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'Anna Kavan: Historical Contexts, Influence, Legacy' Symposium

'Anna Kavan and the New Zealand Connection'

This paper examines Anna Kavan's sojourn in New Zealand from 1941-42 in the company of the pacifist playwright, Ian Hamilton. It discusses the effects of living in a remote provincial island on her thinking, emotions and work, as evinced in stories such as 'Ice Storm' and the essay 'New Zealand: An Answer to an Enquiry', published in *Horizon* (1943), in which she describes the country as 'It's null, it's dull, it's tepid, it's mediocre; the downunder of the spirit' (156).

The paper refers to the recently published diary, 'Five Months Further or What I Remember Ab[ou]t New Zealand', to argue that living in New Zealand introduced a new creative dimension to Kavan's work as she grappled with issues of distance, homelessness and disjunctive reality in what was, she realised later, a safe haven during the war years. The geographies, landscapes and small community of these pacific rim islands, the furthest south before Antarctica, gave a depth charge to her imaginative framework. The discussion will focus on the alternative/parallel world that New Zealand came to represent as imaged, for example, in the dystopian stories of *I am Lazarus* and the apocalyptic vision of her last novel, *Ice*.

ⁱ Published in *Anna Kavan's New Zealand: A Pacific Interlude in a Turbulent Life*, ed. Jennifer Sturm (Auckland: Random House/Vintage, 2009)

Anna Kavan and the New Zealand Connection

I. Introduction

The circumstances that brought AK to NZ began with her breakdown and institutionalisation in a Swiss sanatorium, following the collapse of her marriage to Stuart Edmonds in 1938; then stepping across the boundaries between life and art in metamorphosing from Helen Ferguson to the platinum blonde Anna Kavan, the name of one of her fictional characters (in *Let Me Alone* (1930) and *A Stranger Still* (1935)). The motivation to travel came through her acquaintance with Ian Hamilton, the brother of Margery the woman who became involved with Stuart Edmonds when he and Kavan separated. An upper middle class Englishman who had been living in NZ – he had returned to the UK – Hamilton suggested she join him on his journey back to NZ via New York in 1939, After 6 months on the Pacific coast of California, and a tumultuous meeting with a wealthy US architect Charles Fuller, with whom Kavan fell in love, and travelled with after Hamilton continued on to NZ< spending time at Kouta Beach, Bali, and then NY, Kavan eventually arrived in NZ from LA on the *Mariposa*, 21 Feb 1941. She was still psychologically vulnerable, she attempted suicide in Kouta Beach and again in NY, and realising she needed a refuge wrote to Hamilton (by now separated from his wife) pleading to be allowed to join him-

IMAGES OF TAKAPUNA BEACH

These sudden changes in direction – she was on her way to South Africa to see her mother when she first started travelling with Fuller,--and precipitate decisions illustrate the volatility/ instability of AK's life at this time **when she**

was trying kick the heroin habit, turning to alcohol instead,] her dependency on male support and need for shelter and protection- Furthermore the journey she had embarked on coincided with the outbreak of war which made all travel arrangements hazardous and complicated as she found when she tried to return to England and after that to go back to NZ.

How did she herself when she travelled and settled during this time in New Zealand (is one question which difficult to answer without going into her Horizon article in which she excoriates New Zealand for the 'downunder of hte spirit') ? Was she a traveller, a visitor, a sojourner? Her diary, *Five Months Further (Or What I remember about NZ)*, recently edited and published by Jennifer Sturm, as *Anna Kavan's NZ: A Pacific Interlude in a Turbulent Life*, conveys some unease about the NZ sojourn, as she settled down to domestic life with Hamilton in Auckland's north shore (at Tor Bay or Waitahanui); Covering her last three months in NZ and the two to three months on a troopship returning to the UK, the diary suggests was a visitor or even expatriate in that she always intended to return to the UK -(she never uses this term). She does describe herself as 'wanderer' (81) and broods on what she calls 'the refugee outlook' which occurs when you have no place in the world (Sturm 115). In this sense Kavan's innate/ontological sense of homelessness, her borderline condition (moving into states of unreality) which drew to states suspended between life and death/self destruction, means that her travels and arrival in a strange land were in many ways a re-enactment of full gamut of distancing, alienation, and dislocation that she had already experienced psychologically and which she wrote about in *Asylum Piece*. – the experimental prose fiction written during her

institutionalisation in 1938. Her comment in her article published in *Horizon* in 1943, 'New Zealand: An Answer to a Query': of NZers as living 'among the appalling impersonal perils and strangeness of the universe, living in temporary shacks, as reluctant campers too far from home' (Sturm 260), might well apply to herself.

