

# **The Fiction of Anna Kavan (1901-1968)**

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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of the British writer Anna Kavan (1901-1968). It begins by tracing Kavan's life and examining the mythologies around her radical self-reinvention (in adopting the name of her own fictional character), madness and drug addiction. It attempts to map a place for her previously neglected work in twentieth-century women's writing and criticism. Close reading of Kavan's fiction attends to her uses of narrative voice in representing a divided self. Given Kavan's treatment by the Swiss existential psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, the thesis explores connections between her writing and the British anti-psychiatry movement, especially R D Laing. Focussing primarily on the Modernist and Postmodern aspects of Kavan's work, it also notes Gothic and Romantic inflections in her writing, establishing thematic continuity with her early Helen Ferguson novels. The first chapter looks at Kavan's first collection of stories, *Asylum Piece* (1940) and her experimental novel, *Sleep Has His House* (1947). It reads her portrait of institutionalization as a nascent critique of asylum treatment, and considers Anaïs Nin's longstanding interest in her work. Chapter Two draws on research into Kavan's experiences during the Second World War, particularly her time working with soldiers in a military psychiatric hospital. Reading her second collection of stories *I Am Lazarus* (1945) as Blitz writing, it connects her fiction with her *Horizon* article 'The Case of Bill Williams' (1944) and explores the pacifist and anarchistic views in her writing. The third chapter, a reading of the novel *Who Are You?* (1963), argues that Kavan engages with existential philosophy in this text and explores parallels with Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The final chapter looks at Kavan's last and best known work, *Ice* (1967). Following Doris Lessing, this chapter reads the novel's sadism as a political response to the Second World War. Contesting critical interpretations which have pathologized Kavan's fiction as solipsistic representations of her own experiences, this thesis aims to resituate her as a politically-engaged writer of her time.

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## Kavan Bibliography

### As Helen Ferguson

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1929	<i>A Charmed Circle</i>
1930	<i>The Dark Sisters</i>
1930	<i>Let Me Alone</i>
1935	<i>A Stranger Still</i>
1936	<i>Goose Cross</i>
1937	<i>Rich Get Rich</i>

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### As Anna Kavan

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1940	<i>Asylum Piece</i> (Stories)
1941	<i>Change the Name</i>
1945	<i>I Am Lazarus</i> (Stories)
1948	<i>Sleep Has His House</i>
1949	<i>The Horse's Tale</i> (with K T Bluth)
1956	<i>A Scarcity of Love</i>
1957	<i>Eagles' Nest</i>
1958	<i>A Bright Green Field</i> (Stories)
1963	<i>Who Are You?</i>
1967	<i>Ice</i>

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### Posthumous

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1970	<i>Julia and the Bazooka</i> (Stories)
1975	<i>My Soul in China</i> (Novella & Stories)
1994	<i>Mercury</i>
1995	<i>The Parson</i>
2007	<i>Guilty</i>
2009	<i>Anna Kavan's New Zealand</i> , ed. by Jennifer Sturm (Stories)

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**Kavan's Modernist style**  
*Untitled*, private ownership



**Example of distinctive cross-hatching in oil**  
*Untitled*, Tulsa Archive  
Series IV/ Box 1/ Folder 3



**Examples of later 'disturbing' paintings**  
*Untitled*, Tulsa Archive  
Series IV/ Box 1/ Folder 3



*Untitled*, Tulsa Archive  
Series IV/ Box 2

## Introduction

### The Myth of Anna Kavan

Helen Edmonds, Home Counties housewife and writer of conventional novels, was admitted to a Swiss psychiatric clinic after a suicide attempt in 1938; when she emerged she was barely recognizable, transformed from plump brunette into emaciated platinum blonde; she had taken the name of her own fictional character and become Anna Kavan. With her new name came a radically different writing style which was dark and lucid, influenced by heroin addiction, insanity and despair; she would spend the rest of her life surrounding herself in mystery and enigma. So goes the story of Helen Edmonds' metamorphosis into Anna Kavan; known to many more intimately than her fiction, it is a narrative hard to resist. But the tale of Kavan's life is a jumble of fact, fiction, exaggeration and omission, developed and perpetuated as it has passed from magazine article to fly-leaf, popular biography, book review and back again.<sup>1</sup> Kavan's adoption of the name of one of her fictional creations has been taken as licence by critics as well as biographers to read her life and fiction interchangeably and the character 'Anna Kavan' along with her many later, nameless heroines, has given scope for casual confusion between author and fictional creation. Integral to the Kavan mythology is a paradoxical belief that she fabricated the facts of her life and put her real self into her fiction, reading her name change as a deliberate attempt to mystify and her writing as a complex puzzle. But a persistent desire to seek the 'truth' of Kavan's life, and tendency to view her fiction as an elaborate game of hide and seek with the reader, has inhibited serious consideration of her work and she remains a marginal figure in literary criticism.

Beneath the accumulated layers of speculation, falsehood and elaboration lie the contours of Kavan's life story. She was born Helen Woods in 1901 to British parents in Cannes and her father died when she was 11 years old. In 1920 she married and became Helen Ferguson, moving with her husband to Burma where their son Bryan was born. Less than three years later she returned to England and

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<sup>1</sup> See, especially David Callard, 'Bitter Pilgrimage: The Life of Anna Kavan' *London Magazine* 1989; *The Case of Anna Kavan: A Biography* (London: Peter Owen, 1992); Clive Jordan, 'Icy Heroin', review of *Julia and the Bazooka*, *The New Statesman*, 6 March 1970.; Vivian Gornick, 'The Great Depression of Anna Kavan', *The Village Voice*, December 2-8 1981; Jeremy Reed, *A Stranger on Earth: The Life and Work of Anna Kavan* (London: Peter Owen, 2006).



in 1928 was remarried to Stuart Edmonds, publishing six novels from 1929 to 1937 under her previous name Helen Ferguson. In 1935 she gave birth to a daughter Margaret who died soon afterwards and the couple immediately adopted another child whose fate after their divorce is unknown. In 1938 Helen Edmonds suffered a breakdown, attempting suicide, and was sent to a Swiss psychiatric clinic; she would experience bouts of severe depression throughout her life. After splitting from Edmonds, she published a collection of stories under the name of one of her earlier fictional characters, Anna Kavan, which she would eventually take as her own. Her new writing style brought her some literary success in the 1940s. During the Second World War Kavan travelled extensively, living for a time in America and New Zealand; back in London she worked for a short spell at a military psychiatric unit and then at the literary journal *Horizon*. She is known to have used heroin from the mid 1920s and was an addict for most of her life. She continued to write, with mixed success, but depression and ill-health led to a reclusive lifestyle and she was largely forgotten until the success of her final novel in 1967.

When Kavan was found dead in her home in 1968 reports in *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* on 6 December and in *The New York Times* on 7 December gave assessments of her achievements as a writer rather than accounts of her sensational life.<sup>2</sup> During her lifetime, her work received a variable critical reception and her life little scrutiny. The novels she published as Helen Ferguson won neither effusive praise nor censure and largely did not sell. Under her new name, *Asylum Piece* and *I Am Lazarus* established her reputation in the early 1940s and brought very favourable reviews from Edwin Muir and Desmond MacCarthy. *Sleep Has His House* came in for some scathing criticism when it was published in the late 1940s, but also interest from later critics for its experimental style. Kavan would be largely forgotten during the 1950s and 60s until the modest success of her last novel, *Ice*, in 1967. She would live to see Brian Aldiss award the novel 'Best Sci-fi Novel' of 1967 and Anaïs Nin champion her work in *The Novel of the Future* (1968), published by Macmillan in the US and Peter Owen in the UK. In the first decade after her death there was a frisson of renewed interest in Kavan. A deluge of reviews of the posthumously published collection *Julia and the Bazooka* and reissues of her earlier

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, 'Obituary: Anna Kavan', *The Times*, 6 December 1968 and 'Novelist Anna Kavan Found Dead at Home', *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 Dec 1968.

works capitalized on the newly public information of her long-term heroin addiction.

Rhys Davies began the public post-mortem of Kavan's life when he published two biographical pieces on her in 1970 and 1971. Their close and longstanding friendship was evidenced in Kavan's decision to make him, along with Raymond Marriott, executor of her estate but letters in the Kavan and Davies archives show that they fell out dramatically on several occasions. Both Davies and Marriott were members of a group of homosexual men with whom Kavan became friends after, if not before, her name change. Davies' articles remain a touchstone for other researchers of Kavan's life. The motifs of his narrative set out the contours of the myth of Kavan – her enigmatic nature, her drug use and idiosyncrasies, her traumatically neglected childhood and her 'desperate, one-sided love-hate relationship with her mother'. Davies' revelations about her drug addiction which 'had become common knowledge' among friends and from which he believed 'much of her writing was to derive its symbolic, visionary and, above all, despairing elements' set the trend for critical interest in her life and work.<sup>3</sup> Although he focuses attention on Kavan's use of heroin and amphetamines, Davies is clear that she did not die of an overdose. He revealed that she, like her fictional Julia, called her syringe her 'bazooka' and that she was 'a registered addict for close on 30 years'.<sup>4</sup> Several of Davies' anecdotes about Kavan have been taken up by journalists and biographers, a favourite being that of her hurling roast fowl and crockery at dinner parties before disappearing to inject herself and recline on her bed eating chocolates and reading novels. It all makes for a good story. Approached by Peter Owen to write a biography of Kavan, Davies decided instead to publish a novel based on her marriage to Stuart Edmonds, *Honeysuckle Girl* (1975).<sup>5</sup> His 'Karen' further complicates the story of Kavan's life, creating another fictional reincarnation of the figure who was 'Anna Kavan', and entirely fantastic elements from the novel have made their way into the two biographies. *Honeysuckle Girl* is perhaps most useful for scholars of Kavan in giving scope to understanding Davies' early relationship with Helen Edmonds as she then was, and in highlighting his authorial inclination to spin a yarn when reading his account of her life. It is Rhys Davies'

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<sup>3</sup> Rhys Davies, 'The Bazooka Girl: A Note on Anna Kavan' *London Magazine* 1970, 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> 'Anna Kavan' *Books and Bookmen*, February 1971, 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Honeysuckle Girl* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

testimony of the dramatic physical transformation that accompanied Kavan's change of name that has established and perpetuated the story of her reinvention. But Davies admits to losing touch with Helen Edmonds for a gap of three or four years before she reappeared as Anna Kavan. That she had changed her hair and lost weight when he saw her again was hardly the sudden and drastic transformation it appeared to him, and the change of name was also a slow process. Although Davies writes of Bryan's visits to the Edmonds' home he mentions nothing of the neo-natal death of their daughter Margaret, or the adoption of Susanna, and his tell-all account of her life suggests he would have disclosed these details if he had known. Davies reports that Kavan 'attempted suicide twice, and there were dramas resulting from overdoses'.<sup>6</sup> Her letters reveal that these attempts were more frequent before she began to be treated by Dr Bluth.

It is difficult to fathom how much Davies' homosexuality might have influenced his portrait of Kavan as inherently non-sexual, and his statement that 'a lack of sensuality in her was basic'.<sup>7</sup> He also believed her to be indifferent to, jealous of, and even hostile towards other women. Such claims are belied by archival evidence of Kavan's sexual relationships and her friendship with women outside of Davies' circle. His portrait of Kavan shows her as solipsistic and self-obsessed and this goes hand in hand with his reading of her fiction; he believed that she 'wrote in a mirror' which 'imprisoned her'.<sup>8</sup> Both Davies' articles present her as an 'obdurately subjective writer' and he believes her 'best stories are representative not only of her art but of her life and that she is 'in' each'.<sup>9</sup> Davies' claim that as 'Helen Ferguson she published several conventional Home Counties novels' fits with his narrative of her dramatic transformation and has become a judgement firmly adhered to any discussion of these texts.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that Davies' account of Kavan is both limited and tendentious; he knew her best in her later life, and he knew only one side of Anna Kavan. Nonetheless, his is the best extant firsthand account of her life. Perhaps most interesting in respect to Kavan's work is Davies' description of her 'unflinching love and knowledge of the Bible', which can

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<sup>6</sup> Davies, 'Bazooka Girl', 16.

<sup>7</sup> 'Anna Kavan', 8.

<sup>8</sup> 'Bazooka Girl', 13.

<sup>9</sup> 'Bazooka Girl', 13.

<sup>10</sup> 'Bazooka Girl', 14.

be seen manifest throughout her writing, and that 'she was a ceaseless reader of fiction' which reinforces the extensive intertextuality of her work.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Historiography of Kavan**

Kavan's surviving personal papers, manuscripts and artwork are held in the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa. The bulk of the collection was purchased from her executors in 1986 with later additions including Richard R Centing's research for an unwritten biography, and papers relating to David Callard's *The Case of Anna Kavan* (1992). Another small collection of letters and other papers are held in the Rhys Davies archive in the National Library of Wales. The Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas in Austin contains Kavan's correspondence with her publisher Peter Owen, including reader's reports from his then editorial assistant Muriel Spark. The library also holds letters from Kavan to John Lehmann, Kay Dick, Gerald Hamilton, Francis King and some early correspondence between Helen Ferguson and the William A. Bradley literary agency. Material relating to the publication of *Who Are You?* appears in the Scorpion Press files in both Austin and Tulsa. The Random House archives at the University of Reading hold relevant production records up to 1937 and several peculiarly flirtatious letters from a young Helen Ferguson to Jonathan Cape himself in 1930. Though she was married at this time, she appears to have temporarily split from her husband Stuart Edmonds, claiming to 'have lost all my old interests and connexions' and to be 'broke'. Travelling in France after a visit to a Swiss sanatorium for treatment for TB, her desire 'to start again in quite a new sort of life' suggests that her reinvention as Anna Kavan had a long gestation.<sup>12</sup> Decades later, she would describe Cape in a letter to Peter Owen as a 'mean old devil', suggesting that her requests for an advance on her next novel were denied.<sup>13</sup> A box of letters from Kavan to her lover Ian Hamilton have recently been uncovered in the National Library of New Zealand in Wellington and provide detailed evidence of her life and travels during the Second World War.

Firsthand accounts of Kavan from Rhys Davies, Raymond Marriott and her lover Ian Hamilton suggest that she was unreliable about the details of her past, but

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<sup>11</sup> 'Bazooka Girl', 14; 'Anna Kavan', 9.

<sup>12</sup> Archives of Jonathan Cape Ltd, Archives of Random House publishers, University of Reading Special Collections (Hereafter Cape Archive), Anna Kavan to Jonathan Cape, 14 August 1930.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Owen Archive, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas, Austin (Hereafter Austin). Anna Kavan to Peter Owen, 20 August 1959.

the interpretation of this as a deliberate attempt to surround herself in mystery takes little account of emotional or strategic omissions in her narrative. There were areas of her life that Kavan did not draw on for her fiction and perhaps chose not to discuss, particularly her experience of motherhood and the loss of her children. It appears unlikely that Ian Hamilton knew anything of her first marriage or her son Bryan. Possibly she kept this part of her life from him, like the fiction that she and Hamilton concocted for Charles Fuller when they posed as brother and sister in order to disguise their relationship as unmarried lovers (presumably to encourage a romantic involvement with Kavan). Rhys Davies' report that Kavan refused to disclose her age in later life is hardly a mysterious evasion, and she was aided in her minor vanity by an error on her passport which conveniently made her three years younger. However, the sparseness of Kavan's personal papers is odd. Letters she wrote to others survive in archives, but she appears to have kept only the notes sent to her by Dr Bluth and two diaries from 1926-7. Her tendency to fall out with friends and her difficult relationship with her mother might go some way to explaining the deliberate destruction of mementos, and other factors such as her itinerant lifestyle until the 1950s and the bombing of her London flat during the Second World War might well have led to the loss or destruction of correspondence. Yet extensive manuscripts of unpublished material and several boxes of artwork have survived as well as her collection of photographs, including some from her own childhood and of her son and adopted daughter.

Archival evidence suggests that the metamorphosis of the woman born Helen Woods into the writer Anna Kavan was not as sudden and dramatic as it has been represented. The decision to publish under her character's name appears to have been taken in 1939, over a year before she began to use it in her personal life. As a *nom de plume* it marked a dramatic departure from her earlier writing, but letters reveal that she continued to sign her name Helen and the change did not come into full effect until she was in New York at the end of 1940. At this time she wrote that '[b]eing in a new place I've really succeeded in changing my name to Anna Kavan, but it doesn't seem to have changed my bad luck', insisting '[o]nly call me Anna Kavan. I use it always now' and '[d]on't forget I'm Anna Kavan'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Ian Hamilton Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington (Hereafter Hamilton Papers). Anna Kavan to Ian Hamilton, 11 November; 14 November; 7 December 1940.

Returning to England two years later, confronted with her past and the task of extricating herself from her failed marriage, she stated her intentions more boldly; '[a]s Anna Kavan I want to get right away from Helen Edmonds and all her associations'.<sup>15</sup> Kavan's statement suggests that her name change was not an attempt to throw others off her track, but to flee from the disaster of her personal life and her commercial failure as a writer. Her works as Helen Ferguson were always published under a pseudonym, for she was by then Helen Edmonds, and the success of Anna Kavan's writing debut doubtlessly influenced her decision to adopt the name as her own.

Kavan both invites and thwarts biography and the project of writing her Life has been started more times than completed. Richard Centing at the Ohio State University was one of several scholars who came to Kavan via Anaïs Nin's admiration for her in *The Novel of the Future*. Centing joint-edited the newsletter *Under the Sign of Pisces: Anaïs Nin and her circle* in which he published an article on Kavan in 1970. His essay pieces together biographical information from published sources and gives a heavily over-determined reading of 'Asylum Piece VIII', but was never widely disseminated.<sup>16</sup> His research for an academic biography of Kavan, including correspondence with her friends from the early 1970s, has now been incorporated into the Tulsa archives. Clive Jordan's review of *Julia and the Bazooka* in the *New Statesman* was followed by a long feature on Kavan in *The Telegraph* in 1972 and a visit to Ian Hamilton in Auckland in 1978 but did not result in a book. Jordan's article, like Rhys Davies', emphasizes her drug use and has provided fuel for much of the Kavan mythology. His sources were Kavan's friends and acquaintances and he foregrounds her reported anti-feminism, making much of stories of her 'intense dislike of her own sex'.<sup>17</sup> Margaret Crosland met with Rhys Davies in 1976 with the idea of writing a book on Kavan and was the first to include her in a critical study of women novelists in 1981. Written prior to the availability of archival sources or biographies, factual errors in Crosland's piece are unsurprising, but her discussion of Kavan's 'unexplained death' appears bizarre and unnecessarily

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<sup>15</sup> Hamilton Papers. Kavan to Hamilton, 20 February 1943.

<sup>16</sup> Richard R Centing, 'Anna Kavan's Shout of Red' *Under the Sign of Pisces: Anaïs Nin and her circle* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1970).

<sup>17</sup> Clive Jordan, 'Among the Lost Things', *The Daily Telegraph*, Friday, February 25 1972. See also 'Icy Heroin', *New Statesman*, 6 March 1970.

sensational.<sup>18</sup> Crosland reads Kavan's fiction as autobiographical and focuses attention on her as a woman writer, rightly repudiating Brian Aldiss' claim that she took the name Kavan due to the influence of Kafka.<sup>19</sup> Her view that the fiction she examines is that which 'could only have been written by a woman' is determined by her belief that 'the psyche is conditioned by biology, whether we like it or not'.<sup>20</sup> Crosland's essentialist reading finds a 'feminine quality' in Kavan's writing, 'an artistry of a particularly female kind that never lost the awareness of possible warmth'.<sup>21</sup> Without drawing direct comparison between their work, she places Kavan alongside Ann Quin, reading both writers' experimentalism as an attempt to 'write out their intense unhappiness'.<sup>22</sup> As the only study of twentieth-century women writers to accord substantial attention to Kavan, Crosland's analysis is valuable; but her feminist reading paradoxically fails to recognize the political aspects of Kavan's work and is another example of the persistent tendency to focus attention on her biography and to perceive her writing as a therapeutic act.

