

ANTARCTIC TRAVEL WRITING AND THE PROBLEMATICS OF THE PRISTINE:

Two Australian Novelists' Narratives of Tourist Voyages to Antarctica¹

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Abstract

*With the increasing popularity of Antarctic tourism in the last decade or so, new narratives of Antarctic encounter have begun to appear: narratives that attempt to understand how the individual traveller might relate to the continent and all it has come to symbolise. These texts, which as a group can be classed as Antarctic travel writing, differ from polar exploration narratives and from accounts of life at Antarctic bases, because their authors can be identified as tourists. Antarctic travel writing includes full-length books, such as Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita*, Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* and Peter Matthiessen's *End of the Earth*, and also essays and feature articles in the media.*

The aim of this article is to examine two examples of this new genre of Antarctic travel writing published in the Australian media. Both are feature articles by established Australian novelists (Helen Garner and Thomas Keneally) describing tourist trips to Antarctica, and both appeared in the Age newspaper's Good Weekend magazine. Each article can be read as an exploration of the anxieties of the writer-cum-tourist entering an environment which has become synonymous, in the public imagination, with 'pristine nature.' Both Garner and Keneally are concerned with maintaining the 'pristine' quality of the continent, with protecting it from anything that threatens to alter its original state. Each writer, however, has a very different idea of what this state comprises.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen the emergence of a new genre within the literature of the Antarctic: Antarctic travel writing. Factors behind the rise of this genre include a broader renaissance within travel writing in recent years (see Duncan & Gregory 1999, p. 1), and the increasing accessibility of the continent through Antarctic tour operators: writers and journalists can access Antarctica far more easily now than in the 1970s and 1980s, and their readers can aspire to the same access, the same kind of journey. Antarctica, which for centuries has for most people functioned primarily as a symbol, is now an expensive but nonetheless feasible travel destination. This means that new narratives of Antarctic encounter are appearing, narratives that attempt to understand how the individual traveller might relate to the continent and all it has come to stand for. These narratives tend to be written by novelists who travel to Antarctica, or by specialised travel writers. They differ from polar exploration literature as well as accounts of life at Antarctic bases, as their authors usually travel with tour operators and thus identify, to some degree, as tourists.² Antarctic travel writing includes full-length books, such as Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita*, Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica* and Peter Matthiessen's *End of the Earth*, and also essays and feature articles in the media.

The aim of this article is to examine two examples of this new genre of Antarctic travel writing first published in the Australian media: both are feature articles by established Australian novelists describing tourist trips to Antarctica, and both appeared in the *Age* newspaper's *Good Weekend* magazine. My focus will be on the relationship constructed by these articles between the writer-as-tourist and the Antarctic continent. The articles I want to look at are Thomas Keneally's 'Taking the Biscuit', a six-page spread which appeared in May 2003, and Helen Garner's 'Adrift in the Floating World', which appeared five years earlier, in May 1998, and also occupied six pages as well as the magazine's cover.³ Both Keneally and Garner are concerned with maintaining the 'pristine' nature of the continent, with protecting it from anything that threatens to alter its original state. The two narratives, however, produce contrasting versions of 'pristine' Antarctica.

Keneally and Garner are, of course, very different writers, who travelled to Antarctica under different circumstances. Keneally's visit to Antarctica had a personal precedent: his first trip to the continent was as a guest of the US Navy in 1968, and in the following years he wrote two novels concerned with the early twentieth-century 'Heroic Era' of Antarctic exploration. Garner, to my knowledge, had no previous connection with Antarctica before her visit in the late 1990s. Keneally travelled to the Ross Sea region, site of some of the most potent relics of the Heroic Era; Garner went to the Antarctic Peninsula, by far the most common tourist destination. Keneally travelled with his wife; Garner travelled alone, and in her article hints at a relationship breakdown in the recent past.⁴ Keneally, as a middle-aged, bearded man who likes his icebreaker for its 'honest look, as if one would not need to dress for dinner', approves of its 'blunt and potent' ice-crushing bow, and looks forward to its 'rowdy bar' as well as the 'ample deck space upon which to stand alone, rugged up, in awe and exhalation', seems set to blend right into traditional Antarctic culture (2003, p. 23). Garner, a middle-aged feminist woman, characterises herself by contrast as 'crabby and left out'. 'I'm not the Antarctic type', she states bluntly. 'I'm hanging out for a short black. I'm not adventurous, and I'm too sad to be sociable with strangers' (1998, p. 12).