Travel and relocation—at the remote ends of the earth --reinforced her estrangement from Britain, her defiant flouting of social convention **that underpinned her 'deliberate engagement with otherness'** (as described by Sara Wasson, 60) in her self transformation, and confirmed **her ultimate rejection of any national identity**. NZ with its principally Anglophone society, its wild, powerfully naturalistic landscape, provincial society, nascent national culture was a striking contrast to all that AK with her upper class, metropolitan European upbringing, was used to, and imparted a pervasive sense of strangeness mixed with powerful attractions, it was an idyllic retreat which aroused feelings of nostalgia which ultimately she had to dispel on her return.

NZ provided a temporary home for Kavan after she and Hamilton moved into the house in Tor Bay/ Waitahuna on Auckland's North Shore which Hamilton refurbished along the model of fashionable domestic architecture developed by the Auckland architect, Vernon Brown, and a place for her to write.

SHOW IMAGES

The house perched on a promontory, almost at the extreme physical limit of the outermost settled district of the East Coast Bays. Just as the Pacific Ocean came to represent for Kavan a physical manifestation of her mental state, the topography of 50 Rock Isle Road reflected the outlandish and peripheral nature of her life. Barely connected to the mainland, the greywacke promontory is prone to crumbling and slippage, held together only by the strong roots of pohutukawa trees and the cohesive North Shore clay. The Tor, a small tree-clad island within reach of the shore

at low tide, is the scene of a Maori legend involving a maiden falling to her death. Kavan could not have lived in a more appropriate location.

IMAGE OF TOR

IMAGE OF HOUSE (floor to ceiling windows, pelmets built in bookcases)

Inhabiting this space in a period of relative harmony, including the decorous attention of Hamilton, who was like a spouse/sponsor to her, released her from the fraught tension of the war and the traumas of her personal life. As she writes in one of the stories in *I am Lazarus*, 'After all the dreadful anxiety I had been through, I felt I could never absorb enough of the peace, the beauty, the solitude' (109). Kavan allowed the impressions of a new and strange landscape to sink in and begin to connect up incongruous and oppositional images: of bleakness versus wild proliferating natural life, and the prehistoric archaic hills versus the contemporary settlements; ice and light; snow and sun; shore and sea---as stated in her article published in *Horizon* in 1943, 'New Zealand: An Answer to a Query':

That's what I see in my picture, of the country New Zealand. Always the desolation, always the splendour, always the loneliness, always the opposition, always the ancient trees, the birds which inhabit no other country, the volcanic mountains, the mud bubbling and chuckling. And always, everywhere, strangeness, [...] And then the beaches: with the lovely inexpressible melancholy of long sands, utterly desolate between the dunes and the greengage waves, slowly unfurling [...] absolutely nothing but solitude, like a place that hasn't been found yet, and perhaps never will be found. Strange lonely dream scene (Sturm 255, 256)

Upon her return to England in 1943, the war-torn, semi-demolished urban landscape, the frequent air attacks and substandard living conditions appalled her. She was lonely and even more isolated than she had been in NZ without the intimate companionship of Ian Hamilton, and had to begin all over again with making a living, which she was singularly ill equipped to do. She delved further

into the psychological spaces that she excavated in order to reorient herself along spatio-temporal lines, exploiting in her fiction the tensions between the contradictory binaries of here and there/ this place-that place.

This talk aims to show her responses to the NZ experience, one of alienation yet lasting emotional impact, as can be discerned in her diary and reflected especially stories in *I am Lazarus* (1945) where memories of this alternative world appear to enhance and contradict the one she had returned to.