Vivian Gornick's extended piece on Kavan in *The Village Voice*, published in 1981, delivers wholesale the Anna Kavan mythology, weaving together the known facts of her life and elements of her fiction into a sensational narrative of genius and despair. Gornick is never wholly won-over by Kavan's writing, interpreting its contents as 'drawn exclusively and repeatedly from Kavan's own life in a way that recalls not so much a writer drawing legitimately on intimate experience as a talented analytic patient who, despairing of release, repeats in poetic fever a description of the events that captures the shape of original damage'.<sup>23</sup> She recognizes, as others have, the influence of Lawrence on the Helen Ferguson novels, and makes a less convincing comparison between Kavan and Virginia Woolf. Gornick would go on to use Kavan as a comparator to Jean Rhys in her review of Rhys' *Collected Letters* and is one of several critics to note the similarities in the work of these two writers, without knowledge of their mutual admiration, her reading provides a useful exemplar to which I will return.

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Crosland, *Beyond the Lighthouse: English Women Novelists in the Twentieth Century* (London: Constable, 1981), 186.

<sup>19</sup> Crosland, *Beyond the Lighthouse*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> *Beyond the Lighthouse*, 193, 190.

<sup>21</sup> *Beyond the Lighthouse*, 190.

<sup>22</sup> *Beyond the Lighthouse*, 196.

<sup>23</sup> Gornick, 'The Great Depression of Anna Kavan', 49.

Aorewa McLeod at the University of Auckland interviewed Ian Hamilton about Kavan in 1981 and David Callard reports that she too planned a biography of Kavan. Although she did not publish a book, transcripts of McLeod's interview with Hamilton provide an interesting, if not always accurate, insight into Kavan's life and she continued to inspire students at the University of Auckland to read Kavan's work.<sup>24</sup> Priscilla Dorr had first access to the Kavan archives in the McFarlin Library as a doctoral student at the University of Tulsa. Her thesis was submitted in 1988 but the biography of Kavan she planned was never published. Dorr interviewed Raymond Marriott in 1986 and like Rhys Davies he painted a picture of Kavan as fabricating and creating puzzles in both her life and work.<sup>25</sup> In the mid to late 1980s, there was a surge of interest in Kavan amongst Anaïs Nin scholars. Gunther Stuhlmann reproduced the letters Nin sent to Kavan in the journal *Anaïs*.<sup>26</sup> Yet there has been no sustained comparison of the work of these two writers to date.

David Callard visited the archives in Tulsa in 1985 and first published an article on Kavan in the *London Magazine* in late 1989.<sup>27</sup> His biography *The Case of Anna Kavan*, an artful reference to Kavan's 'The Case of Bill Williams', was published by Peter Owen in 1992. Callard's 'Introduction' sets out explicitly the narrative of Kavan's deliberate secrecy and obfuscation:

She adopted a new name, a new birthdate, a new physical appearance and, it would seem, a new persona and literary style. This done, she set about spreading disinformation about the person she had once been.<sup>28</sup>

Callard's lack of referencing does nothing to dispel confusion between Kavan and her work. Actively conjuring the mystery of Kavan, he freely quotes from her fiction out of context in order to illustrate his interpretation of her life. Callard clearly draws much of his information from Rhys Davies' articles and also quotes extensively from interviews with both Raymond Marriott and Rose Knox Peebles, the daughter of Kavan's old school friend, noting at times the clear disparity in their

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<sup>24</sup> Transcript of interview between Aorewa McLeod and Ian Hamilton, Auckland, 1981 in Raewyn Glynn, 'Anna Kavan on Ice: An Encounter with Anna Kavan's Wartime Writing Via New Zealand and the Arctic Imaginary', (Unpublished MA thesis: University of Auckland, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Priscilla Diaz Dorr, 'Anna Kavan: A Critical Introduction' (University of Tulsa, 1988), 24.

<sup>26</sup> Gunther Stuhlmann, 'Anna Kavan Revisited, the Web of Unreality' *Anaïs: An International Journal* 3 (1985). See also Peter Owen, 'Publishing Anna Kavan' *Anaïs: An International Journal* 3 (1985) and Anonymous, 'Introducing Anna Kavan' *Anaïs: An International Journal* 5 (1987).

<sup>27</sup> Callard, 'Bitter Pilgrimage: The Life of Anna Kavan'.

<sup>28</sup> *The Case of Anna Kavan: A Biography*, 'Introduction'.



accounts of Kavan in later life. His determination to read Kavan's fiction as autobiography leads him to factual errors about her life and prompts him to question the veracity of her fiction. Callard notes the increasing bitterness with which Kavan appeared to view her personal relationships, and invites us to mistrust her demonic portrayal of both her husbands and her mother in her work. But in doing so he loses sight of the fact that Kavan made no claims for her writing as biography and she left no autobiographical account of her life.

Callard's research was the basis for Jeremy Reed's later effort *A Stranger on Earth* (2006) and Reed takes the undisciplined approach to Kavan's life even further, unreservedly attributing the feelings of her characters to their author. His biography is sensationalist, reading early twenty-first century notions of drug culture and mental illness onto Kavan's life and fiction. He makes bold claims for her lesbian sexuality, based on her comments about her liaison with Phyllis Morris in her diary and her fictional portraits of female friendships. Despite factual errors and melodramatic licence, sadly this is the most readily available published source for scholars of Kavan's life.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Jennifer Sturm has contested this narrative of mystery and obfuscation. During her doctoral research, Sturm was the first to uncover the birth and death of the Edmond's baby Margaret and their immediate adoption of Susanna. Her work in the Tulsa archives corrected many errors in Kavan's biography, revealing that the facts of Kavan's life are readily available to more rigorous researchers. Sturm was also the first to examine Kavan's letters to Ian Hamilton in the National Library of New Zealand. Her thesis and published work give a detailed and accurate biography of Kavan's time in New Zealand during the Second World War.<sup>30</sup>

Other critical work of the past two decades has had to rely on the available biographies. Eleonora Rao challenges assumptions about the radical divide between the Helen Ferguson novels and Kavan's later writing in 'The 'Black Sun': Anna Kavan's Narratives of Abjection' (1991), tracing her representations of the literal and metaphorical exile throughout her oeuvre. Rao combines Julia Kristeva's

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<sup>29</sup> Reed, *A Stranger on Earth: The Life and Work of Anna Kavan*.

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Sturm, 'Fictionalising the Facts: An Exploration of the 'Place' of Aotearoa/ New Zealand in the Post-War Autobiographical Fiction of Anna Kavan' (Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Auckland, 2006) and ed., *Anna Kavan's New Zealand: A Pacific Interlude in a Turbulent Life* (Auckland: Vintage, Random House New Zealand, 2009).

writing on melancholy and abjection with Edward Saïd's notion of the exile in her reading of Kavan's 'image of the melancholic outsider':<sup>31</sup>

The strangeness and the foreignness that informs most of Kavan's writing goes to the very core of the psychological subject itself. Kavan's protagonist is typically not only an exile, an outcast; he or she is truly also a stranger to himself or herself. Her writing explores these liminal and borderline states in terms of psychological and social complication.<sup>32</sup>

Rao examines Kavan's disturbed representations of geography and temporality to denote the experiences of her misplaced and dispossessed characters and gives attention to texts otherwise neglected by the limited Kavan criticism, providing a detailed reading of *Eagles' Nest* and *My Soul in China*. Jane Garrity (1994) reads *Sleep Has His House* from a psychoanalytic perspective and Geoff Ward (2001) and Lawrence Driscoll (2000) examine it as a narrative of addiction. Victoria Nelson includes *Ice* in her discussion of the South Polar Romance (1997) and Doris Lessing's public interest in Kavan's work since 2003 has raised her profile again.<sup>33</sup> I address each of these critics in detail later in this thesis.

### **Beyond the Myth**

Kavan herself propagated a narrative of her lonely and neglected childhood and her relationship with her mother was clearly difficult at times. Little is known about the death of her father, his fall from the prow of a ship in Tuxpan Harbour, Mexico, is generally thought to have been suicide, although Rhys Davies' silence on this subject suggests that Kavan did not speak of it. Ten years after her first husband's death, Kavan's mother married Joseph White and appears to have been widowed again before she married Hugh Tevis in 1934. Tevis was a South African who was 21 years her junior and a practicing homosexual. His extensive wealth permitted Mrs Tevis to provide an allowance for her daughter, but after her death the stipend was reduced and an expected inheritance was not forthcoming, leaving Kavan bitter. The fact that she was named Helen for her mother adds something to her troubled relationship with that name. Yet Davies' account of Kavan's vitriolic ill-feeling towards her mother is complicated by archival evidence that shows that at times

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<sup>31</sup> Eleonora Rao, 'The 'Black Sun': Anna Kavan's Narratives of Abjection' *Textus* IV (1991), 130.

<sup>32</sup> Rao, 'The 'Black Sun': Anna Kavan's Narratives of Abjection', 131.

<sup>33</sup> See Doris Lessing, 'Anna Kavan' in *Time Bites* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) and 'Ice in an Outlaw's Heart', review of *A Stranger on Earth* by Jeremy Reed, *The Independent*, 7 July 2006.

she found her an invaluable support and their relationship appears to have been ambiguous and changeable, strained mostly by Kavan's financial dependency. Although her fiction has been comprehensively mined for evidence of her controlling and uncaring mother, Kavan's maternal characters are also more varied and complex than they have often been represented.

The wealth and social standing of Kavan's parents make her first marriage to Donald Ferguson, 11 years her senior, the more complex to fathom. Holding a mid-ranking post in the British colonial railway in Burma, Ferguson was from a solidly middle-class background and the marriage was neither socially nor financially advantageous to Helen Woods; most certainly it was not a love-match. The story that Ferguson was a former lover of her mother's and that she engineered the marriage first appears in Callard's biography but there is no evidence to support this, and the suggestion that she chose to marry in order to escape the family home is a more likely supposition. Kavan drew heavily on the circumstances of her marriages for her fiction, and again, those that have interpreted her characters as literal representations of Donald Ferguson and Stuart Edmonds have vilified both men. During her short marriage in Burma Kavan gave birth to a son, Bryan. In 1923 the family travelled back to Britain and Donald Ferguson returned to Burma alone; in 1927 they were divorced and Stuart Edmonds was cited as co-respondent. Donald Ferguson relocated to India in his capacity of Railway Official, returning again to England in 1930 where he remarried. Bryan did not live with his mother in England, and it appears that Donald Ferguson was granted custody of his son. With his father abroad it is likely that Bryan spent his childhood with nannies, at school, or cared for by his father's family. Herein lies one of the most damning indictments levelled at Kavan – that she took little interest in her own children. Despite her own deeply resentful feelings of childhood neglect which continued until late in her life, there appears to have been little to distinguish her relationship with her children from her own upbringing. Little is known of Bryan's short life, he was killed in February 1944 while serving as a Private with the Black Watch Royal Highlanders. His residence on the Army Roll of Honour is listed as Edinburgh and his death was registered in Bristol. Rhys Davies remembers Bryan's visits to Helen and Stuart Edmonds' house, and two photographs of him take prominent place in Kavan's personal papers, a portrait of him in his Black Watch uniform and one of the two of them together while he was an adolescent.

There is sparse evidence about Kavan's life in Britain immediately after her split from Donald Ferguson. Her only surviving diaries, kept from 1926-7, document her early drug use, beginnings of an affair with the artist Stuart Edmonds and her enrolment at the London Central School of Arts and Crafts. Friends report that Kavan took painting as seriously as she did writing throughout her life, but she sold few pictures and her artwork has received almost no critical attention. She painted mostly in oils, exhibiting landscapes as Helen Ferguson at the Wertheim Gallery in 1935 and later at the Redfern Gallery. The Tulsa archives include several boxes of her surviving artwork, the rest is in private ownership, she gave many paintings away to friends and a collection was sold after the death of Raymond Marriot. In keeping with the reception of her writing, almost any untitled female figure she painted has inevitably been interpreted as a self-portrait. Her accessible artwork is undated, making it impossible to trace whether the change in her literary style was matched in her painting but there are echoes in it of the themes and style of her writing. Like her writing, her artwork shows an inclination to experiment with style and expressionistic tendencies in its emotional intensity and emphatic brushwork. Other paintings are disrupted by a distinctive cross-hatching which recalls the fragmented style of her writing. Kavan's late paintings have a dark palette and a luminosity which is lost in reproduction; Raymond Marriott and Rhys Davies reported destroying many of these due to their disturbing nature. Those that survive give a clue as to their theme; eyeless figures in poses of execution – a head in a gallows, a man's skull split by a red fissure of blood, a woman with a noose of entrails or umbilical cord around her neck.<sup>34</sup>

When Helen Ferguson met Stuart Edmonds he already had a son by his first marriage. After a tumultuous courtship the couple married in 1928 and lived in Bledlow Cross, Oxfordshire. Helen Edmonds began to publish in 1929 under her previous married name, Helen Ferguson. Late in 1935 she gave birth to a baby girl, Margaret, who died soon afterwards, and within weeks the couple adopted another baby, Susanna. Kavan's access to Susanna appears to have been restricted after her breakdown and split from Stuart Edmonds. Early in 1941 she wrote to Hamilton from New York that she felt 'worried and guilty about the child' but felt herself 'not really to blame I suppose'.<sup>35</sup> On her return to London, she met with solicitors in an

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<sup>34</sup> See page 7.

<sup>35</sup> Hamilton Papers. Kavan to Hamilton, 4 Jan 1941.

attempt to gain custody and wrote of objections to her visiting Susanna from Edmonds and other carers. When she eventually saw the girl Kavan enjoyed her company and 'liked her a lot'.<sup>36</sup> But by 1944 Kavan ceases to mention Susanna in her letters and it seems that her hopeful expectations of legal custody were not met. Susanna did not return to live with Stuart Edmonds and his new wife and nothing definite is known of her fate or the name she went by after she left her adoptive parents. Edmonds family lore has it that she eventually married a doctor, but also that she died young, and Edmonds' sons did not meet her. For Kavan anyway, both Bryan and Susanna were lost to her by early 1944.

The chronology of events surrounding Kavan's serious breakdown and admission to a Swiss clinic in 1938 remains unclear. It is not known for certain whether she was addicted to heroin at this time although her diaries indicate she was using the drug in the 1920s. If her marriage had not broken down it was certainly in decline and it appears likely that Stuart Edmonds' affair with Marjorie Davies, whom he would later marry, had already begun. Kavan would later begin her own affair with Marjorie's brother, Ian Hamilton, and would travel abroad with him. A committed pacifist, Hamilton had emigrated to New Zealand in his early twenties, where he owned a sheep farm in Hawke's Bay and was forging a career as a playwright. The success of his anti-war play, *Falls the Shadow* (1939), in Auckland encouraged him travel to England in the hope of staging another production and there he met Kavan. Hamilton was also married, but did not plan to return to his wife and son when he got back to New Zealand. In the later part of 1939 he and Kavan travelled together to Scandinavia and then on to North and Central America. After settling in California for six months they parted company; Hamilton went back to New Zealand and Kavan sailed towards South Africa to join her mother.

Travelling on the same boat as Kavan was Charles Fuller, an American whom she and Hamilton had met briefly. When their passage East was halted by wartime conditions, Kavan and Fuller spent some time at a hotel in Bali and Kavan eventually returned with him to New York. Here she spent three months from November 1940 to January 1941, living under Fuller's patronage as he introduced her to his wealthy and artistic connections and his friends in publishing. She passed again through the city briefly in late 1942 as she voyaged back from New Zealand to London. Her mood during her time in the city appears to have been mercurial and her accounts

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<sup>36</sup> Hamilton Papers. Kavan to Hamilton, 7 May 1943.

of the place differ wildly. She found Americans charming, and awful; felt she could not live there, and then took a flat for a year. Rents were expensive and she had little money; Fuller first helped her to find a cheap room in Greenwich Village which she found intolerable, and she wrote to Hamilton of another failed suicide attempt, full of self-loathing. Kavan managed to find enough money to move to a room and then a flat in Midtown. She was variously sociable and gregarious and then severely depressed. On arrival she went through a 'phase of having to dash around all the time', in the 'state when I simply can't stay in my room for 2 minutes. I just have to go out somewhere the whole time, to every meal, no matter with whom' and she found herself 'going to parties and meeting people like Gypsy Rose Lee' and Louis MacNeice.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, her visa was due to expire and, feeling unable to face the prospect of temporary internment on Ellis Island, Kavan travelled on to join Ian Hamilton in New Zealand.

Jennifer Sturm's recent work on Kavan focuses attention on the unpublished manuscript she wrote while travelling during the war years, *The Cactus Sign*. Sturm edited 18 stories from this document for publication in New Zealand, but British publishers have shown little interest in this writing, which is unspectacular in comparison to Kavan's better known work. These tales of the community in which Kavan and Ian Hamilton lived, not far from Auckland, are less fantastic and thematically more conservative than her stories published in the same period. Archival evidence suggests that Kavan tended to rework her material extensively and her plans for this clearly autobiographical draft manuscript are unknown. References to New Zealand also appear in the *I Am Lazarus* stories, published not long after her return to England, and she worked on several of those written in the first person while she was there. Although it is never directly named, a country on 'the safe underside of the world' is often alluded to and place names, native animals and other descriptive identifiers all conclusively indicate New Zealand.<sup>38</sup> Despite two happy years there, Kavan left the country because of the likelihood that Ian Hamilton would soon be interred for refusing to fight. The penalties for conscientious objectors in New Zealand during this time were significantly harsher than in the UK and Australia, and despite clear evidence for Hamilton's longstanding pacifism, he was imprisoned in 1943 and held until 1946. Conditions in the camps

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<sup>37</sup> Hamilton Papers. Kavan to Hamilton 4 Jan 1941; 19 Nov 1940; 14 Nov 1940.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Glorious Boys' in *I Am Lazarus* (London: Peter Owen, 1978), 41.

were brutal and his steadfast refusal to contribute to the war effort in any way resulted in periods of solitary confinement.

Kavan's fictional representations of the country are universally positive but her first article for *Horizon* 'New Zealand: Answer to an Inquiry' gives an awed and bitter account of the country from which she had recently returned. She describes the landscape as 'weird, unearthly', 'full of splendour and strangeness', a '[s]trange lonely dream scene full of lovely sadness [...] dream without a dreamer'.<sup>39</sup> But Kavan's representation of the islands' society and inhabitants is clearly influenced by Ian Hamilton's experiences; she refers to 'the man with hate-sharpened features writing anonymous letters' and 'the conscientious objectors of the last war [...] bringing conscription to their homeland the first of all the dominions'.<sup>40</sup> She also objects to the country's inherent sexism, painting a picture of women confined to the drudgery of domestic servitude. But ultimately, the enduring image she paints of the country's inhabitants is of a band of souls pitted against the grandeur of the natural world and the imminent South Pole and the land she describes recalls the surreal and breathtaking polar landscapes of *Ice*. As Sturm has noted, Kavan's fictional representation of New Zealand as a land of peace and freedom is incommensurate with her *Horizon* article. Her condescending observations of New Zealanders are both an example of the polemical style of her journalism, which I discuss in relation to 'The Case of Bill Williams', and evidence of her bitter feelings of being forced to leave the country.

Hamilton later wrote an account his experience as a detainee and there are striking resonances between Kavan's idiom and ideology in the *Lazarus* stories and his bitter memoir published privately eight years later. *Till Human Voices Wake Us* (1953), like *I Am Lazarus*, takes a line of Eliot's *Prufrock* as its title and Hamilton quotes 'I am Lazarus, back from the dead' to describe his feelings on re-entering society after his time in prison.<sup>41</sup> His vernacular recalls much of the peculiar language that characterizes Kavan's correspondence and fictional dialogue in the mid-1940s, as her protagonists articulate an amalgamation of the American and Antipodean slang that she had accumulated during her travels. Hamilton and Kavan were clearly an enormous influence on each other's thought and writing, they

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<sup>39</sup> 'New Zealand: Answer to an Enquiry' *Horizon* VIII, no. 45 (1943, September), 162, 159, 157.

