerfully evident. De Kretser did not want Laura to be a caricature; she is good-hearted and well intentioned, she doesn't judge from first appearances, she is open and accepting. However, Laura's litany of complaints about Naples¹¹ is basically a list of clichéd tourist complaints about the city, which might recall the nineteenth-century colonialist stereotyping of places in Southern Italy. The bathetic note on which it ends – a window in her apartment is stuck – indicates that these 'typical' complaints should be read ironically. The nature of travel description in *Questions of Travel* shows that de Kretser has unquestionably advanced beyond the stereotyping of the city. There is in actual fact something profoundly different in the novel by virtue of the implied distance between Laura and the narrator/author; this is where irony comes in. Irony, a distancing trope, is often applied to Laura's actions and reactions, in Naples and throughout the novel. For instance, Laura believes that Bea dislikes the city, and produces her list of complaints partly to anticipate those she thinks Bea is silently formulating; but as Bea's parting remark at the station shows, Laura has mistaken her friend's reaction to the city.

¹¹ "The traffic didn't stop for pedestrians, the post office had run out of stamps, she had lost her sunglasses to a pickpocket, damp afternoon brought the scent of drains, the traffic didn't stop for red lights, there were battalions of stray dogs, she had lost her keys to a pickpocket, rubbish lay rotting on the pavements, the traffic didn't stop for ambulances, the headlines were proclaiming another Mafia murder, and the window of Vivienne's bathroom was stuck" (de Kretser 2012: 157).

The extremely happy result is a novel which cannot but involve the reader, startling them into reflections on uprootedness and travel, and flight from terror; on the difference between those who travel for pleasure and those who are forced to travel and leave their own country, between tourism based on privilege and money, and escape from terrible conditions. In the tantalizing rhythm of this beautifully constructed novel, the descriptions of Italian places, and particularly of Naples, given through Laura's gaze, contribute to explore one of the novel's main themes: a reflection on life and death, echoed in the extraordinary ending. Laura's Italian experience is in fact related to the occasion for coming to terms with life, but also with death: Italy has worked as a catalyst and become a 'spiritual' home. Death, a crucial element in Ravi's story, is introduced, mainly through the descriptions of Naples, in Laura's story as well. The vitality and decadence of Naples gives the character, and the author, the opportunity to think and talk about death. Italy awakens an awareness of beauty in life, but also of our inescapable condition of mortality.

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