II *I am Lazarus*

As Jennifer Sturm points out at least six of the 15 stories of *I am Lazarus* were written in NZ (from Ian Hamilton papers held in ATL, are drafts of three with revisions and deletions. These are 'Concerning the Authorities: A's Case' -- later 'All Kinds of Grief Shall Arrive'; 'A Certain Kind of Experience'; 'Benjo'). Nine stories altogether contain references to experience of living as a stranger on the other side of the world and returning even more estranged still. The collection shows Kavan's subjective acknowledgement/exploration of this double dislocation through introducing binary oppositions of temporal/spatial perspectives.

- 1. 1. A NZ linguistic repertoire of New Zealand landscapes and places, natural phenomena flora&fauna, and distinctive local terms**
(unselfconscious use of NZ place names, Maori terms, and local idioms belong to diary and other forms of documentation of her visit- these disappeared later writings) (NOT GIVEN AT TALK)
- 2. Reframing of present: here and there (Auckland vs London)**
- 3. Imaging the real: framing and pictures**

2. **Reframing of present day experience in London**—Kavan's disorientation /dislocation at finding herself back in war torn London (testified in letters she wrote to Ian Hamilton throughout the 1940s after her return) is represented in a semi-autobiographic style emphasising the arbitrariness and confusion of memory. She reframes her experiences in London through reference to world she has left, sometimes experienced mentally as a disordering presence interrupting the present moment.. In 'Glorious Boys' set at a party in London the narrator meets unexpectedly, Ken an officer she had known 'from another country'; there is what Foucault would describe as a hetero-chronic moment, a sudden split in reality, as the 'other country' intrudes onto and merges with 'this' one.

A carnation pinned to a dress with the coloured badge of a regiment came between, and behind this the known and utterly unlikely face from another country suddenly sprang out at her in the room like a pistol pointed over the noise and smoke and the atmosphere of a party and for a second **she felt cold and confused with the countries running wildly together** (42)

But that was another country and why was it **here** now? When it came at night or when she was by herself that was all right. But **coming** sudden and inopportune now it confused her, she standing glass in hand talking to Ken at a party, and he looking entirely too natural in his uniform (Lazarus 44) .

Kavan converts the text of 'otherness' and strangeness colliding with the real, into an aesthetic/ subjectivity of terror/fear/ dominated by aural cacophony (of falling shells, air raid sirens bombs exploding, the noise of voices at parties), punctuated by remembered visual images of tranquillity and peace. The narrator images NZ as a mental painting of a place of happiness -- in contrast to the chaos of the present but there is no reconciliation between these disparate moments and conflicting sensations:

Sometimes **the picture** was there at night and sometimes it came there alone and she could understand that; but now in the noise of the party it came so much stronger and clearer than it should and there was the low house at the end of the point with water on three sides and there were the big trees with cormorants in them, and she had been happier there with Franks (i.e. Hamilton) than with the other men she had been around with but she had left it as she left every place; and there it was clear in the picture, only it startled her now (43)

In 'Who has Desired the Sea', the disorientation caused by memory's intrusion on the present is associated with mental illness --i.e. the shell shock/psychologically damage. The war veteran, Lennie, in the Neurosis Centre who survived the bombing of his troopship by a German Foker Wulfe (25) feels Like Sylvia Plath's heroine in *The Bell Jar*, that he is living in a glass cell. He is anxiously disturbed by the sound of the sea near the Centre, because it reminds him of this moment of horror, and traumatised search for a young man who was blown up in this bombing; but the sea also brings back idyllic memories of sailing and swimming in NZ. **These are** presented so as to emphasise the jump in distance, the switch between the present and the past, while slippage between pronouns suggestive of overlap between the narrator/character. **Deictic analysis**

Deixis/deictics: words used in locating what is talked about in relation to the speaker's point of view (i.e. locative information), whether in space (*here/there; this/that*); time (*now/then*), discourse (*former/latter*), or social relations (*I/you*).

Here/there;
now/then;
this/that;
up/down
come/go;
bring/take.

Deixis is a phenomenon where there the tripartite relationship between the linguistic system, encoder's subjectivity, and contextual factors, is foregrounded grammatically and lexically. (Keith Green, ?)

