

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

The Criterion 

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Reenacting the Childhood Fantasy in Joanna Kavenna's Travelogue, *The Ice Museum: In Search of the Lost Land of Thule*

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Abstract:

Joanna Kavenna is a British travel writer, novelist and journalist. *The Ice Museum*, a travel narrative published in 2005 is her first book. The paper intends to read how the author reenacts her childhood fantasies in her travel narrative, *The Ice Museum* and how Thule as a mythical place becomes a desirable stage set for the purpose. As her search for Thule progresses she ponders over her childhood fascination for adventurous expeditions. The stories of polar expeditions groomed her childhood fantasy into an everlasting passion for the far north. The travel narrative here evolves into a poetic quest, widening its hitherto constrained generic boundaries and it invariably leads the reader to rethink the literary status of travel narratives.

Keywords: Travel literature, Childhood fantasy, Polar expeditions.

Joanna Kavenna's *The Ice Museum* is a travelogue, one that typically does not belong to the category of literary writing. But then there have been endless debates on the literary status of travel writing. The generic uncertainties of travel writing had its origin in the myriads of travel related materials available to us today. Paul Fussell offers the term "travel book" to refer to the literary form of travel writing. He furthermore, mentions that the travelogue offers the reader something akin to the narrative pleasure of a literary piece. In an attempt to distinguish the "travel book" from guide books and other types of fictional and nonfictional travel related texts Carl Thompson further elaborates Fussell's ideas stating that

The narrative offered by a travel book will almost invariably be a retrospective, first person account of the author's own experience of a journey, or of an unfamiliar place or people. What is more, the personal or subjective aspect of that narrative is often very pronounced, as we are made keenly aware not just of the place being visited, but also of the author's response to that place, and his or her impressions, thoughts and feelings. (14)

Travel book's formal resemblance to novel in the form of chapterisation and subjective elements and its focus on the narration would easily fit it into what we today identify as creative nonfiction. But Fact/Fiction divide in the realm of travel narratives poses serious threat to its status as creative nonfiction. A good number of travel writers including Bruce Chatwin, in fact color their narratives with imagination. It is indeed a known fact that fictional embellishments were nothing new in travel narratives. Fantasy and travel narratives went hand in hand in medieval travel writing as in the case of *Marvels of the East*. The tension between fact and fiction emerged as a major concern only later with the attempts to determine its generic boundaries. Colonial travel narratives had made use of the fantastic elements catering to the desires and fears of its readers at home. They were politically motivated and had their share in

legitimizing colonial enterprise. Their role in constructing place and people qualified them as one of the major machinery of the empire. Contemporary travelogues either mimic or mock their colonial predecessors while engaging themselves with the neo imperial forces. The use of elements of pure fantasy is not any more desirable in travel texts. That is why a quest in search of mythical Thule, the most northerly place in the ancient world makes the travelogue *The Ice Museum* rather an uncanny travel book.

Questing heroes of fantasies and myths have had their counterparts in childhood fantasies. Though it imitates the adult world, unlike the adult world there exists no tension between the facts and fabulous here, both blend in easily in the world of childhood imagination. Childhood fantasies often create strong impressions in the adult who may not believe in them and yet cherish them.

The narrator of *The Ice Museum* is travelling through northern lands of Europe “compelled by the endless indeterminacy of a myth: the land of Thule—the most northerly place in the ancient world” (9). Thule in the minds of many travellers is a “myth”, a “dream”, and part of the “ancient world”. The writer in this narrative digresses from the trodden path of contemporary travel writing by exploring the mythical place. In spite of the blankness and the emptiness of the vast plains of ice she realizes that “it is a landscape ripe for fantastical embellishment; the silence invites it” (8). It was a land that baffled many writers and explorers. When the writers used it as a metaphor, explorers in an unending quest, continued to long for Thule. Following the myth of Thule, Joanna Kavenna travels through Shetland, Iceland, Norway, Estonia, Germany, Greenland and Svalbard. These were the places once believed to be Thule by earlier explorers. Thule was a place without a place, a place beyond time yet it was allowed constant geographical and temporal markers for everybody knew it lay nearby a frozen ocean and had midnight sun during summer. In fact as described by a review in *New York Times* Thule was a literary allusion in many works:

Virgil had called the northern country ultima Thule, and it became a metaphor for extremity. Charlotte Bronte conjured Thule as one of those “forlorn regions of dreary space.” Edgar Allan Poe called it “a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime/ out of space...out of time!” Christopher Columbus claimed to have reached it before sailing to America; the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, long obsessed with the idea of Thule, tried to drift his ship, Fram, across the North Pole and failed in 1893.

As Kavenna travels through the northern lands, she unravels the stories of perilous polar expeditions. But then she pauses and looks back. “I found I was thinking about the past, about my childhood fascination with polar explorers, and the simple sense I had of things at the time” (35). Parallel to the risky polar expeditions there runs a child’s imagined expeditions, mimicking the storied she read “when I read stories of polar exploration, I lingered over the descriptions of intense cold; and when my brother and I played at explorers we were always lost in the storm, beaten by frigid winds” (36). Looking back at herself as a child she says “there was something in the stillness of the ice which gripped me, stillness like suspense, an empty stage ready at any moment for the grand entrance of another explorer, struggling against the snow. I liked the shifting illusions of the Arctic” (36). The narrator’s obsessions with illusions and fantasy, silence and stillness could be traced back to the childhood fantasies which she retains as an adult.