Correspondingly, these two writers produce contrasting narratives. The title of Keneally's article, 'Taking the Biscuit', is a punning reference to his determination to return to Antarctica a hundred-year-old biscuit pilfered from a historic hut on his previous expedition. The title suggests a jovial, familiar, relatively untroubled tone which the article bears out, and also characterises Keneally's narrative as one of forward action—of completing a task, undertaking a quest, returning a relic to its rightful resting-place. Garner's title, 'Adrift in the Floating World', suggests by contrast a directionless, dreamlike, inconclusive, introspective encounter. Victoria Rosner, in an analysis of Wheeler's and Diski's Antarctic travel writing, observes that the cliché that 'men are outer-directed, women inner-directed' seems 'true to a ludicrous extent' in Antarctica narratives (1999, p. 13). Garner's and Keneally's articles do nothing to contradict this observation.

There are also significant similarities, however, in these two novelists' narratives of Antarctic experience. Both writers travel to Antarctica in February with commercial tour operators and both sail on Russian ships.⁵ Both articles are peppered with images of penguins, seals, and icescapes. And both writers base their stories around objects which are left behind in Australia, objects at once concrete and weighed down with symbolic meaning: in Garner's case, her Pentax camera, and in Keneally's, the eponymous biscuit. Onto these objects are condensed each writer-cum-tourist's anxieties about visiting Antarctica— anxieties generated,

I will argue, by the problematics of entering and describing an environment which more than any other has come to embody, in the public imagination, the quality of the 'pristine'.

Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan in *Tourists with Typewriters* have noted the complicated position of contemporary travel writers, who must deal with their complicity with the tourist industry while seeking to provide a 'countercommodified version of what they take to be reality', and are also plagued by a sense of 'belatedness'—of being preceded by other travellers and other writers (2000, pp. 3, 6–7). Both difficulties haunt the travel narratives discussed here, but the second is particularly pressing when the place visited is one popularly conceived as 'untouched wilderness'. Holland and Huggan observe that one 'useful strategy of self-protection' against belatedness is 'self-irony' (2000, p. 7). Both Garner and Keneally make ample use of this strategy, but in neither case is this a sufficient defence against the sense that Antarctica has been grubbed by previous visits and previous representations.⁶ Each writer goes to further lengths to erase the idea that Antarctica is an already-visited and already-imagined place. Rosner claims that both Diski's and Wheeler's Antarctic travel narratives represent searches for 'a prehistory of innocence' (1999, p. 15); I will argue that Garner's and Keneally's articles continue this search, although they do so in very different ways.

One of the most striking features of Garner's journey is her refusal to take her Pentax camera to Antarctica. This can be read as one of a cluster of actions and attitudes that together amount to a refusal to identify as a tourist: she appears unenthused about her destination, at least initially; she cares little for the wildlife; she feels isolated from her fellow-travellers, and hostile towards their very embrace of the tourist experience. 'I'm lonely because everyone else is hiding behind a camera', she complains. 'Everywhere I turn, my view is blocked by some keen bean with a tripod. I fight the sense that a person with a camera has a prior right to any view we both happen to be looking at. I am being driven insane by photography' (p. 15). She is equally hostile towards her companions' attempts to image Antarctica through language: '... somebody begins to liken the icebergs to a face. "It's got a sad eye. See its nose?" On and on people go: it's like a sphinx, a Peke's face, an Indian head with its mouth open... I am secretly enraged by this, and by my own urgent desire to do the same' (p. 13). Garner seeks a purer, less mediated encounter with the Antarctic landscape. She wants to image Antarctica 'only in abstract terms' (p. 13)—to refuse what John Urry has termed the 'tourist gaze' (2002).