The experiential form of deixis is in selecting and drawing attention to objects from the environment – either as the representation of the immediate situation or a memory or imagination of the speaker (Werth, *New essays*, ed Keith Green 64)

Now in the distance he saw the beach at Mairangi and the young man was standing there very tanned in his bathing slippers and that was the small scar on his cheek that he had got from the oyster shell on the rock swimming under water when he was eight years old. **That was one of the things he was seeing**, with, in the background Cape Promise and all the islands, the Sugar Loaf and the Noises, the little one where the penguins went, and the one which was an extinct volcano. It was the **southern** sun that made the wattle burn like a fire all along the creek. In Mairangi at Christmas time the sun was so strong that it hurt **your** eyes for the first few seconds when **you** came out of the bach in the morning and ran down to the sea to swim. **That was the place** where they dragged the boat over the warm sand, shells sharply warm on the foot soles, and where they had **those** great fishing trips out to the Barrier, the water as smooth and solid to look at as kauri gum, and as blue as sapphires, and he remembered the clean splashless opening of the water as you dived into it like a knife. ('Who has Desired the Sea', *I am Lazarus* 24-25)

Here the utterance is encoded in the spatio-temporal context and the encoder's subjective experience is based on distance from the present place and moment.

In the opening phrase, the adverb **now**, combined with the phrase - **in the distance**, frame the distancing action of memory as the deictic demonstratives (that those) define the action of a time and place remote from the speaker –e.g. the word 'southern' points to the northern location of the writer. The perspective is Lennie's who was once there, seeing the young man whom he is obsessed with, as the reporting clause establishes 'he was seeing'. Yet slippage of voice as narrator moves from 3rd person to more intimate second person you, suggests that the narrator also identifies with Lennie. [This is one of the few passages in her work with sense of panorama,, opening out of a vista)

This memory of utopian perfection precedes the recollected trauma of being bombed, but the story fails to offer any guarantees that the present moment can be improved. Lennie glimpses a ghostly reflection in a mirror of the face of the young man he is searching -- a form of haunting -- and he returns to the cliffs and 'the cold, tumultuous restless water beneath' (31). The search concludes with the return of his earlier memory, now reincarnated as a vision of the future. The story ends

Then he looked over the sea and there were islands it seemed, and then a great migration of birds thickened the air and he was in a rushing of wings, the wings beat so dark and fast round him he felt dizzy like falling and the moon disappeared. And **then** it was clear again, brilliant moonlight, and **there**, ahead, as bright as day, were all the small islands, Cape Promise and the Bay of Mairangi wide still, unbelievably peaceful the full moon, And **then** he did know where he was **going**. (*I am Lazarus*, 31)

Generally understood linguistically that 'this' is the centre of the deictic field (because closest proximity to the encoder of the utterance) . But in this conclusion there is no 'this' or 'present moment' to offset this resolute location in the past so contributing to the force of distance from life itself. The spatio-temporal deictics then / there (Not 'now' / 'here'), hint at his suicide by jumping from the cliffs in the delusion that he would rather satisfy his desire for union with the memory and leave this world than come to terms with the loss. (in deixis the distancing away from speaker carries more uncertainty of reference than the more specific connotations of coming towards – so resolution does not state the outcome)]

2. Imaging reality: framing and pictures

Use of imagery of pictures and images with frames dominates Kavan's memories and recollections of NZ, as she isolates them, preserve their intactness in the face

of memory loss, inserting moments of intense recall in fragmented narrative . In 'Benjo', the narrator opens with the difficulty of communicating what 'my life over there' was about, given that there were 'gaps and inconsistencies' and the 'whole thing was incomplete and blurred'. The Wildean terminology of transience suggests that although the picture had been kept under wraps, to prevent the images from ageing, it could not be preserved for ever

The memories themselves seem to be evaporating. The curtain which covered the picture has been removed, but now the colours of the paint are starting to fade. Every day the canvas become more indistinct, a ghostly landscape, with few figures, such as Benjo's, appearing here and there, still touched with the bizarre gleam of their original brightness (108)

This brings Kavan to consider how all reality is no more than a form of representation when objects or experiences are converted into the media of language, memory or art. In Peter Schwenger's summary, "[a]ll our knowledge of the object is only knowledge of its modes of representation – or rather of our modes of representation, the ways in which we set forth the object to the understanding, of which language is one" (2006, 22-3).¹ In this light, as soon as the thing is mentioned, it disappears, it is not the thing that is at stake anymore, but our representation of it – its name, a type of object. This preoccupation with the evanescent nature of reality, how it disappears and eludes rediscovery, underlies other stories which are not about NZ, but which define her condition of existential dislocation.