<sup>40</sup> Kavan, 'New Zealand: Answer to an Enquiry', 156.

<sup>41</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Till Human Voices Wake Us* (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1984), 225.

shared a fierce pacifism and a veneration for nature which I explore in greater detail in Chapter Four of this thesis. Although Kavan had originally planned to return to New Zealand after the war, the two did not meet again.

Kavan's letters to Ian Hamilton provide detail of her life in New York and London during the war years and immediately afterwards, including evidence of her work at Mill Hill and her months working for Cyril Connolly at *Horizon*. Her time in London in the final years of the war provides another example of how she almost, but not quite, integrated herself into an artistic network and contemporary intellectual life. Sylvia Townsend Warner, whom she had met in New York, introduced Kavan to members of the intelligentsia when she arrived in London in 1943. Through *Horizon* she became friendly with other contributors and editors, and struck up friendships with Philip Toynbee, Len Lye, Kay Dick and Max and Maysie Greig. *Horizon* published Kavan's story 'I Am Lazarus' in May 1943 followed by 'New Zealand: Answer to an Inquiry' and in October she began working there as an assistant.<sup>42</sup> She would go on to write six sets of reviews for them and the article 'The Case of Bill Williams', which I discuss in detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.<sup>43</sup> 'Face of My People' appeared in 1944 and an extract from *Sleep Has His House* titled 'The Professor' in 1946.<sup>44</sup> Although accounts of the journal at this time report Kavan as an unpopular figure in the *Horizon* offices, her own letters reveal that she was on close terms with both Cyril Connolly and Peter Watson, the magazine's principal funder, joining them on at least one weekend visit to Watson's Sussex home.<sup>45</sup> On first meeting Connolly, Kavan found him 'pretentious and rude' but after working with him for several months she liked him better and thought him 'really a nice guy under that super-intellectual façade'.<sup>46</sup> However, it is also clear that her drug use and mental instability caused problems. Archives clearly indicate

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<sup>42</sup> See Anna Kavan, 'I Am Lazarus' *Horizon* VII, no. 41 (1943, May).

<sup>43</sup> 'The Case of Bill Williams' *Horizon* IX, no. 50 (1944, February).

<sup>44</sup> 'Face of My People' *Horizon* IX, no. 53 (1944, May); 'The Professor' *Horizon* XIII, no. 75 (1946, March).

<sup>45</sup> For detailed history of the journal, and brief accounts of Kavan's time there see Michael Shelden, *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989) and Jeremy Lewis, *Cyril Connolly, a Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997). For Kavan's friendship with Connolly and Watson see Hamilton Papers, especially Kavan to Hamilton, 24 February 1944.

<sup>46</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 11 April 1943; 2 Dec 1943.



that Connolly knew and disapproved of her using cocaine during this time, and that she possibly supplied it to others at *Horizon*.<sup>47</sup>

An extraordinary letter from Arthur Koestler to Connolly on the subject of Kavan indicates that she was the cause of a disagreement between them. Koestler replies to a letter from Connolly, now missing, regarding Kavan's 'persecution-ideas relative to me'. He refers to 'Anna's allegations' which appear to involve his talking about her to Jonathan Cape, Dr Bluth and Connolly. He admits to having critiqued her 'lack of balance' and 'standard of values' as a reviewer and it appears that she took his comments badly. But their differences appear to have been political as well as aesthetic in Koestler's attack on Kavan's 'approval of the neurotic patients' anti-war and anti-adjustment attitude' in 'Face of My People'. This letter dates from the period in which Kavan's own correspondence to Ian Hamilton had stopped and she was both physically and mentally unstable.<sup>48</sup>

Kavan's reviews for *Horizon* give some insight into her literary influences of the time as well as her views on literary method. Her critical style utilizes her knowledge of psychiatric and psychoanalytic terminology, identifying writers' portrayals of 'an unresolved father complex', 'objectified anxiety dreams', 'infantile sadism' and 'flight from reality' and pondering on their characters' 'paranoid or obsessional or depressive or manic' traits.<sup>49</sup> Like her fiction, Kavan's criticism is more successful at times than at others, and she employs much of the tendency to interpret the author which I have critiqued in others' readings of her own work. However, her reviews dispel the claim that she disliked the writing of other women on principle and she writes of Virginia Woolf's 'fascinating elaboration of detail, threads laced and interwoven so subtly that their mazy ramifications have an air of fortuitousness'.<sup>50</sup> She admires Rosamond Lehmann's *The Ballad and the Source* (1944) but has nothing positive to say of several of Elizabeth Bowen's short stories. She slates the contributors to *English Story* (1945) for poor characterization, calling them immature and infantile, without mentioning her own contribution to the

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<sup>47</sup> Kavan sent a postcard to Rhys Davies' brother in thinly disguised code asking to be introduced at his 'cake shop' and reporting that 'the situation regarding cake for *Horizon* is getting desperate', returning to London after a brief visit to Torquay, she asks him not to suspect her of 'coming back to buy coke'. Cyril Vernon Connolly Papers, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, Series I/ Box 10/ Folder 8, Anna Kavan to Cyril Connolly, undated; Private Papers of Professor Meic Stephens, Anna Kavan to Peter Davies, 27 December 1943.

<sup>48</sup> Cyril Vernon Connolly Papers, Tulsa, Arthur Koestler to Cyril Connolly, 28 June [1944].

<sup>49</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Reviews' *Horizon* XI, no. 62 (1945, February), 144.

<sup>50</sup> 'Reviews' *Horizon* IX, no. 52 (1944, April), 283.

collection. She is a fan of Henry Miller and admires Huxley's work in general, but is disappointed by his turn to mysticism in *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944).<sup>51</sup>

In February 1944 Kavan's son Bryan was reported missing in action, but it is probable that this news did not reach her for some time. The official record of his memorial in Bovey Tracey cemetery, close to his father's family home, gives his mother's name as Helen Ferguson and her address as her ex-husband's. It is unlikely that Donald Ferguson knew of his ex-wife's whereabouts or her change of name, and it is unclear what contact she had with Bryan during her wartime travels. How the news of his death reached her and its affect on her remain unknown, but there is a stop in her letters to Hamilton from Spring 1944 until late September. When she wrote again she reported that her flat had been 'blitzed' and she had suffered a bout of serious illness, leaving her with attacks of angina and spelling an end to her job at *Horizon*, although she would continue to review for them until early 1946.

### **Kavan and Unorthodox Psychiatry**

Some time during 1944 Kavan began to be treated by Dr Karl Theodor Bluth, the German doctor who would become her long-term psychiatrist and close friend and co-author a book with her in 1949. Their relationship was sometimes turbulent, troubled by unpaid bills and 'negative transference', but their peculiar association would last until his death in 1964. The Kavan archives contain hundreds of Bluth's drawings and poems dedicated to her, many scrawled on the backs of envelopes and scraps of paper; these are almost the only correspondence she kept, cherished like love letters. The sketches are often overtly sexual, others refer to Kavan's drug use; doodles of phalluses and syringes appear amongst those of animals and faces, a visual testimony to their highly unconventional doctor/patient relationship. Despite these explicit drawings and ongoing tension between Kavan and Bluth's wife, there is no suggestion that their relationship was physical. Claims have been made in the two Kavan biographies about Bluth's administering her nightly heroin dose, and certainly he supplied her with the drug for many years.

Although little is known of him, Dr Bluth was undoubtedly an enormous intellectual influence on Kavan. Born in Berlin in 1892, his first passion was as a poet and playwright. As a young man he studied literature and philosophy in Jena

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<sup>51</sup> See Kavan, *Horizon XI*, no.62, 144 and Anna Kavan, 'Reviews' *Horizon XII*, no. 67 (1945, July), 67-9.

where he associated with other artists and writers, particularly Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Johannes R Becher, and was influenced by German Expressionism. His first collection of poems was published in 1918 and he continued to write while he studied medicine and began working in German hospitals, specializing in psychiatry. Bluth publicly criticized violence and totalitarianism, particularly in his plays, *Die Empörung des Lucius* (1924) and *Die Kriege des Chaul* (1930), and by 1933 his works were included in the Nazi book-burning, his plays were banned and his medical licence revoked. In 1934 Bluth and his Jewish wife fled Germany, travelling first in South America and coming to Britain in 1936. Bluth qualified again to practice medicine in Edinburgh and moved to London where he opened his psychiatric practice. Many of his patients were artists and writers and they included a number of those in Kavan's circle – David Gascoigne, George Barker, Julian Trevelyan, Peter Watson and Arthur Koestler. Previously, Ian Hamilton had received treatment from him for a 'nervous breakdown' while he was in England.<sup>52</sup> In London during the war, Bluth was a member of the Club 1943, a group of exiled European writers who had fled Nazism. They held weekly lectures and discussions and in 1944 published a collection of essays, *In Tyrannos*, exploring the history of German democratic thought and politics in light of the Third Reich. Bluth's contribution 'Leibnitz, the European' reveals his passion for German philosophy and Kavan recommended the book in her *Horizon* reviews.<sup>53</sup>

It was through Bluth that Kavan came to be treated by the psychiatrist and existential psychologist Ludwig Binswanger in his Swiss clinic, the Bellevue. Kavan stayed at the Bellevue for a month in March-April 1947 and again for a short time April-May 1948, but records in the Binswanger Archives show that the two doctors corresponded about her case as early as 1945. Her treatment at the clinic was for psychological problems and a 'cure' for heroin addiction and she suffered from serious withdrawal symptoms early in her stay there. Kavan's letters from the Bellevue give an insight into life at the clinic and her relationship with Binswanger. She was deeply flattered to find that 'he really has read *Asylum Piece* and *Lazarus* and knows them well, which is rather remarkable'.<sup>54</sup> This remarkable familiarity would certainly have come via Dr Bluth and was perhaps part of Binswanger's

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<sup>52</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 7 Jan 1945.

<sup>53</sup> Kavan, *Horizon XI*, no.62.

<sup>54</sup> Anna Kavan Papers, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa (Hereafter Tulsa), Series II/ Box 1/ Folder 5, Anna Kavan to George Bullock, undated.

preparation for treating her. Bluth visited the Bellevue during Kavan's stay there in 1947, and they travelled to Zurich together.

Letters between Bluth and Binswanger in the Universitätsarchiv in Tübingen reveal that Bluth had referred previous British patients to the Bellevue and he wrote of plans to have Binswanger's work published in English. He arranged for 'a young philosopher from Cambridge', a student of Wittgenstein, to attempt the translation and was instrumental in having articles by Binswanger commissioned by his former patient, Rodney Phillips, for *Polemic* and by Cyril Connolly for *Horizon* (neither publication went ahead).<sup>55</sup> Bluth wrote to Binswanger of his patients in existential terms, quoting Heidegger, and referring to Miss Kavan's *Daseinssphäre*. Kavan's interest in and full understanding of Binswanger's draft article, despite her never having read Heidegger or Sartre, led to the scheme that she would edit the article and improve the English.<sup>56</sup>

Bluth contributed twice to *Horizon*; his review section titled 'Swiss Humanism' (1947) appraised three German-language books published in Switzerland, including Binswanger's *Grundformen und Erkenntnis Menschlichen Daseins*. Bluth's study of these psychological treatises focuses on their philosophical and political value. He reserves his greatest praise for Binswanger, whom he describes as a 'famous doctor, thinker and psychiatrist, who has cured the most difficult mental cases by physical treatment, without losing sight of the patient's spiritual and psychological problems'.<sup>57</sup> His review emphasizes 'Freud's existential outlook', aligning Binswanger's ideas more closely to Freud than Heidegger, but drawing out the differences between the two thinkers.<sup>58</sup> In his opinion 'Freud is a materialist, Binswanger an idealist'.<sup>59</sup> There is little information available about Bluth's psychiatric methods, although they have been universally described as unorthodox. Although he championed Binswanger's work and sent his patients to the Bellevue for treatment, it appears that he did not practice Binswanger's precise method but considered himself, like Binswanger, a philosopher as much as a physician.

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<sup>55</sup> Binswanger Archive, Bellevue Sanatorium, Kreuzlingen 1857-1980, Universitätsarchiv, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen (Hereafter Binswanger Archive), Karl Theodor Bluth to Ludwig Binswanger, 20 June 1947.

<sup>56</sup> Binswanger Archive, Bluth to Binswanger, 30 July 1947.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Theodor Bluth, 'Selected Notices: Swiss Humanism' *Horizon* XV, no. 86 (1947, February), 147.

<sup>58</sup> Bluth, 'Swiss Humanism', 148.

<sup>59</sup> 'Swiss Humanism', 149.

Bluth and Kavan's collaboration on *The Horse's Tale* in 1949 provides further evidence for their intellectual bond. An allegorical satire in the manner of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), the tale is a parody of post-war British politics and intellectualism and was published by the Gaberbocchus Press, the small independent publishers established by Stefan and Franciszka Themerson in 1948. The pun of the title had already been used by Mark Twain in his 1905 *A Horse's Tale* and the novel's wry disclaimer 'All characters in this story are fictitious, even the horse' was misleading for, at least as much as Kavan's other works, this novel is plainly autobiographical. In a war-torn landscape, clearly an allegory for late 1940s' Europe, an old circus horse Kathbar is displaced and homeless having lost part of his memory. He has an artistic nature, can read, recite poetry and dance beautifully, most notably in a performance acting out Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. David Callard takes Kathbar to be an amalgamation of Bluth and Kavan's names, but the horse clearly represents Kavan, and Bluth appears later as his benefactor Mr Patronage. Kathbar's trials evoke Christian's journey in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which Kavan had also previously referenced in *I Am Lazarus*. During his travels, the horse invokes philosophical references and argues with the 'professor of nonsense'; like his creators he approves 'neither of aggressiveness nor of collectivism'.<sup>60</sup> Kathbar discovers and loses allies throughout the novel – Farmer Hugh, the Art School Principal, Mrs Loveluck the journalist at 'Look and Listen', Mr Patronage and finally Dr Hieronymous. With the first two, he disagrees over philosophical and artistic principles and these profound disagreements with his friends match those in Kavan's own life. After escaping the fate of the other horses being driven to slaughter, Kathbar lives and works on a farm, then founds a school of art which he calls 'Hoofism' the 'right and natural form' of his art.<sup>61</sup> Soon after, he becomes depressed, and is diagnosed by a conventional psychiatrist as 'a psychopath, unbalanced, autistic and somewhat degenerate' who wonders if the horse is 'an alcoholic, or addicted to any drug?'.<sup>62</sup> After falling down drunk at a party of intelligentsia, Kathbar is sent to a public asylum where he is put into an artificial sleep for 48 hours. Kathbar's experiences of the institution give scope for Kavan's anti-psychiatric views:

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<sup>60</sup> Karl Theodor Bluth and Anna Kavan, *The Horse's Tale* (London: Gaberbocchus Press Limited, 1949), 57.

<sup>61</sup> Bluth and Kavan, *The Horse's Tale*, 44.

<sup>62</sup> *The Horse's Tale*, 54.

The days in this place were utterly vacant, devoted to a routine of emptiness which seemed as if it might have been devised to deprive sane people of their wits rather than for the purpose of curing those who'd already lost them.<sup>63</sup>

Kathbar is rescued by his friends who pay for him to receive better treatment at 'the establishment of a foreign expert who had recently been successful in treating a famous dancer'.<sup>64</sup> This description of the expert, Dr Hieronymous, clearly references Binswanger and his treatment of Vaslav Nijinski. At the clinic Kathbar also encounters Dr Zwengli, a thinly disguised Dr Wenger, Binswanger's deputy whom Kavan disliked. Dr Hieronymous and Mr Patronage, like Binswanger and Bluth, are already acquainted and on good terms. The doctor treats Kathbar as an equal, they discuss 'art and its symbolism in general' and Dr Hieronymous deduces from a Rorschach test that the horse's depression is 'due to a constitutional abnormality':<sup>65</sup>

Then he began to explain the principles of "existential psychology" of which he was one of the founders.

For Freud he had the highest respect; but other psychoanalytical schools had introduced all sorts of nonsense and reduced the whole practice of analysis to a crazy amateur level. Therefore he had turned to existential psychology, which was based on the assumption that men, plants and animals had their own special ways of living.<sup>66</sup>

Dr Hieronymous goes on to prescribe electric shock treatment for Kathbar, and later narco-analysis under the influence of sodium amytal. It is not unlikely that Kavan herself received these same treatments at the Bellevue for although Binswanger is primarily known for his existential analysis and humanistic methods, more invasive treatments were also used at the clinic. Kathbar is frightened and sceptical of the benefits of shock treatment, describing the experience as 'a sensation of metaphysical annihilation and disturbed ontological being which [...] Heidegger would doubtless have called despair'.<sup>67</sup> But the narco-analysis is successful, Dr Hieronymous establishes contact with Kathbar's unconscious and retrieves

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<sup>63</sup> *The Horse's Tale*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> *The Horse's Tale*, 99.

<sup>65</sup> *The Horse's Tale*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> *The Horse's Tale*, 103-4.

<sup>67</sup> *The Horse's Tale*, 106.

information about his forgotten former life. *The Horse's Tale* has an unexpectedly happy ending; thanks to the kindness of Mr Patronage and the treatment by Dr Hieronymous, Kathbar finds his way home and the book is to this extent Kavan's tribute to Binswanger and Bluth. Dr Bluth sent Binswanger a copy of the book, which amused him greatly. He replied wishing it success and sending his regards via Bluth to 'unserer gemeinsamen Freundin' [our mutual friend] the horse.<sup>68</sup>

Bluth's close friendship with Kavan did not help his already difficult relationship with his wife Theophila who had psychological difficulties of her own. She was Jewish and suffered a severe breakdown after her entire family were killed in Nazi Germany. The complexity of Bluth's relationship with both women is indicated in his instruction to Binswanger to correspond with him care of Kavan, since his wife opened all of his post. Although Kavan blamed Mrs Bluth for scenes between them, she would later make her a beneficiary of her will.

Kavan was devastated by the death of Bluth in 1964, calling him 'my greatest friend for many years'.<sup>69</sup> She herself wrote his obituary for *The Times* which described him as 'a prominent figure among Berlin intellectuals', 'associated with Brecht and Becher at the State Theatre'. Her eulogy emphasises his creative tendencies, anti-fascist views and his 'kindness courage and gaiety'.<sup>70</sup> The month after he died Kavan made her own will and by friends' accounts attempted suicide again.<sup>71</sup> A year later, she had written a series of stories as a tribute to him, for, she writes:

He had wanted me to write something about him, and as I can only write fiction, I have written a number of short slightly fantastic pieces around him and myself and our relationship.<sup>72</sup>

Three of these stories appeared posthumously: 'The Mercedes', 'The Zebra-Struck' and 'Obsessional'.<sup>73</sup> These fictional accounts are inspired not simply by a friendship but by the overwhelming grief experienced at its end, revealing the intensity of the bond Kavan felt existed between herself and Bluth. 'Obsessional' perhaps refers to

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<sup>68</sup> Binswanger Archive, Binswanger to Bluth, 10 Jan 1950.

<sup>69</sup> Francis Henry King Archive, Austin, Kavan to Francis King, 30 Dec 1965.

<sup>70</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Obituaries: Dr Karl Theodor Bluth', *The Times* 1964.

<sup>71</sup> Tulsa, Loraine Toeg to Richard Centing, 16 Aug 1971.

<sup>72</sup> Austin, Kavan to Francis King, 30 Dec 1965.

<sup>73</sup> Appearing in Anna Kavan, *Julia and the Bazooka*, (London: Peter Owen, 1970).

the diagnosis Kavan was given before Bluth ‘cured’ her – ‘obsessional suicide’.<sup>74</sup> Kavan’s sense that their association was a genuine meeting of minds is elucidated by the resonance of themes already present in her work and Bluth’s philosophical interests. Bluth now remains a marginal figure in Germany; he believed that his forced exile ended his bright career as a writer and in the late 1950s made a claim for damage done to his health by Nazi persecution. After delay and confusion, resulting in Kavan writing letters on his behalf, he received only modest compensation.