Garner's rejection of tourist identity can be tied to her identity as a writer: although she is a member of a tour group, and is outside her regular work and home environment, to the extent that her Antarctic journey acts as fodder for her writing it can be classed as work rather than leisure.⁷ However, her attempt to position herself as professional interpreter, rather than passive consumer, of the scenes she encounters is self-consciously ironic. As her remark quoted above indicates, she is by her own admission no better than her companions at finding a new way of imaging the continent, and is constantly tempted to fall back on inadequate comparisons:

Leaning over the rail I see my first tiny chunk of ice go bobbing past, very close to the ship's side. At once I'm seized by an urge to compare it with something—with anything; it's the size of a loosely flexed hand, palm up; like a Disney coronet with knobbed points; as hollow as a rotten tooth... I don't *want* to keep going 'like, like like' [original emphasis]. But I can't stop myself (p. 13).

Garner's aim to 'go to the icy continent in a state of heroic lenslessness' is similarly compromised: towards the end of the article she confesses that, at the last minute, she purchased a disposable camera, which lies hidden in a drawer in her cabin (pp. 15, 18).⁸ Her helplessness against the lure of the photograph is further reinforced by the layout of her article in *Good Weekend*: the columns of text are punctuated by standard Antarctic photographic fare—penguins diving from the ice, drifting bergs—indicating the editor's blithe disregard of Garner's meditation on the inadequacy of imaging Antarctica in this way.⁹ Moreover, Garner reveals her own determination to confront the Antarctic 'with only a notebook and a pen' as naïve and unrealistic when she is unable to write because of the bulky gloves needed to protect her hands against the cold (p. 15).

Near the article's conclusion Garner explicitly addresses the key anxiety manifested in tourists' obsessive desire to photograph the Antarctic; it is, she posits,

the terror of forgetting, which drives people to raise a camera between themselves and everything they encounter—as if direct experience were unbearable and they had to shield themselves from it, filter it through a machine, store up a silent, odourless version of it for later, rather than endure it now (p. 18).

But again, she quickly adds, her writer's notebook performs much the same function; writing too is an escape from, a shield against, the immediacy of the Antarctic experience. The 'purity' of Antarctica, she suggests, is in some way painful, and thus has to be endured as much as enjoyed: 'The sky is so pure it hurts to look at it' (p. 16). Like Moses and the burning bush, the Antarctic tourist can bear to look at only an indirect image of the continent; the article is essentially the narrative of Garner's attempt, as a writer, to look it directly in the face.

Garner thus interprets the Antarctic tourist's obsessive photography as a way of shielding the viewer from the purity of the continent by substituting a tourist gaze for a 'direct' one, and her own act of leaving her Pentax behind as a vain attempt at removing this shield. However, it is possible to read this situation in a converse manner: to see Garner's refusal of photography as an indication of her desire for an impossibly unmediated and pure experience of the continent—a desire just as socially produced as her companions' need for cameras. Kevin Markwell, in his examination of nature-based tourism, argues convincingly that 'tourist-nature interactions are constructed and mediated by the tourist industry', and opposes what he terms the 'romantic view' in which tourism can provide 'an "unmediated and intensely personal relationship between the person and the natural world"' (2001, p. 41).¹⁰ The increasing recognition of the tourist experience as an embodied one might seem to suggest a more direct encounter, but, as Markwell notes, the body too can act as 'a site of mediation within the context of tourism' (p. 44). It is the 'intensely personal' relationship with nature that Garner appears to be seeking in her narrative, and the necessity of mediation—of bulky gloves around her hands, as well as the metaphors that spring into her mind—that so frustrates her. Antarctic travel, she is forced to realise, is by physical necessity as well as law hyper-mediated; multiple layers are imposed between human and environment, in the interest of preserving both.¹¹

Garner's desire for an unmediated Antarctica, moreover, requires its own kind of mediation, its own form or shielding, in which anything that appears to complicate or sully the desired experience is expelled. Very little mention is made in her article of the history and politics of Antarctica: its role as a site of late-imperialist exploration in the Heroic Era, and its more

recent centrality in issues of international political and scientific cooperation, environmentalism and, indeed, tourism. Garner's lack of interest in wildlife can also be read in this context: 'in my heart,' she writes, 'all I want to do is go out in the boats and "look at ice". Seals, penguins and whales, to me, are only distractions from the bliss of this' (p. 17). The same minimalising need underlies her hostility towards metaphor and her vain attempts to locate a form of representation not corrupted by the unwanted associations she and her fellow-travellers inevitably introduce:

Where to find a language for these miraculous frozen forms? Couldn't there be poetry in the ship's library alongside the glossy photo books ... Would Gerard Manley Hopkins have found words for these teeming variations on *surface*? [original emphasis] ... The colour of an iceberg, or of a glacier wall, is impossible to name... One plumbs the word-well. The bucket comes up empty' (p. 17).