In 'Now I Know Where my Place Is' all reality is questioned, as narrator searches for the place that-- from snippets of information -- she thinks might hold the key

¹ Schwenger, Peter. 2006. *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

to her character: the slipperiness of memory and the treachery of appearances is hinted at in the transitions between waking and dream landscapes. Hearing of a hotel that she may have visited as a child the narrator asks

Was it really the same place that they were talking about? The place that for so many years lingered like a half memory on the horizons of my consciousness? How often...did the tenuous picture appear on the vague twilight between sleeping and waking! All these things I had been accustomed to accept as part of a queer dream plasma which flows along like a sub-life....

She then shifts from 'the same place' to question whether the medium through which her impressions was constructed was no more than an illusion: this leads to the challenge to visual perception, is it a painting or a photo?

Or perhaps it was really only a picture of the hotel I saw in an album of photographs at my old home. I remember so well the album bound in some very soft leather and embroidered in coloured beads with an Indian symbol. Is it really the soft roughness of the leather ... that comes back to me...? Or is this, too, just an illusion and the blue-tinted photograph, round which constellations seem to be wheeling, no more than a shadow in an old dream?(121)

It corresponds to Roland Barthes' definition of photography in *Camera Lucida* : " A bizarre medium , a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination" (1981 , 115;)

This undermining of the perceptual experience, too might be emblematic of the NZ experience. That is, it—the sharp to fading memories of it-- give her back no more of herself than she has at the present moment of writing. Literalisation of metaphors and images of memory as framed, comes in the story called 'The Picture' in which the narrator alone in a foreign land takes a picture to be framed but is given the wrong one in return (a picture of a frog with a top hat) by the a framer, a nasty man with rat like teeth and a venomous leer. The foreign landscape lacks any local specificity, and the story's emotions of loss, betrayal

and disappointment arguably represent the culmination of Kavan's grappling with memories and framings of them as pictures

IV. Conclusion

To answer the question with which I opened, as to what kind of traveller Kavan saw herself as being, I suggest that the 'thread of pacific nostalgia' that (Jenny Sturm, 244) identifies in the letters to Hamilton which describe her attempt to book a passage back but being defeated by the bureaucracy of wartime, makes her a diaspora subject upon her return to the UK. Her abrupt severance from the life she had enjoyed there with Hamilton, aroused in her, something close to what Avtar Brah calls 'a homing desire' (not the same thing as the desire for a homeland') the wish for a place where being at home/homeliness acquired meaning. So NZ (according to critic Ien Ang, 2001, 89) might be seen as a symbolic elsewhere, a place with which she had a long distance and virtual relationship, engaged at a distance with a community of belonging/ers (like Benjie). Yet as the stories show, such concept as homing and belonging are not ones which Kavan embraced. As Sturm points out with reference to 'Who has Desired the Sea', the memory Lennie enjoyed was a denied utopia. NZ may have been a locus amoenus, an idealised landscape and blissful interlude, in retrospect, but it was irrecoverable. In time Kavan eradicated its specificity, including the pleasures she experienced which were so central to its meaning; instead/ finally she turned to the symbolic yet geographically indeterminate landscape of Ice. The NZ sojourn comprised a hinge period in her life between domestic married and free-floating, bohemian identities, where her creative powers as AK (not Helen Edmond/Ferguson) developed, one that reinforced

and complicated her psychological alienation from her own country. Managing and controlling her NZ experience retrospectively required an engagement with memory that thrust further into the darkness of the world beyond reality (aesthetics of insanity?). My final question is whether she could have probed so deeply these recessive places/spaces had she not encapsulated so vividly and intensely another world/terrain which acted as 'other' to one she was writing from- enabling her- for a while at least- to negotiate some kind of relationship between them?