### **Kavan and Politics**

Kavan’s political allegiances are difficult to track, and too often her writing has been pathologized as the ravings of solipsistic madness or a vision of drug-induced fantasy. In this thesis, I argue that her writing of mental disturbance and its treatment is political as well as affective and aesthetic in its intention. Though Kavan’s fictional representations of mental breakdown and its treatment were most certainly influenced by her own experiences, her association with psychiatry came to extend far beyond that of patient. Contemporary psychological theory, alongside philosophical concepts of consciousness and will, clearly influence her fiction from the mid-1930s onward. In the 1940s she had become known under her new name for her writing of psychological turmoil and its treatment, and by the end of that decade she had experienced psychiatric clinics as both patient and worker, formally studied psychiatry, and undergone psychoanalytic treatment at the Tavistock clinic. In addition to all of this, there is strong evidence to suggest not only that Kavan had contact with a number of progressive psychiatric practitioners, but that they in turn were familiar with her work. In Chapter Two of this thesis I look in detail at Kavan’s association with Ludwig Binswanger and the British psychiatrist Maxwell Jones, and evidence that suggests they both read her fiction. Jones’ pioneering development of community therapy and Binswanger’s existential psychology were both major tributaries into the work of the figurehead of British anti-psychiatry, R D Laing. I use Laing’s writing as a vantage point from which to reconsider Kavan’s perceived apoliticism.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I look at Anaïs Nin’s association of Kavan’s writing with Laing’s concept of the divided self in *The Novel of the Future* (1968).

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<sup>74</sup> Gerald Hamilton Archive, Austin, Kavan to Gerald Hamilton, 14 Dec 1958.



Although Nin does not explore the connection between Kavan's work and Laing's theories to its full extent, these writers can be associated in two broad ways. Firstly, Kavan's fictional representations of the fractured psyche resonate with Laing's description of the schizophrenic experience. Kavan's characters are plagued by confusion of identity, and often torn between public and private selves. Acting out roles to meet social expectations, they lose their ability to distinguish between real and unreal in a manner strikingly resonant with Laing's 'divided self'. Secondly, the politics of psychiatry expressed in Kavan's fiction and journalism pre-empt Laing's revival of the connection between madness and truth, privileging the voice of unreason and critiquing conventional-psychiatric treatment as a method of social control. A direct connection between Laing's theories and Kavan lies in her treatment by Ludwig Binswanger and her familiarity with his work. Discussing the categorization of *The Divided Self* in later years, Laing described the work as 'a sort of soft edge between psychoanalysis and existentialism' and as a comparator he claimed the 'nearest similarity was to Binswanger'.<sup>75</sup> I propose that Laing's 'soft edge' – the uneasy meeting point of existentialism and psychoanalysis – is a fertile interpretive site for examining Kavan's fiction, and that she, like Laing, is deeply concerned with the politics of madness and its treatment.

Terminology for this meeting point of philosophy and psychological theory is imprecise and can be problematic. Existentialism by its nature concerns itself with the dilemma of defining human identity and the major existential philosophers have all made contributions to theories of mind. Likewise, existentialism has had a diverse influence on practitioners of psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Rollo May has noted the spontaneous and simultaneous emergence of practitioners of existential psychiatry and psychology, and sketched out the common cultural roots of both existentialism and psychoanalysis in late nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>76</sup> While existential psychology has necessarily diverged from, and posed direct contradictions to Freud, Freudian psychoanalysis was particularly influential to this field. Both Binswanger and Laing trained in both clinical psychiatry and psychoanalysis and relied heavily on psychoanalytical terminology while openly challenging some of Freud's ideas. Both psychoanalysis and existential psychology

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<sup>75</sup> Bob Mullan, *Mad to Be Normal: Conversations with R.D. Laing* (London: Free Association Books, 1995), 159.

<sup>76</sup> See Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology* (New York: W W Norton, 1983).

can be seen as continuing the humanistic turn in the care of psychiatric patients, the origins of which are generally traced to Philippe Pinel's work at the Salpêtrière at the end of the eighteenth century. Binswanger was the first to specifically combine Heideggerian existentialism with Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>77</sup> Although Medard Boss would later use Heidegger to critique psychoanalysis and was influenced by Binswanger in his early work, he evolved his school of *Daseinsanalysis* independently.<sup>78</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre's association with psychoanalysis is often underestimated in its complexity. Although he rejected the Freudian unconscious as fundamentally incompatible with existential free-will in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939), Sartre later developed his own more phenomenologically grounded concept of consciousness and expounded a theory of 'existential psychoanalysis' in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Though Sartre continued to critique Freudian psychoanalysis, his theory owed much to Freud and he went on to apply it in psychobiographies of Baudelaire and Flaubert.<sup>79</sup>

The movement David Cooper would term 'antipsychiatry' in 1967 was a neologism for ideas that had developed from existential psychology, explicitly politicizing the agenda of this work. Yet antipsychiatry was never a cohesive movement and its proponents were often indifferent and even inimical to each other. But the term, though rarely self-applied, is useful in identifying an intellectual trend of psychiatric critique in the 1960s. Like the existential psychology that inspired it, this work began to emerge spontaneously. Michel Foucault was the first to publish work that would later be discussed under the label of antipsychiatry, but he was ambiguous in response to the term. Foucault himself traces the beginnings of a criticism of the psychiatric institution to between 1930 and 1940.<sup>80</sup> In his early work, Foucault was profoundly influenced by Binswanger and his first publication 'Dream, Imagination and Existence' (1954) was an extended introduction to the French translation of Binswanger's *Dream and Existence* (1930).<sup>81</sup> Foucault's first book, later published as *Mental Illness and Psychology*

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<sup>77</sup> See Ludwig Binswanger in May, *The Discovery of Being: Writings in Existential Psychology*.

<sup>78</sup> See Medard Boss, *Psychoanalysis and Daseinsanalysis* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982).

<sup>79</sup> For an overview of the often underestimated complexity of Sartre's association with psychoanalysis see Betty Cannon, *Sartre and Psychoanalysis: An Existential Challenge to Clinical Metatheory* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1973-4* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 39.

<sup>81</sup> First published as 'L'Introduction' in Ludwig Binswanger, *Le rêve et l'existence* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954) and translated into English as Ludwig Binswanger and Michel Foucault, *Dream and*

(1954), also relied heavily on Binswanger's thought and although Foucault was later dissatisfied by his methodology in this work and distanced himself from it, the influence of existential analysis on his critique of psychoanalysis can be identified throughout his oeuvre.<sup>82</sup> Laing in turn admired Foucault's work and was the first to bring *Madness and Civilization* (1967) to a British audience, but his own writing was more directly influenced by other practitioners.<sup>83</sup> Laing did not welcome the label anti-psychiatry, preferring to describe his method as psychotherapy or 'social psychiatry'. Cooper himself regretted the ambiguous interpretation the term invites and it should be understood as a rejection not of psychiatric treatment per se but as a questioning of traditional psychiatric method. The leftwing politics of Laing and Cooper and their involvement in the counter-culture of the 1960s did not preoccupy all thinkers to whom the label antipsychiatry has been applied. However, the established central tenets of those identified with this movement are a critique of the traditional asylum and its treatments and the identification of mental illness as negative label, social construct or the manifestation of valid coping methods for dealing with the 'madness' of society. Laing particularly would come to revere the value of psychosis as a healing process itself.

Laing began publishing his work towards a 'science of persons' with *The Divided Self* (1960).<sup>84</sup> A year later Erving Goffman's sociological critique of the American psychiatric hospital, *Asylums* (1961) was published, as was Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961).<sup>85</sup> Szasz's fundamental attack on the concept of mental illness and the medicalization of deviant human behaviour began his long and prolific writing career criticizing psychiatry, psychoanalysis and medicine. Although both major proponents of antipsychiatry, Szasz was at times hostile towards Laing, while Laing claimed to have been baffled by his antagonism. Franco Basaglia, whose work in the 1960s and 1970s influenced the reform of the

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*Existence*, ed. Keith Hoeller, trans. Forrest Williams and Jacob Needleman (Seattle, WA: *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, 1986).

<sup>82</sup> Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1987). First published as *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (Paris: PUF, 1954) and first translated into English by A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

<sup>83</sup> This first English publication *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967) was an abridged version of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961).

<sup>84</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>85</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (London: Penguin, 1968); Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

psychiatric institution in Italy, was another psychiatrist influenced by Binswanger and existential philosophy, but he too rejected the label antipsychiatry. One clear divide in the group of thinkers who have come to be known under this label can be drawn between those who worked with patients in a clinical or practical environment and those whose work was exclusively theoretical. Deleuze and Guattari took on the call for 'an effective politicization of psychiatry' in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), criticizing elements of both psychoanalysis and antipsychiatry and concluding that Laing had made progress but not gone far enough in this project.<sup>86</sup> Laing in turn dismissed the practical and political relevance of this work, believing Guattari to have little investment in relating to his patients as people.<sup>87</sup> The diverse and spontaneous nature of 'antipsychiatry' appears to have emerged from the joint concerns of existential philosophy, humanistic psychology and political reform in the air at this time. It is worth noting, however, that such criticism of asylums and traditional psychiatric treatment had been implicitly present in women's literature and in the gonzo journalism of Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887) long before.<sup>88</sup>

In the wake of early antipsychiatry, feminist critics and sociologists interrogated both historical and contemporary constructions of women's madness and its treatment, and were mistrustful of the patriarchal foundations inherent to both traditional psychiatry and psychoanalysis.<sup>89</sup> Such critical work can arguably be traced to the work of Laing and others, but not all refers specifically to antipsychiatry, and some has been highly critical of Laing, and especially David Cooper. Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* (1972) broadly welcomes Laing's challenge to Freud and his discussion of female patients in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, but she highlights his lack of attention to 'the universal and objective

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<sup>86</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004), 352.

<sup>87</sup> See Mullan, *Mad to Be Normal*, 365.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard, *The Prisoners' Hidden Life or Insane Asylums Unveiled* (Chicago: Published by the Author, 1868); Nellie Bly [Elizabeth Jane Cochrane Seaman], 'Ten Days in a Mad-House' (University of Pennsylvania Digital Library, 1887); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Selected Writings* (London: Virago Press, 2009).

<sup>89</sup> See Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, Rev. and updated ed. (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987); Jane M. Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Denise Russell, *Women, Madness and Medicine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Jill Astbury, *Crazy for You: The Making of Women's Madness* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1996).

oppression of women and [...] its particular relation to madness in women'.<sup>90</sup> Directly addressing the impact of the antipsychiatry movement for women, Chesler also raises a criticism often levelled at Laing's later work – 'his occasional and increasing equation of madness with mass political revolution or art forms'.<sup>91</sup> Her broadest challenge to both Laing and Cooper, which might equally apply to Kavan, is directed towards their tendency to figure madness as revolutionary, and in doing so to distract away from its social reality as 'a cry of powerlessness and an illness which is mercilessly punished'.<sup>92</sup> Juliet Mitchell offers the most in-depth feminist analysis of Laing's work in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), and was connected to him through their involvement with the Anti-University of London in 1968. Laing has often been criticized by feminists for failing to address women's situation, but Mitchell still considers him important to her study because she identifies him as 'a dominant psychopolitical ideologist'.<sup>93</sup> She gives a thorough assessment of Laing's writings from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, but her own feminist interpretation of Freud makes her criticisms of Laing more psychoanalytical than political. Barbara Hill Rigney's *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* (1978) uses Laing's theories to read the texts of women authors including Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing and finds the politics of antipsychiatry to be a useful framework for feminist criticism.<sup>94</sup> Simone de Beauvoir too welcomed Laing and Cooper's representation of the socially conditioned nature of madness and found it a useful enterprise for women.<sup>95</sup> Jane Ussher looks at the broadly positive effects of antipsychiatry for mentally distressed women in *Women's Madness* (1991).<sup>96</sup>

Elaine Showalter was forthright in her concerns about the inherent patriarchy of the antipsychiatry movement in *The Female Malady* (1985) and I look at her comments in further detail in Chapter Four of this thesis. However, she has much positive to say in her overview of Laing's career, writing and reception in 'R D Laing and the Sixties' (1981) and gives full credit to his 'poetic, personal, and concrete' style and 'brilliant and dedicated' leadership of the Radical psychiatry

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<sup>90</sup> Chesler, *Women and Madness*, 153.

<sup>91</sup> *Women and Madness*, 155.

<sup>92</sup> *Women and Madness*, 160.

<sup>93</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Pelican Books, 1975), 279.

<sup>94</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing and Atwood* (1978).

<sup>95</sup> See Alice Jardine, 'Interview with Simone De Beauvoir' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1979), 229.

<sup>96</sup> Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?*.

movement.<sup>97</sup> Although she believes his later work deteriorates, Showalter maintains that 'for much of the sixties, his writing is fresh, powerfully evocative and nuanced' and most significantly that he uses 'the techniques and ideas of modernist literature and criticism' in *The Divided Self*.<sup>98</sup>

For Laing, insanity or psychosis is the intensification of the divisions within the self that mirror the compartmentalization and fragmentation of modern society.<sup>99</sup>

Showalter here captures something of the quality of Laing's work that gave it mass appeal in the 1960s and elucidates the connection she, and others, have made between the fragmented schizophrenic experience and Modernism. Both Laing and Louis Sass have taken their intimate knowledge of schizophrenia in a clinical setting and connected their findings to readings of Modernist art and literature.<sup>100</sup> 'Schizophrenia' has been invoked in discussion of Kavan's work, both positively and negatively, by Edwin Muir and Diana Trilling.<sup>101</sup> I avoid the casual use of this term as inappropriate for my study of Kavan, acknowledging instead the use of Laing's writing on schizophrenia for analysis of the fragmented modern experience.

The relevance of British antipsychiatry for a broader intellectual community of the time is evidenced in the currency Laing's theories and terminology had with those outside of psychiatric and psychoanalytic circles. Though there is no record of Kavan's response to Laing, several of the women writers with whom I compare her in this thesis, Anaïs Nin, Angela Carter and Doris Lessing, all engaged directly with his ideas. Yet, by 1981 Elaine Showalter maintained that '[n]obody, not even the mad, seems to take Ronald Laing seriously anymore'.<sup>102</sup> Examining Laing's own literary inspiration, aspiration and affect, Showalter concludes that if 'Laing's work lasts it will not be in the realm of psychiatric practice or social style, but in art and literature'.<sup>103</sup> Her assessment appears to have been wide of the mark for, as an artistic inspiration and interpretive tool, Laing's theories were of their cultural

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<sup>97</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'R. D. Laing and the Sixties' *Raritan* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1981), 115, 110.

<sup>98</sup> Showalter, 'R. D. Laing and the Sixties', 116.

<sup>99</sup> 'R. D. Laing and the Sixties', 117.

<sup>100</sup> Louis A Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>101</sup> See Edwin Muir, 'Review of Asylum Piece', *The Listener* 1940 and Diana Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

<sup>102</sup> Showalter, 'R. D. Laing and the Sixties', 107.

<sup>103</sup> 'R. D. Laing and the Sixties', 127.

moment and remain out of fashion.<sup>104</sup> An emphasis on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic thought in literary and critical theory has overshadowed the influence of antipsychiatry in literary interpretation. The legacy of Laing's work lies instead in the continuing schools of existential therapy, most notably The Philadelphia Association, which he co-founded, and The Society of Existential Analysis, founded in 1988. The *Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry*, which began in 1961 and has published major thinkers and practitioners including Sartre, Laing, Boss, Viktor Frankl, and Eugène Minkowski, is still read by a specialized audience. Contra to Showalter's prediction, Laing has bequeathed more to the 'scientific' field of contemporary psychotherapeutic practice than to the arts.

Laing's own influences were literary, philosophical and theological as well as psychological and are so profuse and diverse they become difficult to track. Sartre was clearly a profound inspiration to the existentialist elements of his work, but he was also strongly influenced by object relations theory and his supervisor, D W Winnicott. Despite his belief in the profound similarities between his own project in *The Divided Self* and Binswanger's, in *The Voice of Experience* (1982) Laing would go on to heavily criticize the success of Binswanger's existential analysis in 'The Case of Ellen West' (1958).<sup>105</sup> As I hope to demonstrate in this thesis, Kavan's 1940s writing presages Laing's theories, yet although there was some overlap in their publishing careers, there is no evidence as to whether or not they were familiar with each other's work. Laing, like Kavan, was a voracious and catholic reader, and he certainly read *Horizon* in the late 1940s.<sup>106</sup> It also seems highly unlikely that Kavan was not aware of the popularity of Laing's work early in the 1960s. The practical and political schema of British antipsychiatry lends itself particularly well to a reading of Kavan. The connection Nin makes between Kavan and Laing has been taken up by other critics, but never discussed in depth.<sup>107</sup> Françoise Tilkin also includes Kavan in her study of narrative and antipsychiatry, *Quand La Folie Se*

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<sup>104</sup> For recent developments in existential psychotherapy see Emmy van Deurzen, *Everyday Mysteries: A Handbook of Existential Psychotherapy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>105</sup> See Ludwig Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West' in Rollo May, Ernest Angel and Henri F. Ellenberger, ed., *Existence* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994) and R. D. Laing, *The Voice of Experience* (London: Allen Lane, 1982) 53-62.

<sup>106</sup> See Laing's quotation from Cyril Connolly's 'Comment' in the last edition of *Horizon* (December 1949) in R. D. Laing, 'The Bird of Paradise' *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (London: Penguin, 1990), 144.

<sup>107</sup> See Brian Aldiss, 'Kafka's Sister' *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 3, no. 2 (1991), Janet Byrne, 'Moving toward Entropy: Anna Kavan's Science Fiction Mentality' *Extrapolation* 23, no. 1 (1982) and Crosland, *Beyond the Lighthouse*.

*Racontait: Récit et antipsychiatrie* (1990), but does not examine her writing in close detail.<sup>108</sup>

Kavan's concern to present in her fiction not simply the subjective experience of mental breakdown and distress but the problems of negotiating social and medical responses to it connects her sensibility to that of antipsychiatry. In situating the 'madman' in the asylum and in society at large Kavan focuses attention on the interaction between madness and the medical profession, social norms and 'reason'. For all her protagonists the treatment they receive only compounds their distress. Although she was conversant with psychoanalytic concepts Kavan was not directly familiar with existentialist philosophy in the early to mid 1940s, but she read and admired Erich Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom* (1942).<sup>109</sup> Despite his utmost respect for the foundations of Freud's work, Fromm also posed a challenge to Freud's thinking on the basis of free will and he would later develop this into his 'humanistic psychoanalysis' in *The Sane Society* (1956). Fromm's critique of the structure of American society, democracy and capitalism identifies it as a 'sick' society that pathologizes any dissent. His view of traditional psychiatry and psychoanalysis as methods that discipline behaviour incompatible with the social order recalls both Kavan and Laing. Fromm's philosophy is further testament to the widespread nature of concerns with psychology and free will at this time. From Binswanger, to Fromm, to Laing, Kavan's political and philosophical concerns were in tune with those of her times, from the early 1940s through to the late 1960s.

One of the greatest divergences in Laing's politics and Kavan's is his greater focus on economic disadvantage and its social impact. Kavan's fiction does not provide the implicit critique of twentieth-century state asylum treatment that can be found in the writing of women such as Antonia White, Emily Holmes Coleman or Janet Frame. Her internments were in private institutions and paid for by her mother, and her experience and representation of psychiatric treatment were determined by her economic advantage. Kavan's correspondence reveals her expectation of a comfortable, independently wealthy lifestyle and her horror of the drudgery of paid work. The apparent disregard of class politics in her fiction was in some measure the result of her over-privileged background. Although she never

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<sup>108</sup> See Francoise Tilkin, *Quand La Folie Se Racontait: Récit Et Antipsychiatrie* (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1990).