This desire to find a pre-existing language sufficient for the continent quickly transforms into desire to erase all such attempts—to encounter the continent free of pre-conceived methods of imaging:

I fiercely wish I had no prior inkling of this place, that everything I'm looking at were completely new to me. I hate movies and TV and videos. People with cameras are busybodies, writers are control freaks, spoiling things for everyone else, colonising, taming, matching their egos against the unshowable, the unsayable. I long to have come down here in a state of infantile ignorance (p. 18).

The word that encapsulates Garner's desire here is a word constantly used to describe wilderness regions, and particularly the Antarctic continent: 'pristine'. While this word is commonly used in what the *OED* terms a 'weakened' sense to mean 'brand-new' or 'newly made', its etymology reveals connotations not of newness but of recovery, restoration or preservation of an earlier condition. 'Pristine' derives from the Latin *pristin-us* meaning 'former', 'previous' or 'original' (*OED*, 1989, vol. 12, p. 514). In its pristine form, the word 'pristine' suggests not newness itself, but the recovery of a former or original newness. This, I would argue, is the quality that Garner, self-confessedly suffering from a personal sadness, is eager for the continent to provide—what she ensures that it does provide, by paring it down to the purity of the ice and rejecting the corruption of previous attempts to image it.

Keneally, as he represents himself in 'Taking the Biscuit', shares none of Garner's anxiety about the 'tourist gaze' or her concerns about the impossible task of saying the unsayable. This comparative nonchalance perhaps reflects the fact that Keneally's tourist voyage represents a second visit to Antarctica. The first two pages of his article recount his 1968 journey, which was clearly not a tourist trip, and thus establish an authenticity as an Antarctic traveller unavailable to Garner.¹²

Yet Keneally's article, for all its differences from Garner's, also centres on the necessity of Antarctica retaining its ability to encapsulate, and bestow upon its visitors, the quality of the pristine. Like Garner, Keneally suggests that the continent holds this quality largely because of its emptiness, its lack of cultural baggage:

This trip augmented a tendency of mine to see Antarctica as another state of being. Nobody was a native of the place. Only in the past 60 or 70 years had a few human

myths become associated with it. But even in its massiveness it had made no tribe unto itself. It had provoked no native tongue, no rites, no art, no jingoism (p. 20).

Like Garner, Keneally—himself author of two Antarctic-based novels—prefers an Antarctica free of human attempts at imaging. To do this he must put to one side the complex history of Antarctica's representation and role within Western culture. The myths generated by Heroic-Era exploration are not by any means the only myths the continent has produced; a number of critics have examined the rich cluster of myths and meanings generated by Antarctica well before it began to be explored on foot in the early 1900s.¹³ Keneally's claim that the continent has produced 'no art' is similarly problematic: it ignores the work of expedition artists such as Edward Wilson, as well as the various 'Artists-to-Antarctica' programmes which are well-established in Australia, New Zealand and the United States and have been the source of numerous exhibitions and publications. Antarctica, for Keneally, must be a pure source of natural images, not an already-imaged place that can be accessed second-hand: 'After Antarctica,' he writes, 'nothing is the same, and that's the reason I really went back, to refresh that wellspring of images' (p. 28).