Elsewhere the narrator remembers her favorite fairy tales and mourns the loss of “the ability to imagine themselves away from reality”. Leaving the city of London she sets out on a journey in search of a mythical land. A journey in search of Thule was her attempt to reclaim the lost Arcadias of childhood fantasy which is the antithesis of the adult world of the city she left behind. Though she would assert that, “there was nothing unusual about my childhood fascination” [For “it was part of a collective childhood hallucination”], she was not so sure about her decision to leave her job to follow her childhood fascination. And she acknowledges it as “a slightly foolish thing”. Because she knew that she could not risk trespassing the rational limits of the adult world.

The evasive, illusory Thule has already been made desirable by the long line of illustrious travelers whom she dutifully lists and describes at length in her narrative. In finding herself following those famous explorers she knew her ground is firm and safe. The infantile fantasy is now disguised in the adventures of the adult world; a desirable quest to define the frontiers of the known world. Imagination and fantasy were very much welcome in such a world as we learn later from the narrator that the lost explorers “after days and nights together, deprived of other company, they ran out of things to say, so they fantasized together about soft clothes, a Turkish bath, cakes, chocolate, bread and potatoes” (30). Thus Fantasy becomes a technique of survival.

Even the indeterminacy of Thule could not keep it away from the European politics in the early 20th century. ‘Thule Society’ a group founded by a few Germans was a precursor to the Nazi party. Thule, as a pure land lured the attention of the Nazis who imagined it to be the land of their racially superior ancestors. Even Thule was not beyond conquests as the Nazi fantasy ravaged the entire Europe. Thule air base of the US army in Greenland established during the Cold War houses Nuclear weapons and hides nuclear wastes. Thule here emerges as a dark fantasy, the purity of which was misused to suit the agendas of western power centers. It almost created a dystopia in the far north where the narrator witnesses the industrial wastes of Europe and North America drift towards the polar region. Thule here becomes an endangered myth –polluted, misused and manipulated.

Thinking, reading and imagination are foregrounded in the text to an extent of threatening the actual travel. Most of the time, we see the narrator reading earlier accounts of travel and analyzing them meticulously. She comments on Norwegian explorer Nansen’s baroque prose, Richard Burton’s obsession with polysyllables, Victorian cliché phrases and Strabo’s irritable prose. Then she goes on to imagine the earlier travelers.

I imagined the creaking of the boards under their feet, as they moved heavily through the boat-stocky weather-hardened men, born into Arctic darkness, bred in thick snow and long winters...after roaming ‘Fram’ for hours, I began to imagine that I had sailed in it, that I had felt the smash of the ice against its blow, had been thrown from my bunk by the pressure of the bergs.(24)

It invariably reminds the reader of the narrator’s childhood fantasy “We would imagine we were on a ship in a storm, sitting in a playground with a few swings. Or I would wake in a pensive mood, thinking of snow plains and rocks, and drag my brother into the garden to perform a chaotic series of imaginary expeditions.” According to Oxford Dictionary of English “reenact” means to “act out (a past event)”. ‘Reenactment’ happens at various levels in the narrative, first when she acts out her childhood fantasy, then in the emulation of earlier expeditions and finally

by writing the travel account in which she narrates the story of her travel. Travel narrative becomes a convenient vehicle for the reenactment of her fantasy because of its inextricable link with the quest myth.

Interestingly neither the narrator nor her predecessors arrive in Thule- described by Greeks as the land of mid night sun near a frozen ocean. For Strabo, the Greek geographer Thule itself was a mass of lie. A few who claimed to reach there were either proved wrong or branded liars. At their arrival they knew that Thule had eluded them drifting beyond their grasp. They had to be satisfied with 'earlier Thules'-places once thought to be Tule. And each one of them creates their own imagined Thule compromising their fantasy and longing. For Tacitus, Britain was Thule, Victorians called Iceland Thule, Nansen, Norway and Rasmussen, Greenland. Thule was much like a world of infantile fantasy the entry of which is lost to the adult world. A search for Thule is an attempt to regain the childhood arcadia which offers the wonderful, the mysterious. As in a fantasy, the questing heroes here are met with many impediments. While her predecessors were confronted by the hostile weather, the narrator is delayed by digressions of various kinds. Nansen, the Norwegian explorer was anxious about what would happen when one reaches Thule; and once it gets to be known. But the narrator has no such fear. She declines to name the exact location of her Thule. By never reaching Thule she could continue with her journey to Thule. Her infantile fantasy will never perish as long as Thule exists in the realm of imagination.

In *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz point out that to appreciate fantasy, we need " "child-like" talents-the joy of invention and discovery, the wonder at variety and ingenuity- the fresh view of the different, the other"(4). Travelers naturally acquire these talents because every traveler in an unfamiliar land resembles a child. Not knowing the land, people, their custom and language leaves him in a state of curiosity and innocence. To quench her curiosity the narrator goes on asking questions to the locals, experts, writers and scientists in an attempt to know Thule better. Though her attempt is not met with any fruitful result she likes to listen to their stories and enjoys it. She further goes to visit the polar museum which houses 'Fram' the ship designed for polar expedition by Nansen, her childhood hero. In the museum, the 'stuffed birds and animals, set against an Arctic stage' enchant the narrator with their 'parody of motion' much like the parody of expedition the narrator is doing while exploring the polar museum.

In *The Ice Museum*, the narrator covers up the inevitable egotism of the personal fantasy by roping in the long line of previous explorers, one that helped her to qualify her infantile fantasy by identifying it with the collective fantasy of the Europe. At one point in her narrative she addresses it directly to the reader "Thule could be formed and reformed, depending on your anxieties and predilections. Depending on what Arcadia meant to you...you could reinvent Thule whenever you felt a former Thule had faded, become tarnished"(108). She makes an irresistible offer to the reader to join her in her search for Thule-the reenacting of her childhood fantasy.

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