<sup>109</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 1 August 1943.



craved social status and found her mother's wealthy lifestyle oppressive, she was unable to contemplate financial independence. Instead, her work persistently displays disillusionment with party politics, a strong antipathy towards dominant social discourses and a wariness of even dissident, organized political voices. This strain in her work manifests first in Helen Ferguson's unsympathetic portrayal of leftwing idealism in *Rich Get Rich*.

Kavan reviewed James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) in *Horizon* as part of a personal campaign to get the book published in England. She knew both Evans and Agee through Charles Fuller in New York and discussed the possibility of collaborating on a book with Evans, who also took a series of photographs of her.<sup>110</sup> She explains the 'ethical value' of Agee and Evans' 'study in words and pictures of three Alabama 'poor white' tenant families' in forcing the reader to acknowledge 'his own profound implication' in the universal problem it raises:

It is a terrifying fact that the post-war world will be full of damaged and helpless human beings with whose fate, if any values are to survive, the whole human race must realize itself involved.<sup>111</sup>

Kavan's response to this text is a sound indication that her concern for the dispossessed individual is not a merely a self-pitying indulgence, but an attempt to speak for all those without a voice. Yet, Kavan did not look towards revolution for the emancipation of such 'damaged and helpless human beings', but to the entire break-down of society. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter Two, her call for a 'tonic wave of neurosis' in 'The Case of Bill Williams' anticipates Laing's formulation of madness as non-conformity and political revolt and suggests emancipation in a state of anarchy. Kavan's fictional representations of the outsider, which date from her earliest writing as Helen Ferguson, appear to have resonated for her with the fate of many in the Second World War, and go some way to illustrating her feelings of fellowship with Dr Bluth as an exile.

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<sup>110</sup> Several of these images have been used as publicity shots for Kavan's work. The full set of 33 photographs is held in the Walker Evans Archives, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and can be accessed digitally at <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/anna+kavan/>

<sup>111</sup> Kavan, 'Reviews' *Horizon* IX, no. 52 (1944, April), 285.

Kavan frequently describes herself in her letters and articles as an egoist and an individualist and although these terms had broader philosophical and psychological currency in the 1940s, when taken together with some of her radical political views hint towards an interest in anarchism. Anarchistic tendencies were not uncommon in British intellectual circles in the first half of the twentieth century, but little attention has been given to the history of this political ideal. David Goodway has discussed the neglect of anarchism as a historical subject in Britain due in part to its irretrievable associations with violence. His observation that anarchism is 'notorious for its diversity' also emphasizes an inherent problem for tracing its history as a definite movement.<sup>112</sup> David Kadlec's study of anarchistic influences on Modernist literature maintains that poststructuralist critics have 'traditionally merged anarchistic with bourgeois "individualism"' and 'kept us from according anarchism its historical role in the formation of modernist aesthetics' due to 'a tacit belief that radicalism must be progressive'.<sup>113</sup> Among the concepts and practices Goodway lists as characterizing the anarchist tradition are 'autonomy, both individual and communal [...] opposition to hierarchy [...] anti-statism [...] resistance to war; and increasingly, although with deep roots in the tradition, sustainability and ecology'.<sup>114</sup> These concerns are clearly evident in Kavan's 1940s' writing.

Further evidence of Kavan's interest in anarchistic thought can be found in her connection with the anarchist, writer and critic Herbert Read. It is likely that Kavan first knew Read through *Horizon*; his essay 'Art and Crisis' was published alongside her 'Face of My People' in May 1944.<sup>115</sup> As a pacifist, Read was active in promoting the cause of conscientious objectors in Britain during the Second World War and in October 1945 Kavan met with him in the hope of enlisting help for Ian Hamilton who was still imprisoned in New Zealand.<sup>116</sup> Read gave helpful advice, and offered to publicize the case, but Kavan was dismissive of his political influence, just as he himself described being shunned in political, if not intellectual, circles because of his professed anarchy. But Read's influence on, or correspondence with,

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<sup>112</sup> David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow: Left Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>113</sup> David Kadlec, *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>114</sup> Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Herbert Read, 'Art and Crisis' *Horizon* IX, no. 53 (1944, May).

<sup>116</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 29 Sept 1945; 10 Oct 1945.

Kavan's politics appears to have extended further than this. As late as 1959, Kavan submitted a story to John Lehmann at *The London Magazine* (they did not take it) which she described as 'more or less on the subject of Herbert Read's article in your August number; I mean, the artist against technology'.<sup>117</sup> Kavan's interpretation of Read here highlights one of the strongest correspondences between her ethos and his theory of art. Read's article, 'The Two Cultures: An Intellectual Replies', responds to C P Snow's Rede lecture with less vitriol than F R Leavis' piece in *The Spectator*. Yet Read, even more than Leavis, critiques material and particularly technological progress, believing it to lead to a loss of an essential part of life:

In short, technology (and the automatism that goes with it) tend to destroy human sensibility, and it is upon human sensibility that what is human in us survives. Without sensibility we become robots, that is to say, functional animals incapable of moral and aesthetic responses.<sup>118</sup>

Read's invocation of a mechanised society matches the nightmare visions of Kavan's work. He enumerates the negative effects of technology on Man who 'has lost his primitive faith and has no explanation, mythical or religious, for the frantic life he leads; he is the victim of unconscious fears and psychic illnesses'. For Read, technological progress leads to automatism, loss of artistic and human sensibility and brings 'widespread and devastating' 'social neurosis'.<sup>119</sup> There are strong resonances here with the views Kavan expressed in her 'Bill Williams' article sixteen years earlier, the greatest distinction between her analysis and Read's is that Kavan welcomes such widespread neurosis as the only cure for society's modern affliction.

Read's polymathic writings included poems, a novel, extensive essays on politics, literary criticism and theory of art. As one of the organizers of the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London, he was also one of the earliest proponents of the surrealist movement in Britain, introducing the collection of essays *Surrealism* (1936).<sup>120</sup> Read's advocacy for surrealist visual art provides another connection to Kavan, who experimented with a surrealist writing style in *Sleep Has His House*, discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. Although Read's anarchism was communist, his pacifism and in many respects his theory of art

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<sup>117</sup> John Lehmann Files, Austin, Kavan to John Lehmann, 25 August 1959.

<sup>118</sup> Herbert Read, 'Mood of the Month - X: The Two Cultures: An Intellectual Replies' *The London Magazine* 6, no. 8 (August 1959), 43.

<sup>119</sup> Read, 'The Two Cultures: An Intellectual Replies', 42.

<sup>120</sup> Herbert Read, ed., *Surrealism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).

correspond with Kavan's principles which are closer to individualist or egoist anarchism. Her emphasis on individualism may have been inimical to socialist ideals, but it was strongly opposed to fascism. In one of her reviews, she sets out her interpretation of the issue of 'collectivism versus individualism':

The word 'Collectivism' in our time has come to mean something more dangerous than group living or group thinking: it includes the concept of the organization of collective units into youth camps, labour camps, and fascist conditions in general. A further extension confronts us with the mechanization of social life; the machine versus the individual man, the wheel against the hyacinth in the heart.<sup>121</sup>

For Read all ideology, from Marxism to Fascism, dehumanizes society and in this sense he considered himself not apolitical but 'unpolitical'. In his essay 'The Politics of the Unpolitical' (1943), Read describes the desires of this unnamed, uncollective group:

They want a world that is morally clean and socially just, naturally productive and aesthetically beautiful [...] and they know they won't get it from any of the existing parties, from any of the existing political systems. They hate fascism, they recoil from communism, and they despise democracy. They are groping towards a new faith, a new order, a new world.<sup>122</sup>

Read's 'unpolitical', with their longing for aesthetic beauty and rejection of political systems offers one avenue through which to connect Kavan's writing to the politics of her time. Her rejection of mainstream political affiliation does not imply that she was too self-involved to be political, but that her politics were too radical for the mainstream.

### **Kavan's Writing in Context**

Despite periods of obscurity and an ongoing struggle to get her work published, Kavan had a reasonably prolific career, publishing 16 books during her lifetime, including the six Helen Ferguson novels. Her literary output, spanning from the late 1920s to the late 1960s, was never wholly of its time but, as Rhys Davies testified,

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<sup>121</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Reviews' *Horizon X*, no. 59 (1944, November), 360.

<sup>122</sup> Herbert Read, 'The Politics of the Unpolitical' in *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (London: Routledge, 1943), 12.

she was influenced by a wide range of contemporary literature, fictional and otherwise. Peter Owen continues to reissue most of her works and she now has a relatively small but loyal readership; the story of her life and her relative obscurity attracts readers searching for the esoteric.

Kavan reportedly began writing in Burma during her first marriage, and the lengthy process of finding a publisher and getting into print may explain why she began her writing career under the name Ferguson. Less than a year after her marriage to Stuart Edmonds, *A Charmed Circle* (1929) and *The Dark Sisters* (1930) appeared within six months of each other, closely followed by *Let Me Alone* (1930). Five years passed before its sequel *A Stranger Still* (1935) and then in consecutive years *Goose Cross* (1936) and *Rich Get Rich* (1937). The influence of D H Lawrence can be strongly perceived, particularly in her first two novels, as Ferguson's characters struggle with the conflict between personal independence and love, described in a Lawrencian idiom of submission, domination, victory and defeat. Kavan would return to this mode in *A Scarcity of Love* (1956) and again in the posthumously published *The Parson* (1995), but in general the battle between opposing personalities and their will to dominate mutates as her work develops into inner conflict within a single character. By *A Stranger Still*, broader influences are apparent in explicit references to Schopenhauer and psychoanalysis, revealing the beginnings of her ongoing interest in philosophy of mind and psychology. Madness affects several of Helen Ferguson's early characters, and George West in *A Stranger Still* is her first fictional psychiatric patient. By *Let Me Alone* and *A Stranger Still* her protagonists begin to be plagued by feelings of unreality and mechanisation has already become a trope for social convention, associated with mental breakdown. In the extraordinarily complex world of *Goose Cross* inanimate objects have a life of their own, and Thomas Spender's war trauma manifests in his possession by a china figure of Horatio Nelson, prefiguring the experiences of Kavan's traumatized soldiers in *I Am Lazarus* (1945).

These early novels have almost always been presented in stark contrast to her writing under the name Kavan, but despite their more conservative style and structure, themes and imagery of these novels presage her later work and reveal consistencies in her writing from her very earliest work through to *Ice*. Generally dismissed as 'conventional' and described by Rhys Davies as 'country romances' (as though by definition not modern), in fact only one of the six has an exclusively rural

setting and the conflict of urban modernity and rural tradition is a consistent theme. These are psychological novels with modern preoccupations and although their style is undoubtedly more realist and conventional than her later work, their unremarkable nature has become part of the mythology surrounding Kavan's dramatic transformation. Their lack of commercial success and extraordinary content – characters haunted by demons, automata and split personalities – exclude them from the category of Middlebrow. Class and gender are much stronger preoccupations in the Helen Ferguson novels than in Kavan's later writing. Ferguson explores the oppressive nature of traditional family life and social expectation, particularly for young women, in greater detail than in her more oblique later work. Her treatment of race does not differ dramatically across her writing and is an area of neglect in her work, despite her colonial locations which were influenced by her time in Burma, the Dutch East Indies, New Zealand and South Africa. Although *Let Me Alone* expresses strongly anti-British and anti-colonial sentiments, the novel contains some disturbing passages which draw on contemporary discourses of race, most prominently in the short African interlude. Despite her critique of patriarchy and social convention, Kavan's fiction does little to question or subvert colonial attitudes and comparisons with Rhys and Lessing bring this into focus. Perhaps most interesting from a postcolonial perspective is her story 'Annunciation' (1958), a Gothic tale of a girl's transition into womanhood, her indeterminate heritage and race, and her incarceration in the house of her white grandmother.<sup>123</sup>

As a broad category, Kavan's work can best be described as Modernist, and she occasionally finds her way into a footnote of Modernist studies. The Helen Ferguson novels, published between 1929 and 1937, fit most comfortably into a chronology of late Modernism, but in fact her writing as Anna Kavan saw a shift into a more modern style. A pervasive preoccupation with technology appears across the Ferguson/ Kavan oeuvre; her characters revel in the thrill of driving fast cars but this is counterbalanced by a deep and pervasive horror of the soulless machine. This modern concern, epitomized in Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), is extended by Kavan to affect both the artwork and human psychology, and is encapsulated by her recurring description of the 'social machine'. A similar trope is manifest in other Modernist writing, most

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<sup>123</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Annunciation' in *A Bright Green Field* (London: Peter Owen, 1958).

pertinently in the fiction of Jean Rhys; Helen Carr has emphasized Rhys' metaphor of the 'huge machine of law, order and respectability'.<sup>124</sup> There are Romantic inflections in Helen Ferguson's writing which continue throughout her Kavan period. Although many of her stories are concerned with tropes of modernity, the natural world is always waiting to burst through and take control. The gathering storm and oppressive heat of *A Charmed Circle* foreshadow the tropical weather and storms of *Let Me Alone* and *Who Are You?* (1963), and the wintry landscapes of *The Dark Sisters*, *Goose Cross* and *Rich Get Rich* prefigure the frozen apocalypse of *Ice*. Kavan's belief in the artistic significance of nature leads her to invoke it as a sublime force in her fiction, the converse of the dead mechanisation with which she characterizes modern society. There is more to say of the Helen Ferguson novels, particularly those of the late 1930s. My discussion of this early writing in Chapter Three focuses on *Let Me Alone* and *A Stranger Still*; these novels' concerns with unreality, fictionality, self-alienation and self-division are most pertinent to my overall reading of Kavan's work.

Early in her writing career, Kavan appears to have felt herself caught between her literary heroes of high British modernism – Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Lawrence – and the next generation of 1930s' male writers; admiring both, but belonging to neither. Although she quotes from, and alludes to, Auden, Spender and Isherwood in her published and unpublished work of the 1930s and early '40s, on meeting Louis MacNeice in New York, Kavan found him 'pleasant enough' but maintained that 'I really haven't any use for those boys', finding them 'hopelessly rooted in adolescence somehow'.<sup>125</sup> Kavan was certainly affected by Anglo-American Modernism, especially T S Eliot and Virginia Woolf, but on the whole her Modernist sensibility is closer to the European, expressionistic Modernism of Kafka. The influence of her close neighbour on the bookshelf has been often overstated by Kavan's biographers and reviewers, though never explored to its fullest extent by critics. One strand of the myth surrounding Helen Edmonds' name change is that she chose 'Kavan' to echo 'Kafka', but the publishing history of both writers makes this improbable. Although *Let Me Alone* appeared in the same year as Willa and

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<sup>124</sup> See Helen Carr, *Jean Rhys* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), 53-7; Rhys' short stories are particularly fruitful sources for this trope, see particularly 'Vienna' and 'Outside the Machine' in Jean Rhys, *Tigers Are Better-Looking with a Selection from the Left Bank* (London: Penguin, 1972).

<sup>125</sup> References to Auden in Helen Ferguson, *Rich Get Rich* (London: John Lane, 1937) and to Auden, Spender and Isherwood in Anna Kavan, 'The Cactus Sign' (London: Peter Owen Publishers Archive); Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 14 Nov 1940.

Edwin Muir's first English translation of *The Castle* (1930), there is little reason to suppose that this influenced her choice of the name Kavan for the characters of her novel. However, from the 1940s onwards her admiration for Kafka's work is stated clearly in her correspondence and its influence on her writing, particularly *Asylum Piece*, is undeniable. Brian Aldiss later called her 'Kafka's sister' as a term of approbation, but feminist critics have bridled at a title that recalls Woolf's 'Judith Shakespeare', whose talents remained unfulfilled due to the social confines of her sex.<sup>126</sup> Although Aldiss admired her, others prefer to read Kavan as a writer in her own right, out of the shadow of Kafka. But Kafka is also a useful comparator to Kavan, and I look at this in more detail here and in Chapter One. Despite universal recognition of his quintessential modernity, there has been a lack of sustained comparative work on Kafka and his work is often read in isolation. Interpretations of Kafka as both expressionist and existentialist emphasize parallels with Kavan, and his influence can be seen in the dread and alienation of her characters and her meaningless and absurd societies.

One undeniable element of the Kavan myth is the dramatic departure in her writing style when she began to publish under her new name. In Chapter Three I trace the development of Kavan's distinctive voice in a close comparison of two of her novels, *Let Me Alone* from the Helen Ferguson period and *Who Are You?* published after her name change. Anna Kavan's writing style stripped Helen Ferguson's prose bare; dispensing with and distilling descriptive language and characterization, robbing her narrators of reliability, her work became at once more mannered and more intimate. In *Asylum Piece* (1940) her first-person voice addresses the reader in the flippant idiom of small talk, using the language of social convention, and then veers without warning into absolute horror. Treading a fine line between impersonal nonchalance and desperate appeal, Anna Kavan's narratives have a disturbing habit of taking the conventional and reassuring and juxtaposing it with something terribly dark. The emotional content of Helen Ferguson's writing is replaced by frozen, cinematic moments in Anna Kavan's, and their force is considerably more powerful. *Asylum Piece* was quickly followed by *Change the Name* (1941) which was published in the UK by Cape while she was living in New Zealand. This novel was very much a return to the Helen Ferguson narrative style and it is likely that it was at least part written before *Asylum Piece*.

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<sup>126</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/ Three Guineas* (London: Penguin, 1993).



Other writing in the early war years included *The Cactus Sign*, a collection of stories based on her travels which remain mostly unpublished, and *My Soul In China* (1975), which Rhys Davies later severely truncated when he edited it for posthumous publication. Kavan's next collection of stories, *I Am Lazarus* (1945), included those she had published in journals during the war.<sup>127</sup> Drafts of others appear in the Ian Hamilton archives, showing that she worked on them during her time in New Zealand. These stories, displaying again Kavan's characteristic mix of realism and fantasy, show the influence of her work with psychiatric patients, her travel and her experiences in wartime London. Despite critical success, it was the last book Kavan published with Jonathan Cape. *The Horse's Tale* (1949) was never marketed or sold publicly; Bluth's attempt to reduce production costs by having the novel printed in Germany backfired when he failed to secure a licence to import the book, causing difficulties for his friends the Themersons who had agreed to publish the work under the banner of their Gaberbocchus Press. Eventually, the copies available were mostly distributed to friends.<sup>128</sup>

In *Sleep Has His House* (1947), Kavan experimented with a more surrealist style, her representation of a 'night-time world' is heavily laden with symbolic and absurd dream images. After this novel's critical failure, Kavan struggled in the post-war publishing climate. She supplemented her income by setting up a business renovating houses and appears to have had as sharp an eye for reconceiving property as she had for reinventing herself.<sup>129</sup> Although Kavan's hallucinatory writing and preoccupation with identity crisis suggest parallels with the Beat writing of 1950s, it was not a successful decade for her as a writer and her literary output was not at its best. She returned to a more realist and strongly Lawrencian style again in *A Scarcity of Love* (1956) but the publishing house that was due to distribute the novel went into receivership and most of the print-run was pulped. *Eagles' Nest* (1957), the first work she published with Peter Owen, received poor reviews. A heavily symbolic tale in which the protagonist moves with bewilderment through a world shrouded by half-mysteries and cryptic signs, this novel reaches for

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<sup>127</sup> Kavan, 'I Am Lazarus'; 'Face of My People'; Anna Kavan, 'The Blackout' *The Listener* 1944, September; 'Who Has Desired the Sea' *Cornhill Magazine* 1944/5.

<sup>128</sup> The Themersons sought legal advice regarding Bluth's attempts to covertly import copies of the book without a licence, for evidence of this and Bluth's relationship with the couple, see Themerson Archive, London.