This regenerative process can only take place, however, when he has erased the physical sign of his previous journey. At the centre of Keneally's narrative is his quest to replace the hardtack biscuit he had taken from Scott's *Discovery* Hut on his previous voyage. It was this same foodstuff, he notes, that formed a staple of the diet of Scott's polar party in 1912, and the eventual lack of it was a factor in the party's grim fate (p. 21). Keneally relates in the article his growing guilt about his removal of the biscuit, a guilt which reached its apex when he viewed a television recreation of Scott's polar journey and imagined one of the dying expeditioners 'making a claim' on the stolen biscuit (p. 23). It was at this point that he determined to return the biscuit to the hut. Halfway through his article, however, Keneally admits that he forgot to take the biscuit with him on his Antarctic tour—possibly because, he suggests, his *intention* to return it was so strong that he felt that he had already packed it. Intention thus replaces action as the centre of his quest, but does not change its nature: he decides to search out an 'authoritative person' on his journey who can tell him how best to deal with the biscuit when he returns (p. 23). It is not until this is accomplished that he feels 'Antarctica can be unambiguously enjoyed' (p. 24).

Keneally, then, like Garner, needs Antarctica to be returned to its former condition, to reverse the change he enacted on the continent on his previous visit. He needs this visit to the continent to be, in a sense, his first visit and, like Garner, needs his relationship with the continent to be correspondingly uncomplicated, 'unambiguous'. In order for the continent itself to retain its power of re-newal, it must itself be re-newed, be made pristine. Yet, like Garner, Keneally is ironically aware of the futility of such attempts. At one point in his article he recalls that lines from Coleridge's poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' were posted on the ship's noticeboard to mark the tour group's initial encounter with the Southern Ocean: '*We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea*', he quotes [original emphasis], adding 'Well, maybe not the first, but at least it felt like it' (p. 23). Later he describes the shock that accompanied the sighting of another tourist ship, which revealed his party as one in a long line of tour groups rather than the intrepid mariners they were encouraged to imagine themselves as (p. 24). Any sense of Antarctica as untouched wilderness, Keneally implicitly acknowledges, is provisional; but this provisionality does not appear to dampen his fervour for his quest to replace the biscuit.

Keneally's focus on the pilfered biscuit indicates that, for him, the 'original' condition of Antarctica is not the pure icescape that Garner so desires it to be. Although it might have generated no rites, art or jingoism, according to Keneally, it is still very much inscribed by history—specifically, the history of the Heroic Era of exploration. Unlike Garner's article, Keneally's features numerous references to the early expeditions of Scott and Shackleton, as well as photographs of their historic huts. These huts, which must be preserved down to the last biscuit, are implicitly contrasted with the activities of present-day visitors to Antarctica—evidence of which, as Keneally is aware, must be erased as much as possible in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty System. Although conscious of the hypocrisy of his thinking, he worries about the future impact of Antarctic tourism. He describes plans to build a track to service the US's South Pole base, the very idea of which 'sucks the myth out of the Pole, the myth on which every Westerner of my generation has been raised'. He speculates that if tourism continues to expand, 'the Ross Sea Novotel and Sheraton could be built within this century. Children will gambol on the iceshelf where Scott exhaled his last, pained breath' (p. 26). It is not the Antarctic environment here that is most threatened by tourism, but the memory of the Heroic-Era explorers.

Keneally and Garner, then, both want to protect the Antarctic continent, to render it 'pristine', but they have very different ideas of what they are protecting—what the 'original' Antarctic state is. For Garner, the continent's essential condition is a minimalist icescape, and what threatens it are pre-packaged clichés and visual technologies which prevent the possibility of pure communion with the place. For Keneally, the narratives of early heroic exploration and their physical remnants comprise the original Antarctic state. He imagines his returning of the biscuit to the hut as a literal attempt to save Scott and his men. But what Scott must be saved from is not his own dreadful death, which is an intrinsic part of 'pristine' Antarctica for Keneally, but current and future attempts to downgrade his achievement. Keneally thus implicitly advocates a freezing of the Antarctic landscape in a specific historical moment—one that many would decry as masculinist and imperialist. Conversely, Garner represents her Antarctic experience as primarily an existential experience of the ice, paying little attention to historical and political aspects of the continent that for many others are integral to its meaning.

Keneally's and Garner's versions of the pristine come together, however, in one important sense. For both novelists, the continent can be considered pristine only if it is emptied of previous attempts to image it. Keneally condenses Antarctica mythology onto the Heroic-Era explorers, sidelining other mythologies and meanings attached to the continent; Garner wishes she had never come across previous representations of the place. To retain its original newness for these writers, Antarctica must forever, paradoxically, remain unwritable.