<sup>129</sup> As evidenced in an article on Kavan's home 'Two Homes from One: Conversion of a London Mews House' *Ideal Home* 1956, July.

the atmosphere of alienated disorientation of *Asylum Piece*, but lacks much of the beauty and subtlety of this earlier work. More successful was the collection of stories *A Bright Green Field* (1958), a number of which had been anthologized or published in journals during the mid 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>130</sup> However, these stories sit less well together than those of her earlier collections and their lack of overarching theme made them a less striking and affecting anthology. *Who Are You?* (1963), published by the Scorpion Press, replays part of the plot of one of her early Helen Ferguson novels, giving the story a hallucinatory quality and a peculiar structural rift in the presentation of time, and in Chapter Three I look at existential elements of this novel.

Kavan's late and posthumous work is some of her best writing and its dark themes have encouraged her status as a 'cult' novelist.<sup>131</sup> *Ice* (1967) remains her most popular work, a genre-defying hallucinatory fantasy that disturbs the reader with intimations of sadism and dark sexuality, and which won the 'Best Sci-Fi Novel' award of 1967. As joint executor of her literary estate, Rhys Davies was actively involved in Kavan's posthumous publications until his death in 1978. *Julia and the Bazooka* (1970) collected her late stories, several of which had already appeared in *Encounter* and *London Magazine* before and after her death. These stories combine Kavan's characteristic voice and motifs with a diverse range of literary influence, and have been the source of much apocryphal biographical information about her. Direct references to drug-use not seen in her earlier work indicate her interest in contemporary culture and literature. 'Out and Away', a tale of a girl isolated and out of place in boarding school who becomes withdrawn and eventually 'swaps places' with her fictional twin sister, recalls Jane Bowles' 'Camp Cataract' (1949).<sup>132</sup> The novella *My Soul in China* (1975), written in the 1940s and with some of the surrealist style of *Sleep Has His House*, contains some excellent writing but was heavily edited out of the draft of a full novel by Rhys Davies, making consideration of it as a complete text difficult.<sup>133</sup> The posthumous publication of *Mercury* (1994)

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<sup>130</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Ice Storm' in *New Zealand Writing*, ed. Ian Gordon (Progressive Publishing, 1942); 'All Saints' *Tempest* 1 (1943, October); 'One of the Hot Spots' in *English Story*, ed. Woodrow Wyatt (London: Collins, 1945); 'A Visit to the Sleepmaster' *The European* 8 (1953, October); 'Happy Name' *London Magazine* 1, no. 11 (1954, December).

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Emily Hill, 'Cult Vip/ Anna Kavan: Kafka's Sister' *Dazed and Confused* August 2010.

<sup>132</sup> See Jane Bowles, 'Camp Cataract' in *Plain Pleasures* (London: Peter Owen, 2004).

<sup>133</sup> As evidenced in Davies' report to Peter Owen, Tulsa, Series I, Box 7, Folder 1.

was a curious move from Peter Owen, for it is identifiably a draft or reworking of *Ice*; nevertheless, the novel contains some startling and powerful writing and imagery not seen in *Ice*. The major differences between these two texts lie in their narrative voice, which in *Mercury* is in the third person, but the plot and motifs are broadly the same. *The Parson* (1995), which Doris Lessing has particularly admired, was a complete manuscript found in Kavan's papers which appears to have been written in the 1950s or 1960s but which returns to her early-Lawrencian idiom and style; the novel's setting in an unspecified Northern country and the protagonist's fatal leap from a snow-swept cliff into the sea recall *Ice*. *A Scarcity of Love* (1956) was republished by Peter Owen in 1971, almost all of the original Angus Downie edition having been destroyed. Kavan's style in this novel again recalls Lawrence and her portrayal of emotionally-damaged and self-absorbed maternal figures has fuelled negative biographical interpretations of her own relationship with her mother. The manuscript of *Guilty* (2007) was uncovered in the offices of Peter Owen, and its publication indicates a continuing commercial demand for Kavan's writing. The quality of Kavan's published writing was sometimes patchy; several of her novels do not reach the standard of her best work and are not discussed in detail in this thesis, particularly *Change the Name* (1941) and *Eagles' Nest* (1957). My focus on Kavan's more politically and philosophically inflected writing has also led me away from detailed discussion of her posthumously-published work, including Jennifer Sturm's edition of the stories she wrote in New Zealand (2009) which has not been published in the UK.

Vivian Gornick's use of Kavan as a comparator to Jean Rhys provides a useful example of an interpretive trend that has pursued both these writers. Gornick reads Rhys' early novels in the same way she views Kavan's work, as 'dated and neurasthenic' and rehearsing the same protagonist and situation repeatedly.<sup>134</sup> She cites both among her examples of twentieth-century British women writers who have experienced and portrayed madness and incarceration in their fiction:

There is a tradition in Britain of "unstable" literary women that includes Antonia White, Anna Kavan, Jean Rhys, and Virginia Woolf, each of whom seems to have been permanently stunned by the underlying brutishness of relations between women and men, and each of whom wrote a remarkably interior prose. [...] Anna Kavan never rose above obsession and Virginia

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<sup>134</sup> Vivian Gornick, *The End of the Novel of Love* (London: Virago, 1999), 61.

Woolf never began at less than transcendence. Between them stands Jean Rhys, who worked hard to leave obsession behind, to disentangle and pull from herself the long line of slowly clarifying thought that justifies a writer's life.<sup>135</sup>

Gornick's autobiographical reading of each of these authors leads her to charges of solipsism and lack of agency, which she associates inextricably with their status as women. Woolf has been less vulnerable to such claims than the other writers Gornick singles out; her fiction does not draw so explicitly on the events of her own life and if she was 'permanently stunned' by the relations between the sexes, she gathered herself sufficiently to respond politically to this. But White, Kavan and Rhys each drew extensively on material from their own lives for their fiction, and this has had dramatic consequences for interpretations of their lives and works. From Rhys' *Collected Letters* Gornick draws the conclusion that her 'self-absorption is monumental: she speaks of nothing but herself' and that she was 'tough and honest about writing' but 'weak and nerveless about living'.<sup>136</sup> Rhys has often been rebuked for failing to live up to the promise of her fiction; her seemingly disastrous personal life and her comments on race have troubled literary assessments of her work, just as Doris Lessing's rejection of feminism has disappointed some of her readers. Kavan's fiction itself has been integral to the mechanism that drives the myth of her life; her powerful fictional evocations of despair and dispossession, and her enigmatic style have perpetuated the story of her own tortured and secretive existence. Gornick's piece highlights the danger to the author of readings that take life and work to be mutually contingent; the perceived moral failings of Rhys' and Kavan's characters have been extended to their own lives and, locked into a perpetual cycle of misery, they can only write out their own unhappiness. Yet narratives that have taken both Rhys and Kavan, and their heroines, to be perpetual victims miss the unfailing defiance of their protagonists; however tragically flawed their character, however inevitable their situation appears, they do not accept their fate. To claim that Kavan never rose above obsession is to miss, as many have, the politics of her fiction. The sense of social injustice in both her writing and Rhys' applies further than to their own lives. The extent to which their characters are involved in making their own fate indicates the complexity of their understanding of

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<sup>135</sup> Gornick, *The End of the Novel of Love*, 62-3.

<sup>136</sup> *The End of the Novel of Love*, 56, 58.

the issues they address, and is what makes their writing so uncomfortable, and so true. Developments in Rhys scholarship provide a useful paradigm for new readings of Kavan's work. More recent work has challenged discussion of the 'Rhys woman' and gives a cue to move on from reading Kavan's protagonists as endless incarnations of herself.

Gornick's invocation of Antonia White also provides fruitful comparison to Kavan. Like Kavan, White experienced and wrote about asylum incarceration, and her work has almost exclusively been read as autobiography. Jane Marcus's inclusion of White in the anthology *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) was part of a critical move to resituate White as a Modernist, and also lists *Asylum Piece* under 'Works Cited' without referring to Kavan.<sup>137</sup> Marcus states that 'White's career was a lifelong attempt to write her life as a woman, and her contribution to modernism is a major redefinition of female autobiographical forms'.<sup>138</sup> Yet White, like Rhys, spent years working on an autobiography later in life and never intended her fiction to be read autobiographically. White's use of Modernist, fragmented narrative coupled with Gothic motifs in her stories of madness and psychological instability also parallel Kavan's.<sup>139</sup>

Anna Kavan's name-change takes the vexed association between author and narrator/ character to a new level. Taking account of the ways in which her life story has affected and limited critical readings of her fiction, in this thesis I have attempted to maintain a fine balance between acknowledging the importance of accurate biographical material to my reading of her work and moving away from interpreting her texts as autobiography. There is no denying that there are certain episodes, drawn from her own life, to which Kavan returned time and again in her fiction. A necessary critical reassessment of women's autobiographical writing in recent decades has not engaged directly with Kavan's work, but may have influenced its interpretation. The critical neglect and dismissal of women's life-writing highlighted in Donna Stanton's *The Female Autograph* (1984) was followed

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<sup>137</sup> See also Mary Lynn Broe, 'My Art Belongs to Daddy: Incest as Exile, The Textual Economics of Hayford Hall' in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. Mary Lynne Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Sandra Jeffery, 'Antonia White and the Subversion of Literary Impotence at Hayford Hall' in *Hayford Hall: Hangovers, Erotics and Modernist Aesthetics*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks and Sandra Chait (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

<sup>138</sup> Jane Marcus, 'Antonia White' in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 598.

<sup>139</sup> See Antonia White, *Strangers* (London: Virago Press, 1981).

by feminist studies that examined and redefined women's autobiographical forms.<sup>140</sup> Following the second wave's politicization of personal life, such work, along with a trend towards confessional autobiography in feminist criticism and political writing, has perhaps encouraged readings of women's fiction as literary self-disclosure. Yet, many of these welcome analyses figure women's life-writing as radically self-determinative, while in Kavan's work the self remains elusive and uncertain. As I will explore, her fiction often plays out an existential denial of essential and unchanging selfhood; for Kavan there can be no real knowledge of the self, through writing or otherwise. Although this indeterminacy at times causes her characters torment, it also brings with it the productive potential for reinvention. The concentration on Kavan's writing as a confessional practice has overlooked the performative elements of her work. In this thesis I argue that Kavan's adoption of her character's name indicates not a tendency towards autobiography but an enduring fascination with the mechanisms, and the transformative potential, of fiction. Kavan repeatedly calls on the reader to take note of the ambiguous relation between fiction and reality in her work. Her metafictional tendencies, combined with the apocryphal writing of her life, keep the complex connection between fantasy, fiction and reality, and between author and character, at the fore when reading her work. The self-conscious artifice of much of Kavan's writing, her intertextuality, and her refusal of notions of fixed identity pushes at the already unstable divide between Modernism and Postmodernism.

Although Kavan's prose can best be described as Modernist and experimental, there are also a proliferation of Gothic motifs in her work; representations of madness, incarceration, bizarre and sinister locations, uncanny coincidence, doubling, images of self and anti-self, and elements of fairytale and the fantastic. Sara Wasson's recent work on Kavan highlights strong Gothic inflections in her wartime writing, specifically her *Lazarus* stories and *Sleep Has His House*. Wasson's study of Gothic trope in fiction of the Second World War maintains that 'Kavan's writing can be read as a hallucinatory refraction of some of the authoritarian pressures that convulsed the home front' and that her protagonists

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<sup>140</sup> See Donna C Stanton, ed., *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988) and Bella; Schenck Brodzki, Celeste, ed., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

are 'outsiders rendered "other" by national position, by madness, or by falling prey to callous bureaucracy'.<sup>141</sup> These features are part of broader pattern of Gothic tendency in Kavan's fiction dating from her first Helen Ferguson novels. David Punter, John Paul Riquelme and Smith and Wallace have all argued convincingly for the importance of the Gothic imaginary to high Modernism, and illustrated the Gothic tradition's appropriate form for modern themes.<sup>142</sup> Riquelme notes that despite 'comparatively dismissive attitude toward the Gothic in academic studies' due to its close relation to 'some popular cultural forms', Modernism has a persistent dark side and often makes use of Gothic convention.<sup>143</sup> Pertinent to my interpretation of Kavan is his observation that Gothicism is a surprisingly political mode, for, he points out, it is connected to a 'refusal of conventional limits and the critical questioning of cultural attitudes' and is 'frequently a vehicle for staging and challenging ideological thinking rather than a means of furthering it'.<sup>144</sup> This claim suggests that Kavan's literary Gothic tropes undermine neither the Modernist nor the political elements of her work. This intermingling of Gothic and Modernist features can be observed particularly in short stories written by women. Gothic motifs in Antonia White and Leonora Carrington's stories, May Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* (1923), Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Demon Lover' (1945) and even Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall' (1921) all exhibit this combination in some measure.<sup>145</sup> The short form appears to invite a reworking of the traditional ghost story, and Gothicism is also a tradition in literary representations of women's madness. Paula Treichler's reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) observes a conflict between women's discourse and traditional psychiatric diagnosis, and notes in passing similar features in Kavan's *Asylum Piece* stories.<sup>146</sup> Angela Carter's early work has also been described as Gothic, but she rejected this

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<sup>141</sup> Sara Wasson, 'Carceral City, Cryptic Signs: Wartime Fiction by Anna Kavan and Graham Greene' in *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61, 60.

<sup>142</sup> Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, eds., *Gothic Modernisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>143</sup> John Paul Riquelme, 'Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism: Dark Modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett' *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2000), 588.

<sup>144</sup> Riquelme, 'Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism', 589, 588.

<sup>145</sup> See White, *Strangers*; Leonora Carrington, *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* (London: Virago, 1989); *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (London: Virago, 1989); May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1923); Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945); Virginia Woolf, *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction* (London: Vintage Books, 2003).

<sup>146</sup> Paula A. Treichler, 'Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper"' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, no. 1/2 (Spring - Autumn 1984).

term, preferring the term 'mannerist' for her anti-realist work, and responded by playing with the Gothic genre in *Heroes and Villains* (1969).<sup>147</sup>

Kavan's work might most readily fit into studies of fantastic literature which encompasses the Gothic, utopian and dystopian fiction, ghost stories, fairy tale, magic realism and, most importantly, writing that falls between these categories. Critical work on the fantastic has challenged notions of genre, and drawn extensively on psychoanalytic theory, specifically Freud's writings on phantasy and the uncanny. Todorov's seminal, structuralist study *The Fantastic* (1970) has retained its relevance for more recent work in this area.<sup>148</sup> Todorov defines the fantastic as a mode of indeterminacy, situated between reality and unreality. In this sense, the fantastic does not apply to representations of dream or madness, or to allegory as a device to illustrate an idea, but to texts of ambiguity. As Rosemary Jackson illuminates – '[b]etween the marvellous and the mimetic, borrowing the extravagance of one and the ordinariness of the other, the fantastic belongs to neither'.<sup>149</sup> The fantastic then, is a site of interplay between the real and the imaginary, a topic central to Kavan's work and touching broader questions about all literature. Later developments in this field have also held fast to Todorov's ideas of the extent to which the fantastic is determined by the reader's experience of the text. Above all, fantastic literature is characterized by its unsettling qualities, a peculiarly disturbed relationship between text and reader. Usefully, Todorov uses Kafka as his concluding example of a 'new fantastic', a '*generalized fantastic* which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it'.<sup>150</sup> Todorov's assertion that the fantastic is best measured by the reaction it provokes gives it enormous political potential and Rosemary Jackson identifies the 'dismissal of the fantastic to the margins of literary culture', and its subversive refusal to represent either socially accepted realities or 'supernatural fictions'.<sup>151</sup> Lucie Armitt has extended the study of fantastic literature to the specific area of women's fiction and readings of Kavan's work from this critical perspective would be fruitful, placing her alongside writers with whom she shares obvious features, especially Franz Kafka, and other women writers including Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison

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<sup>147</sup> Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (London: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>148</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

<sup>149</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1988), 35.

<sup>150</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 174.

<sup>151</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, 173, 179-80.



and Doris Lessing.<sup>152</sup> The fantastic comfortably accommodates seemingly disparate elements of Kavan's writing; her Gothic inflections, her sometimes playful approach to genre and the political elements of her work.

Walter Benjamin's thoughts on (mis-)interpreting Kafka capture the same spirit of the literary fantastic:

There are two ways to miss the point of Kafka's works. One is to interpret them naturally, the other is the supernatural interpretation.<sup>153</sup>

Following Benjamin, Theodor Adorno's discussion of Kafka also recalls Todorov's description of the fantastic's disruption of the easy relationship between reader and text. Adorno maintains that Kafka's 'texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings', and that each 'sentence says "interpret me," and none will permit it'. Such observations could equally apply to Kavan.<sup>154</sup> Kavan, whose work has most often been compared to Kafka, herself uses this author as an exemplary writer in several of her reviews. Most tellingly, in her discussion of a post-war passion for nostalgic entertainment, she identifies a desire for escapism into the 'smug, self-confident era' of the Victorian age and uses Kafka as a measure of great writing.<sup>155</sup>

The mature artist's work is the outcome of his own experience; his own thought, imagination, emotion. It is his own death which Kafka describes in the terrible last paragraph of *The Trial* when the knife is turned twice in K's heart [...] Writers of the quality of Kafka and Gogol do not run away from reality. They have too much integrity, both as artists and human beings, to indulge in escapist flights.<sup>156</sup>

For Kavan then, the writer's representation of reality owes as much to their imagination as their experience; it is not the literal depiction of event but the converse of escapism, measured by the writer's depth of genuine feeling and their willingness to turn the truth and pain of their life into art. Her interpretation of

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<sup>152</sup> See Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000).

<sup>153</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 123.

<sup>154</sup> Theodor W Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka' in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981), 213, 212.

<sup>155</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Selected Notices: Back to Victoria' *Horizon XIII*, no. 73 (1946, January), 63.

<sup>156</sup> Kavan, *Horizon XIII*, no.73, 65.

Kafka again recalls Todorov's description of the fantastic as a mode representing neither fancy nor mimetic reality, and Kavan suggests that this a means by which to express an 'inner truth'. For Kavan, the subjective is neither solipsistic nor escapist; personal reactions are reality. For many of her readers, Kavan's appeal has been the darkness of her prose, and reductive and autobiographical interpretations of her life have been driven in part by her readers' sense of the 'truth' of her fiction. But Kavan did not intend her writing to be autobiographical, she meant her writing to be 'true' in a more profound way.

The revelation of Kavan's long-term heroin addiction and the success of *Ice* at around the time of her death resulted in this novel becoming associated by many with her drug use and the ice itself has been taken to represent heroin, or its withdrawal. Reviews and publishers' marketing have also encouraged a popular conception of her work as drug narrative, and promoted the concept of her as a 'cult writer'. However, romanticized notions of Kavan's altered consciousness and its affect on her writing fail to consider the humdrum reality of her addiction, her consequential ill-health and periods of controlled withdrawal with which she lived for decades. Although she kept her heroin use largely to herself for many years, it appears that Kavan was attracted to the countercultural spirit and emerging drug culture of the 1960s and she approached the topic of drug use directly in many of her late stories, collected in *Julia and the Bazooka*. These have been the source of several erroneous claims about the origins of her addiction, but her surviving diaries of 1926-7 indicate that she was first given the drug as a pain killer.<sup>157</sup> In his 1981 interview with Aorewa McLeod, Ian Hamilton maintained that Kavan only began using drugs after her return to England from New Zealand, but again, her early diary entries already record her using 'H'. Rhys Davies reports her use of amphetamines and archival evidence shows that she was using cocaine in London during the war years.

Elizabeth Young gives the most compelling argument to date for the effect of Kavan's heroin addiction on her writing in her review of Callard's biography, asserting that 'Kavan rarely wrote directly about her addiction, but indirectly she rarely wrote about anything else'.<sup>158</sup> Young makes claims for archetypal features of

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<sup>157</sup> Tulsa, Series I/ Box 13/ Folder 4.