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¹ I would like to thank the Australian Antarctic Division for awarding me an Antarctic Arts Fellowship which allowed me to travel to Antarctica in early 2004. This journey has informed and influenced all of my subsequent Antarctic-related research.

² An ambiguous category is comprised by the small number of writers (such as Wheeler) who travel with government Antarctic programmes as writers-in-residence. Thomas Bauer, in his *Tourism in the Antarctic*, quotes R. J. Reich's categorisation of Antarctic tourist activities, which includes 'goodwill/VIP visits, including those by representatives of the media, photographers, and artists' (2001, p. 70). Bauer himself, however, considers this kind of visit to be business rather than pleasure travel, and thus outside of his definition of tourism (p. 15).

³ Garner's article was later anthologised under the title 'Regions of Thick-Ribbed Ice' in her non-fiction collection *The Feel of Steel*, and also in *The Best Australian Essays 1998*. Versions of Keneally's article appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper (27 Sept. 2003, "Review" p. 4) as 'Cold Mountain' and in *Granta* (vol. 83, 2003, pp. 129–144) as 'Captain Scott's Biscuit'.

⁴ Garner's opening comment, that 'a couple is the greatest mystery of all', suggests this interpretation of her 'sadness' (p. 12); although she provides no explicit details, readers familiar with Garner's biography would probably connect these hints with the breakdown of her third marriage, to writer Murray Bail.

⁵ Garner's article is followed by contact information for the airline and the tour operator with whom she travelled.

⁶ In addition to a well-established body of canonical exploration narratives, Antarctica has generated a rich tradition within literature, attracting writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Jules Verne, H. P. Lovecraft, Douglas Stewart, Ursula Le Guin, Beryl Bainbridge, and Kim Stanley Robinson. See Fauno Cordes' "'Tekeli-li" or Hollow Earth lives: A bibliography of Antarctic fiction', available at <http://www.antarctic-circle.org/fauno.htm>, for a comprehensive list Antarctic-themed novels stretching back to the early seventeenth century, and my own 'Representations of Antarctica: A bibliography,' available at http://www.utas.edu.au/english/Representations_of_Antarctica/, for recent poetry, drama, prose (fiction and non-fiction), film, and literary and cultural criticism dealing with Antarctica.

⁷ According to Urry, a key feature of tourism is that 'The journey and stay are to, and in, sites outside the normal places of residence and work' and that 'The places gazed upon are for purposes not directly connected with paid work and they normally offer some distinctive contrasts with work (both paid and unpaid)' (2002, p. 3).

⁸ Diski similarly admits to choosing to go to Antarctica *sans* camera and then buying one at the airport when her 'courage failed' (1998, p. 152); Diski's and Garner's meditations on their Antarctic journeys at times run in close parallel.

⁹ The *Good Weekend* cover photograph, by contrast, reinforces Garner's point: it shows a whale rising before a boatload of tourists, almost all of whom are viewing the whale through a camera lens.

¹⁰ The source of the inner quotation here is Gary Alan Fine's article 'Wild life: Authenticity and the human experience of "natural" places' (1992, p. 166).

¹¹ Garner mentions the elaborate tagging and counting systems employed on her tour to ensure that nobody is lost, and the various rules designed to prevent the continent being contaminated or disturbed by its visitors (p. 15); perhaps this sense of extreme control was one of the triggers for her desire for the unmediated experience.

¹² Another authenticating feature of Keneally's journey was the ferrying of five Australian scientists to sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island. He observes (with a hint of self-irony) that 'The presence of the scientists gave us tourists a sense of being part of a noble cause' (p. 23).

¹³ Victoria Nelson, for example, in her article 'Symmes Hole, or the South Polar romance' (1997), has explored the mythological resonances of the South Pole, and by extension Antarctica, from ancient Greek thought to the present. William Lenz has examined the way in which Antarctica acted as a 'locus of symbolic meaning' for nineteenth-century American writers such as Poe, Cooper and Melville (1995, p. xlii). My article 'Romancing the Pole: A survey of nineteenth-century Antarctic utopias' (2004) describes some of the mythological and

literary traditions surrounding Antarctica in this period. The websites mentioned in note 6 also provide an indication of Antarctica's cultural, literary and mythological history.