<sup>158</sup> Elizabeth Young, *Pandora's Handbag: Adventures in the Book World* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001), 189.

addict's writing in Kavan's work. She draws the clear parallels between Kavan and Jean Rhys, emphasizing their personal addictions, and makes further comparisons with Poe and Baudelaire. Her most consistent comparison with the Romantic poets is convincing and is supported by Dr Bluth's writing on opium and the Romantic imagination, which I explore in more detail in Chapter Four, but such claims have yet to be substantiated by closer textual analysis of Kavan's work. Compelling links have been suggested by both Young and Geoff Ward between Kavan's writing and that of William Burroughs.<sup>159</sup> The 'Introduction' to Burroughs' cult novel *Naked Lunch* (1959) provides ample fuel for the correlation many have drawn between the ice of Kavan's novel and her heroin addiction:

Junkies always beef about *The Cold* as they call it [...] A junky does not want to be warm, he wants to be Cool-Cooler-COLD. But he wants The Cold like he wants His Junk – NOT OUTSIDE where it does him no good but INSIDE<sup>160</sup>

But Burroughs' overwhelmingly visceral narrative is far from the disembodied tone of Kavan's narrators, just as her addiction was hidden and quietly conducted within the confines of respectable social norms. The smart, wise-cracking junkie of *Naked Lunch* operates outside of straight society but is part of a vigorous underclass and his voice bears no relation to Kavan's desperate and outcast individuals. Kavan's late story 'Clarita' sees her experiment with a style much closer to Burroughs' and her enthusiastic taste for new forms of fiction makes a direct influence of the Beats not unlikely, another area which deserves greater attention.<sup>161</sup>

Kavan was particularly flattered when Brian Aldiss awarded *Ice* 'Best Sci-Fi Novel' of 1967 because she was a fan of his work and some of her unpublished stories also reveal the influence of science fiction. But despite her enthusiasm for the genre, and Aldiss' accolade, studies of science fiction mostly neglect Kavan. J G Ballard's term 'inner space fiction', which Doris Lessing has self-applied to her work, is a useful model with which to explore the relationship between Kavan's writing and Science Fiction. Ballard was another writer who admired Kavan, and in *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (2001), Samuel Francis explores Ballard's own

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<sup>159</sup> See Geoff Ward, 'The Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk: Lowry, Hamilton, Kavan and the Addictions of 1940s Fiction' in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*, ed. Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

<sup>160</sup> William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 13.

<sup>161</sup> See Kavan, 'Clarita' in *Julia and the Bazooka*.

dialogue with antipsychiatry and Laingian ideas, especially in 'The Insane Ones' (1962).<sup>162</sup> Ballard's and Lessing's 'inner space fiction' identifies a strain of science fiction that is less concerned with science than with creating alternative worlds through which to explore psychological, and indeed political, themes. Patrick Parrinder sees connections between Rhys' and Kavan's earlier work, and between Kavan and Lessing as 'writers whose concern with unusual psychic experience has led them from time to time into the realms of science fiction'.<sup>163</sup> Jeannette Baxter cites Ballard's *The Drowned World* as 'an example of an experimental strand of post-war writing (including Alan Burns's *Europe after the Rain* (1966), Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969)) which responded to historical atrocity through the science fiction genre'.<sup>164</sup> Kavan's writing can certainly be identified as part of this thread, and the apocalyptic events and strange dreams of the protagonists of *The Drowned World* (1962) suggest it may perhaps have influenced *Ice*. The deadly 'ice 9' of Kurt Vonnegut's satire of the nuclear age, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), also recalls the political elements of Kavan's frozen world in *Ice* and her fantastic representations of wartime London in her 1940s stories also invites comparisons with Vonnegut's representation of the bombing of Dresden in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969).<sup>165</sup>

Kavan's writing poses inherent difficulties for categorization and this has undoubtedly contributed to its critical neglect. Her unflinching tendency to experiment with style meant that her writing never simply developed into a more assured rendering of her previous work; irrespective of critical reception she would try something new, or return to rework a previous style or plot. This experimental bent, and her inclination to play with tropes of genre fiction makes comparisons with other authors as diverse as Kafka, Lawrence, Coleridge and De Quincey very easy, and these have been made by reviewers in the most casual way. But although her work fits in many places, Kavan sits nowhere comfortably and

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<sup>162</sup> See Samuel Francis, *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>163</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from Its Origins to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 391.

<sup>164</sup> Jeannette Baxter, *J.G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 19.

<sup>165</sup> See Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (London: Penguin, 2008); *Slaughterhouse-Five* (London: Vintage, 2000).

rehabilitating her to any one literary movement necessarily excludes other aspects of her writing.

In this thesis, I compare Kavan's texts to those of a number of other women writers, several of whom have admired or been influenced by her – Anaïs Nin, Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and Angela Carter. These writers all share a particular independence from the edicts of any a particular literary movement and all have both inspired and posed difficulties for feminists. Their works correspond to, and differ from, Kavan's, and each suggests alternative ways of situating her fiction within existing critical frameworks. Rhys and Nin's work has contributed to discussion of relevant issues surrounding the relationship between autobiographical and fictional writing, and both have been incorporated into the expanding field of Modernist studies. But these writers are appropriate comparators for Kavan, not only because they admired her work, but in the challenges they have posed to autobiographical interpretation and their own somewhat uncomfortable situations within the Modernist canon. The eroticism of Nin's writing also provides a comparator for the dark sexuality of Kavan's later work and Angela Carter's writing on the Marquis de Sade offers interpretive theory for a reading of the sadism of *Ice*. Unlike the other writers with whom I compare Kavan in this thesis, there is no known connection or influence between Kavan's writing and Carter. But Carter's playful, genre-defying fiction and challenging representation of heterosexual relationships offer fruitful comparison to Kavan's late work. Doris Lessing has compared the fantastic world of *Ice* to her own *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Grigot and the Snow Dog* (2005), revealing a shared preoccupation with a future ice age. More broadly, the scope of Lessing's work and her tendency to experiment with style and genre, shifting from space fiction to inner space fiction, realism to fabulism, recall Kavan. In this thesis I also look at connections between the politics of these two writers and correspondences between their work and anti-psychiatry.

My reading of Kavan's fiction has been shaped by my research into her philosophical and political development, rather than her biography. I begin my analysis of her work not with her earliest publications, but with her first writing under the name Anna Kavan, *Asylum Piece*, and her experimental novel *Sleep Has His House*. I trace her literal and metaphorical representations of space in these texts – the world of asylum, the confines of the mind or unconscious, and the

restrictive arena of social convention. Via Anais Nin's comments on her work, I look at Kavan's representation of fractured consciousness against R D Laing's 'divided self'. My second chapter focuses on Kavan's more evidently political writing during, and about, the Second World War; particularly her second collection of stories *I Am Lazarus* and her article 'The Case of Bill Williams'. I examine how her combination of psychopolitics and pacifism anticipates British antipsychiatry, and explore how the psychosomatic symptoms of the patients she worked with affect her writing in literal and more obscure ways. In the third chapter, I maintain that Kavan consciously explores existential ideas in *Who Are You?* and read the novel against Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I explore the ontological significance of the bird in both texts via Binswanger's *Dream and Existence*, and look to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to provide a bridge between an existentialist interpretation and Rhys' and Kavan's representation of sex and gender. My final chapter looks at Kavan's last and best-known novel, *Ice*, taking Angela Carter's interpretation of the Marquis de Sade as a model for reading Kavan's representation of sadism. Doris Lessing's thoughts on this novel provide a key to my interpretation of the way Kavan's politics remain evident in her fiction to the end. Throughout, I remain alert to the way in which Kavan's writing is deeply concerned with the art and consequence of fiction, and the significance of this to her humanistic philosophical and political engagement with her times.

## Chapter 1

### **'A private madness': *Asylum Piece* and *Sleep Has His House***

Anna Kavan recreated herself as a writer with *Asylum Piece*. The dramatic shift from the realist style of Helen Ferguson's psychological novels into the oblique, subjective and haunted narrative of these stories was the turning point for her literary career and legacy. Though not everything she published from this point on equals its quality and style, her name change signals a general move in her writing into an expressionistic and experimental idiom out of which she created bleak and fantastic worlds. *Asylum Piece* also marked a structural departure to a shorter form; Kavan would continue to write stories for the rest of her career and her novels became substantially more diminutive. Kavan's elusive and deeply unreliable narrator speaks in the first-person for the first time and like many of her characters from this time forward has no history or name. But the voice of the text is as distinctive as it is anonymous, creating a narrative persona that would re-emerge in many of her later works. As Helen Edmonds attempted to shed her former life along with her name, she found a literary voice which operated without markers of identity. Freed from the realist constraints of plot and character development, much of the stories' narrative work is done by ambiguity and inference. The stories of *Asylum Piece* contrive to be deeply, disturbingly, personal and at the same time highly artful and performative. Kavan's narrator presumes an uncomfortable intimacy with the reader that characterizes her rare use of the first-person voice. The peculiarly direct address of the narrative voice does not simply grant the reader access to the thoughts and emotions of the narrator, but forces them into an often claustrophobically intimate contact with it. At the same time, the delusional quality of the narrator's experiences makes us mistrustful of her, forcing us to re-enact her suspicion and paranoia; a correspondence between the narrator's experiences within the text and the reader's sensation when reading it. The narrative style of *Asylum Piece*, along with the ever-present facts of Kavan's biography, makes for a complicated ménage-a-trois of author, character and reader.

The eight distinct sections of the 'Asylum Piece' sequence from which the collection takes its title are third-person scenes of asylum life, drawn with more conventional plot and character development than the thirteen first-person narratives which surround them. All the stories are very short, some no longer than

a few pages, Kavan's form makes the asylum experience appear fragmentary and disjointed. Though the tales are intricately connected, at times the collection feels structurally incoherent; a sense of progressive linear narrative repeatedly emerges and then slips away. Shifts in tense, mood and situation trouble the stability of the first-person narrative voice, particularly in the early stories; without any name or physical description to identify the 'I' speaking, there are few clues as to whether the narrative speaks in one constant or many different voices. When any definite indication of gender is given the voice is always female, supporting critical interpretations of the work's autobiographical basis, but gender seems to be of little importance to this narrator. Minor characters sharing names and characteristics reappear throughout the stories in subtly different incarnations. The world of the text, and its inhabitants, shift and mutate, forming patterns of simultaneous sameness and difference – the certainty of one story becomes the enigma of the next, leaving the reader constantly questioning the identity, location and psychological stability of the narrator. Deliberate narrative evasions make the stories' individual significance difficult to grasp; like the sleep that eludes the narrator and the familiar face of her enemy, we 'catch a glimpse' of meaning just as it is 'snatched away' from us.<sup>1</sup> Though we only see it out of the corner of our eye before it vanishes, a sense of some hidden and intangible meaning accumulates, no more comprehensible to the narrator than to the reader. These stories are a complex and moving portrait of the utterly consuming isolation of depression, sketched out by Kavan in language as spare and unornamented as the stark reality she describes. Perhaps the most surprising feature of the text is the beauty Kavan cultivates out of this barren ground; as Desmond MacCarthy would describe it, there is 'beauty in the stillness of the author's ultimate despair'.<sup>2</sup>

Less distinctive in style and voice than the later stories, and more evidently shaped by the conventions of genre fiction, the stories which open the collection toy with the reader's expectations. These are accomplished examples of supernatural Gothic tales, the overtly sensational prelude before the confessional narrative begins. In 'The Birthmark' a beautiful but ill-fated girl, a castle in a strange land and an uncanny coincidence mark the story as high Gothic, but perversely the narrative voice is more familiar and trustworthy here than at any other point in the

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Kavan, *Asylum Piece* (London: Peter Owen, 2001), 115, 209.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond MacCarthy, 'Madness and Art', *The Sunday Times* 10 March 1940.



collection. The commonsensical first-person narrator gives little away about herself, dwelling instead on her long-remembered fascination with H, a young girl 'endued with a peculiar quality of apartness' and accompanied by a 'strange sense of nullification'.<sup>3</sup> H, whose initial provokes thoughts of 'Helen', invites comparison with the speaker of the following stories; her uncertain but ghastly incarceration is metonymical of the psychological journey of Kavan's nameless narrator. With the characteristic enigma of the psychological ghost story, the half-glimpsed prisoner might be H or a mere flight of fancy. 'A Changed Situation' is a similarly uncanny tale, its once nomadic narrator has settled down only to find herself trapped inside her malign and mysterious home, '[i]mprisoned in its very fabric [...] like a small worm, a parasite, which the host harbours not altogether willingly.' At night 'the old house opens its stony, inward-turning eyes' and watches its victim, whom it will eventually cast out 'like vomit, like dung'.<sup>4</sup> The narrator's irrational and paradoxical descriptions of the house leave the reader in little doubt that this is a portrait not of an enchanted dwelling, but of a mind detached from reality and turned in on itself. The seemingly disparate first-person voices of these tales are distinct from the narrator of those that follow, but their themes of unjust condemnation and confinement anticipate the later stories. The endless winter of 'Going Up in the World' represents inescapable depression and despair as it does throughout the collection, and the narrator's indeterminate crisis and desperate appeal for help to her wealthy 'patrons' appears as an allegory to the text's later happenings. In beginning the collection with explicitly fantastic and supernatural tales, Kavan makes the bizarre elements of the subsequent stories plausible in comparison. Although there are Gothic inflections throughout the collection, particularly the sense of hidden meaning and Kavan's unreliable narrator, the thrill of Gothic horror gives way to an altogether more surreal and idiosyncratic portrait of dread and despair.

A sense of constancy to the narrative voice develops throughout the following stories, though the world she inhabits fluctuates from story to story. Her unseen foe continues to stalk the collection, but the narrator's unstable reality casts her constant tormentors in various guises; she is plagued by mechanical despots, an omniscient jailer and a faceless bureaucracy that communicates its messages on

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Kavan, 'The Birthmark' in *Asylum Piece*, 10, 11.

<sup>4</sup> 'A Changed Situation' in *Asylum Piece*, 39-40.

pale blue notepaper. The undefined accusations against her and her visits to her 'official advisor' to discuss her case are the most explicit signs of the influence of Kafka on this text. In places, *Asylum Piece* performs a consciously intertextual dialogue with *The Trial*, but the major distinction between the narrator's persecution and that of Josef K is Kavan's use of the first-person voice. K's bizarre situation is described with the authority of Kafka's third-person narrator but the voice of *Asylum Piece* speaks directly to a reader who from the first is given reason to suspect its unreliability. Though guilt and persecution are prevailing themes for both authors, the concept of the law, so important in Kafka's writing, also mutates in Kavan's work; the unseen force that seeks to judge her protagonist goes beyond the arbitrary and incomprehensible to be actively, personally hostile. Though *Asylum Piece* shares some of Kafka's absurdism, the tragicomic element of his writing is entirely absent in Kavan, replaced by a bitter anger which underpins the political elements of her work. Her emphasis on representing the subjective and psychological world of her characters makes the mysterious and disturbing happenings of her stories foibles of the mind. If Kafka's protagonists live in a world gone mad, Kavan's fiction is more ambiguous; madness is catching and presents itself in both protagonist and world.

In a letter describing her encounters with British war-time bureaucracy four years after the collection was published, Kavan would write:

At times when I'm in one or another of these enormous buildings waiting for an interview with some new authority, I feel as if I were the victim of a private madness induced by too much reading of *The Trial* and *The Castle*.<sup>5</sup>

Kavan's sardonic remark reflects the influence of Kafka on her outlook, but also usefully illuminates a clear distinction between her writing and his; her work does not simply imitate Kafka's dystopias, instead they become internal worlds – 'private madness'.

Kavan's success with *Asylum Piece* was confirmed when it attracted the attention of two highly respected contemporary critics. Desmond MacCarthy wrote in *The Sunday Times* of the 'beauty about these stories which has nothing to do with their pathological interest, and is the result of art' and Edwin Muir believed they

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Ian Hamilton Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington (Hereafter Hamilton Papers). Kavan to Hamilton, 7 March 1943.

were filled with 'a sense of beauty and tragedy'.<sup>6</sup> As Kafka's translator, Muir immediately recognized similarities in their writing:

And like Kafka's stories, *Asylum Piece* has almost as much reference to the life of everyone as it has to that of the schizophrenic. The fears and suspicions are a little more articulate, the conviction of oncoming disaster a little more definite; but they are all recognisable, they are all things which we have felt; what makes them different is the intensity with which they are realised.<sup>7</sup>

Though both Muir and MacCarthy identify the text as a tale of growing madness, both equally highlight the universal quality of the *Asylum Piece* stories. There is little or no open reference to madness or its treatment in any of the stories, yet we recognize it as a portrait of depression, made most explicit in the narrator's feelings of hopelessness, isolation, guilt and worthlessness and her thoughts of suicide. The external world contrives to thwart and frighten her, friends no longer help her and very soon she describes how '[o]ne loses sleep, it becomes harder and harder to take any interest in conversation, books, music, plays, eating and drinking, love-making, even in one's personal appearance. Ultimately one becomes completely cut off from reality'.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Enemy Within**

In 'The Enemy' the first-person narrator takes on the voice that it will articulate for most of the collection and the pervasive atmosphere of persecution begins to build. These stories shift between past and present tense as the narrator recounts her ongoing tribulations and reminisces about earlier, happier times. In the present it is bleak winter; memories of summers past break her heart and the prospect of spring represents fragile hopes which are repeatedly crushed. The chill that blights Kavan's fictional worlds sets in here, anticipating the deep freeze of *Ice*, and the narrator begins to feel 'some connection between this bitter cold and my own sufferings'.<sup>9</sup> The matter-of-fact tone with which she recounts events and feelings of dread and horror is characteristic of Kavan's first-person voice:

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<sup>6</sup> MacCarthy, *The Times*, 10 March 1940 and Muir, *The Listener*, 21 March 1940.

<sup>7</sup> Muir, *The Listener*.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Kavan, 'The Birds' in *Asylum Piece*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Kavan, 'The Birds', 46.

Somewhere in the world I have an implacable enemy although I do not know his name. I do not know what he looks like, either. In fact, if he were to walk into the room at this moment, while I am writing, I shouldn't be any the wiser.<sup>10</sup>

Self consciously recording the act of writing in the immediate present tense, the narrative reads like an entry in a private journal. For the reader who knows as little about the anonymous and unsituated narrator as her mysterious enemy, her growing obsession with the 'traitor who is determined to ruin me' and her speculation about 'some vast and shadowy plot' suggests an infinite paranoia.<sup>11</sup> Here the complexity of the reader's relationship with this text and its narrator begins to develop; as she reveals her deep distrust of even those closest to her, we begin to reflect these feelings back in an infinite regress of mistrust and suspicion. From the outset, this shadowy foe who orchestrates her unwarranted persecution appears to the reader to be no more substantial than the personification of her mental breakdown itself. He is always with her, dominating both her internal and external life – watching, hurting, destroying love and friendship, depriving her of sleep, sunshine, hope. This text poses a moral dilemma; though we mistrust the narrator's feelings of persecution, to deny them extends to ourselves the lack of humanity she finds in the world of the text. The only compassionate response is to accept the very real threat the enemy poses to her and the true fatality of her immanent sentence. The narrator's address to the reader is a petition to the redemptive power of literature; if we can respond with empathy and understanding to this artistic rendition of mental breakdown, she, and others like her, will not be so entirely alone.

The narrator's sense that she has reached 'the beginning of the end now' inaugurates the moribund sense of drawing to a close which hangs over the collection. For, she confides, 'the time can't be far off when I shall be taken away' and the officials who will come to escort her will be 'two or three men in uniform, or white jackets, and one of them will carry a hypodermic syringe'.<sup>12</sup> The ambiguity of this forced removal rests on a likeness of practice between penal and psychiatric institutions which cuts to the heart of Kavan's text. Never entirely certain whether she has been found guilty of some crime or diagnosed as mad, the reader must

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Kavan, 'The Enemy' in *Asylum Piece*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Kavan, 'The Enemy', 32.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Birds', 33-4.

navigate the uncertain terrain of the narrator's reality. This story's ending forces the reader into a peculiarly intimate relationship with this disembodied narrative voice:

I know that I'm doomed and I'm not going to struggle against my fate. I am only writing this down so that when you do not see me any more you will know that my enemy has finally triumphed.<sup>13</sup>

No longer a private diary but a personal letter, the narrator's intimate prediction – 'when you do not see me' – is unsettling on two counts. Suspicion that the voice appealing to us is losing its mind arouses discomfort at being made party to a delusion, but if we trust the truth of the narrator's fears, the thought of her unwilling departure is equally disquieting. To read a text from which the narrator has been made to disappear is a troubling prospect and we wait with apprehension for the voice to fall silent, or perhaps be replaced by that of the triumphal enemy she fears. Drawn in and implicated by the speaker's direct appeal, as voyeur we become the helpless witness of her terrible persecution; the privileged omniscience of the reader is denied, the speaker will be taken somewhere we cannot follow.

The 'obscurantist atmosphere' of the narrator's reality intensifies in 'The Birds' and the 'subterranean activities' of her secret enemy have led to countless misfortunes and accusations against her.<sup>14</sup> Her only pleasure is in watching and feeding the many small birds that visit her garden; in a hostile world, their simple indifference gives her a sense of security which keeps her from total despair. Two vividly coloured little birds appear, 'as if two tiny meteors of living flame had suddenly plunged through the dull atmosphere'.<sup>15</sup> Their 'unearthly buoyancy' and 'joyous animation' illuminate the garden with a vision of hope.<sup>16</sup> Only half believing herself the 'victim of a hallucination', the narrator is enchanted by her 'ethereal visitors' which she takes for good omens.<sup>17</sup> These winged apparitions are a hallucinatory manifestation of the many birds that flit through the pages of these stories. Inhabiting memories of happiness and accompanying visions of spring, their call provides the soundtrack to the collection. The narrator's happy memories and

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Birds', 34.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Birds', 43.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Birds', 49.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Birds', 50.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Birds', 50, 51.

visions of spring are accompanied by the 'sweet singing of small birds'; she glimpses a woodpecker, 'the ghost of an emerald dagger spectrally flung' and two brown owls are 'like old friends'.<sup>18</sup> Even in the early stories, the small bird on the hat of the narrator's Patroness in 'Going Up in the World' is 'vivid and rare as a jewel' with 'brilliant, blind eyes', the emblem of the privilege she enjoys.<sup>19</sup> In the 'Asylum Piece' sequence the inmates also cherish memories of birds and 'hillsides sprayed as by fountains with the larks' singing' and the pigeons in the asylum grounds are heart-rending reminders of freedom.<sup>20</sup> But despite her vision of the birds, the narrator's luck does not change.

In 'Airing a Grievance', the narrator begins her desperate negotiations with the authorities to whom she has been denounced. Though she tries to place her trust in her 'official advisor' D, her confidence in him has begun to waver. Following her previous hallucination, the 'case' she discusses with him seems as likely to be psychiatric as legal. Like Josef K and his advocate, the narrator is not certain that D is acting in her best interests and her distrust of him increases when she realizes why his face has been strangely familiar to her:

It was no ancient portrait that D's face recalled to my mind, but a press photograph, and one that I had seen comparatively recently [...] The face of the young assassin, gazing darkly at me from the page, was, in all essentials, the same black-browed face that had confronted me a short time previously in the curtained seclusion of his handsome room.<sup>21</sup>

The narrator finds herself plagued by 'grotesque' and 'utterly illogical' ideas that this 'accidental likeness' suggests an awful capacity for violence in D's character, and even as we doubt her sanity, her paranoia about some undisclosed conspiracy becomes infectious.<sup>22</sup> D spells death, and whether he is lawyer or psychiatrist, it seems that he will speed rather than prevent the narrator's untimely end.

Another encounter with D in 'Just Another Failure' is difficult to locate in relation to the previous story. In one of many narrative disjoins, though D appears to be the same character both nominally and physically, the role he inhabits is subtly altered. Now friend or acquaintance rather than official advisor, his face still

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<sup>18</sup> *Asylum Piece*, 117,118,200.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Going up in the World' in *Asylum Piece*, 24, 25.

<sup>20</sup> 'Asylum Piece II' in *Asylum Piece*, 128.

<sup>21</sup> 'Airing a Grievance' in *Asylum Piece*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Kavan, 'Airing a Grievance', 60, 59.

has a vaguely familiar look about it. Just as his features remind the narrator of someone she has seen somewhere before, the reader almost recognizes him as the character we previously encountered. The world of the story is more real, if not more prosaic, than that of the previous stories; the setting is concretely London, the gender of the narrative voice is more distinct and the narrator's difficult situation has a defined shape – her forthcoming meeting with her husband and his new lover whom he proposes to bring into their home. Whether she can accept this emotional blow is the very real dilemma that preoccupies her mind. Walking through 'the wintry London twilight', the rhythm of her futile self questioning assumes 'by its very monotony a quality of horror and torment' that drives her to fear that she will 'suddenly become mad, scream, perpetrate some shocking act of violence in the open street'.<sup>23</sup> The prospect of plunging into absolute insanity threatens the narrator sporadically throughout the narrative, yet these fears are superseded here by the knowledge that she is 'inexorably imprisoned behind my own determination to display no emotion whatever'.<sup>24</sup> Denied the liberating rebellion of complete madness, she experiences instead a hallucinatory moment of severe paranoia:

I had become the central point around which the night scene revolved. People walking on the pavement looked at me as they passed; some with pity, some with detached interest, some with more morbid curiosity. Some appeared to make small, concealed signs, but whether these were intended for warning or encouragement I could not be sure. The windows lighted or unlighted, were like eyes more or less piercing, but all focused upon me.<sup>25</sup>

There is no secret enemy or mysterious authority here, only the narrator's disproportionately intense feelings of guilt and shame; against this story's realist backdrop we see her slipping quietly towards delusion. Her impending death sentence takes the form of her indistinct and hopeless contemplation of suicide, for although she finds it 'difficult to live with so much unhappiness and so many failures, to die seems to be harder still'.<sup>26</sup>

Dinner with an old friend 'R' in 'The Summons' is interrupted by the arrival of an official carrying another pale blue notification, now instantly recognizable as a

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<sup>23</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Just Another Failure' in *Asylum Piece*, 76, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Kavan, 'Just Another Failure', 79.

<sup>25</sup> 'Just Another Failure', 79.

<sup>26</sup> 'Just Another Failure', 81.

communication from the unseen authorities, which spells the end to the narrator's freedom – she is to be taken away. In a futile attempt to evade the summons, she appeals to an administrative error:

a mistake had certainly been made; I was not the person mentioned in the document he had shown me which probably referred to somebody of the same name. After all, my name was not an uncommon one; I could think of at least two people off-hand – a film actress and a writer of short stories – who were called by it.<sup>27</sup>

The 'not uncommon' name of the narrator of *Asylum Piece* is never revealed to the reader, but in this veiled reference she appears to claim a case of mistaken identity with her author. This 'writer of short stories' is tantalizingly self-referential, actively associating, or rather disassociating, the speaker from Kavan herself. The American film actress Helen Ferguson was popular at the time Kavan was using, and then writing under, that name, but it is Anna Kavan (whose name is most certainly uncommon) who writes short stories and not Helen Ferguson. This postmodern and metafictional allusion insists on our remembering Kavan when reading her fiction. The narrator of *Asylum Piece* is incognito, hiding her name to evade the fated doom, unjust accusations and awful incarceration of H – Helen Ferguson/Edmonds.

In the sleep-deprived winter of 'At Night', the narrator's delicate tightrope-walk between reality and fantasy has given way and she has come under the internal control and surveillance of the authority which seeks to condemn her. Lying in bed 'like a well-drilled prisoner' the room is 'dark as a box lined with black velvet that someone has dropped into a frozen well'.<sup>28</sup> In the pitch darkness her jailer cannot be seen, but he is everywhere and sees everything. Restrained and tortured, she has become a hostage in a world of pain:

An iron band has been clamped round my head, and just at this moment the jailer strikes the cold metal a ringing blow which sends needles of pain into my eye sockets. He is showing his disapproval of my inquiring thoughts; or perhaps he merely wishes to assert his authority over me.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Anna Kavan, 'The Summons' in *Asylum Piece*, 93-4.

<sup>28</sup> 'At Night' in *Asylum Piece*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> 'At Night', 100.



This invisible warder has the same intrusive access to the narrator as the secret enemy of the earlier stories. In her prison of sleeplessness the narrator scrambles to fathom why she must endure her punishment – ‘[b]y what laws have I been tried and condemned, without my knowledge, and to such a heavy sentence, too, when I do not even know of what or by whom I have been indicted?’.<sup>30</sup> But she remains literally and metaphorically in the dark. In an attempt to evade judgement she disengages from time and self:

I try to imagine myself in the skin of a newborn infant, without future or past. If the jailer looks into my mind now, I think, he cannot raise any objection to what is going on there.<sup>31</sup>

A sudden cock crow, ‘fantastic, unearthly’, illuminates this internal world in a moment of synaesthesia as the sound ‘flowers sharply in three flaming points, a fiery fleur-de-lis blossoming momentarily in the black field of night’.<sup>32</sup> This cry does not signify the light and hope of approaching dawn but, recalling Peter’s denial of Christ, heralds sacrificial crucifixion.

In ‘An Unpleasant Reminder’ the narrator remembers another ‘unlucky day’, though she has begun to find it ‘so difficult to keep count of time now’ that she cannot be certain how long ago it occurred.<sup>33</sup> In a holiday-camp setting reminiscent of the asylum of the later stories, she receives a visitor who conveys the long awaited judgement in the form of medication which she is instructed to take:

At last I brought myself to the point of opening it and holding the four pills on the palm of my hand; I lifted them to my mouth. And then the most ridiculous contretemps occurred – there was no drinking glass in the bathroom [...] In despair I filled the soapdish with water and swallowed them down somehow. I hadn’t even waited to wash out the slimy layer of soap at the bottom and the taste nearly made me sick.<sup>34</sup>

It is the ‘ridiculous contretemps’, the predicament of trying to swallow poison without a glass of water, which augments the horror of this act of execution or forced suicide by gilding it with desperate indignity. But this is not the final act at

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<sup>30</sup> ‘At Night’, 102.

<sup>31</sup> ‘At Night’, 101.

<sup>32</sup> ‘At Night’, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Anna Kavan, ‘An Unpleasant Reminder’ in *Asylum Piece*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> ‘An Unpleasant Reminder’, 110-1.

all, only a dress rehearsal complete with terror and debasement, and choking down the tablets turns out to be only 'a cruel hoax, just a reminder of what is in store'.<sup>35</sup>

In 'Machines in the Head', day follows the darkness of 'At Night' and the narrator is woken 'savagely, violently, shockingly'.<sup>36</sup> The surreal horror of the narrative's bizarre nightmare world is only intensified in daylight; the narrator is not only confined but sentenced to hard labour, in the service of a mechanised tyrant:

I jump up just in time to catch a glimpse of the vanishing hem of sleep as, like a dark scarf maliciously snatched away, it glides over the foot of the bed and disappears in a flash under the closed door. I am awake now for good, or rather for bad; the wheels, my masters, are already vibrating with incipient motion; the whole mechanism is preparing to begin the monotonous, hateful functioning of which I am the dispirited slave.<sup>37</sup>

In a dreadful conspiracy of biology and technology, the 'intolerable and inescapable' working of the mechanism's cogs and engines is 'a sickness inside the blood'. Like her unseen jailer, these machines control from within and any retaliation against them can only be manifested as an act of suicide:

This morning it drives me to rebellion, to madness; I want to batter my head on the walls, to shatter my head with bullets, to beat the machines into pulp, into powder, along with my skull.<sup>38</sup>

As the stories progress, the narrator's mortality becomes increasingly precarious; her bid for freedom, paradoxically achieved through an impulse of monstrous self-hatred, acknowledges again the liberating impulse towards absolute madness. Kavan's vision conjures a gruelling portrait of factory labour that she certainly never experienced - 'scarcely able to stand' on her feet, 'the noise of machinery fills the whole world' as her hands are forced to perform their 'detested task'. A sudden vision of spring through the window is astonishing and magical; she hears birdsong, sees sunshine, flowers and 'blue, blue arches of sky'.<sup>39</sup> But the machines in the head also control the outside world; hope is denied, spring recedes and becomes

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<sup>35</sup> 'An Unpleasant Reminder', 111.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Machines in the Head' in *Asylum Piece*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> 'Machines in the Head', 115.

<sup>38</sup> 'Machines in the Head', 116.

<sup>39</sup> 'Machines in the Head', 118.

'phantasmal, transparent as the texture of dream plasma'.<sup>40</sup> The perpetually turning cogs of this uncanny apparatus evoke the tormenting rhythm of the narrator's self-doubt in 'Just Another Failure', which equally drives her to 'madness'. Against nature, they also evoke the domination of the social machine which Kavan will spell out later in 'The Case of Bill Williams'. Echoes of Kafka reverberate in the perverse reprisal and mechanized torture of these stories, recalling the horror of 'In The Penal Colony'.<sup>41</sup>

'Machines in the Head' brings the first-person narrative to an abrupt close and her narrative disappearance recalls the fate she anticipated earlier in the text. Though neither she nor the reader are wiser as to the source of her feelings of persecution, these first-person stories can be read either as a representation of mental breakdown before we enter the world of the asylum, or an allegory of the asylum experience itself. Her winter of incarceration is also the season of her absolute delusion and the jailer is no simple phantom of the imagination, he makes the nature of her confinement twofold, personifying and internalizing her physical reality. We leave the narrator without hope of escape from her incarceration in the fortress of the mind.

### **The Asylum Within**

Unlike the individually titled but seemingly connected stories that precede it, the eight numbered segments of the 'Asylum Piece' sequence itself are linked only by name and setting. Their singular rather than collective title deliberately fails to reconcile Kavan's fragmentary representation of the asylum experience, for together these episodes only constitute another 'piece' and not a whole. Pieces I and II stand apart from the rest of the series but pieces III-VIII are all scenes of asylum life, each third-person narrative featuring a different patient-protagonist. These tableaux represent moments of connection and alienation between the institution itself and its protagonists; the asylum is the site of, and also third party in, the familial and professional relationships played out between its inhabitants. The liberal regime of this asylum – its comfortable grounds and décor, the workshops for occupational therapy, and communal staff and patient dining room –

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<sup>40</sup> 'Machines in the Head', 117.

<sup>41</sup> Kafka's story was first translated into English by Eugene Jolas, *Partisan Review*, March-April 1941, 98-107, 146-158, and later republished in *Horizon* 5. 27 (March 1942), 158-83 making it extremely unlikely that Kavan was familiar with the text before *Asylum Piece* was published.

mark it as an institution for the privileged few, distinct from the indignities and discomforts of the state asylum. Located in Switzerland, this private clinic has all the features of an expensive hotel but the perpetual summer of the asylum is no more comforting than the perpetual winter of the first-person narrator's anguished existence. Unlike the *I Am Lazarus* stories that followed five years later, these narratives make almost no reference to psychiatric treatment – this asylum confines but makes no attempt to heal. With the exception of the maid in 'Asylum Piece VI, the staff have little or no contact with the patients who exhibit few symptoms to explain their presence at the clinic; on the whole, their distress stems more from their incarceration and enforced separation from loved ones than from any apparent internal mental affliction. Written in a more realist style than the earlier stories, there are thematic correspondences here with the first-person narrative; the apparently therapeutic environment of the asylum and the creeping persecution of madness operate as a two-way metaphor. The chilling Gothic of the confining house in 'A Changed Situation' is reversed, the place has got into their heads. These patients are affected by their physical location in the asylum and the asylum's insidious incursion into their minds.

The third-person narrative of 'Asylum Piece I' works to set the scene for those that follow:

The scene is set exactly like a stage upon which a light comedy, something airy and gay, is about to be acted. At the back can be seen part of the ground floor of a mansion with doors right and left [...] The foreground, which in a theatre would be the auditorium, consists of an enormous view over falling ground with a lake in the middle distance and mountains beyond.<sup>42</sup>

This theatrical vignette introduces us to the bizarre world of this particular asylum; its charming neoclassical building, handsome lakeside grounds and endless, incongruous sunny days through which the occupants wander in their misery. This self-conscious appropriation of the language of stage direction manoeuvres the reader into the position of spectator, but the promise of 'airy and gay' comedy will remain unfulfilled. The well-dressed actors enter the scene, going about their bourgeois after-dinner routine, followed by three emaciated figures in dark glasses. The 'bright flashing wings' of the flock of pigeons which startle them into life and

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<sup>42</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Asylum Piece I' in *Asylum Piece*, 123-4.

provoke their 'simultaneous lamentable cry' are not coincidental; in the asylum birds trigger and accompany moments of crisis.<sup>43</sup> Soon it becomes clear that this is a theatre of puppetry and all but one of the performers acts without will:

The long, lank, match-thin limbs with their enlarged joint mechanisms jerk into forlorn obedience to the Professor's wires as, like a smiling puppet-master, he hurriedly takes control. And from behind the three pairs of dark spectacles large tears roll over the painted marionette cheeks and slowly drip onto the stone terrace.<sup>44</sup>

The manipulating machines in the head of the previous story have been replaced by a smiling puppet-master. As the narrative voice shifts out of the subjective first person and into the third, so too the control over the story's protagonists is externalized; but any hope that the third person will offer a more objective view of the world of the text is dashed. The calculated unreality of this first piece creates a distance between reader and text that was previously absent and encourages us to keep in mind that the asylum is a space of symbolism, performance and masquerade.

The second 'Asylum Piece' is unique in the sequence in its return to the first person, positioning it in ambiguous relation to the earlier stories. Lying alone 'between the wall and the bitter medicine in the glass', the locked door, 'screen of wrought iron and 'professional faces of strangers' all indicate the narrator's location in the institution.<sup>45</sup> Darkness is banished here and the unflagging light that watches her 'with its unbiased eye' refigures the vigilant jailer of 'At Night'. The voice, drugged, confused, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, seeks to distinguish dream from reality in her tale of loneliness, despair and lost love:

I had a friend, a lover. Or did I dream it? So many dreams are crowding upon me now that I can scarcely tell true from false: dreams like light imprisoned in bright mineral caves; hot, heavy dreams; ice-age dreams; dreams like machines in the head. I lie between the bare wall and the medicine bitter with sediment in its dwarfish glass and try to recall my dream.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Kavan, 'Asylum Piece I', 126.

<sup>44</sup> 'Asylum Piece I', 127.

<sup>45</sup> 'Asylum Piece II', 131.

<sup>46</sup> 'Asylum Piece II', 128.

This catalogue of dreams traces the scope of Kavan's fictional writing; the 'machines in the head' from this, her first collection of stories, and the 'ice-age dream' which will be her last and best known work. These metafictional dreams further complicate our understanding of the relationship between the fragments of this text. The fantastic quality of the narrative allows for the possibility that these protagonists may be dreaming, or characters in a dream, and this device might link the first and third-person voices of this text. There are resonances between the first-person narrative of 'Asylum Piece II' and the protagonist of 'Asylum Piece V', a nameless woman brought to the clinic against her will and abandoned without a farewell by her lover or husband:

drugs and exhaustion have destroyed her appreciation of time. She is not asleep, but neither is she truly awake. Vague fantasies, most of them unpleasant, occupy her submerged brain.<sup>47</sup>

Neither asleep nor truly awake, this character's vague and unpleasant fantasies recall the other stories in the collection; the fiction of her unconscious and the fiction of Kavan's literary art appear connected. But the reticulation of meaning in the collection will not tolerate undue pressure; if the narrator 'can scarcely tell true from false' here the reader is in a similar quandary. Though the first-person narratives that precede the 'Asylum Piece' stories might more obviously be perceived as fantasy, the asylum is also a dream-world, only we do not witness the inner worlds of the patients' dreams, instead we observe them sleepwalking through the asylum. Hans wonders if the girl he greets in 'Asylum Piece III' 'has simply fallen into a dream' and the weeping patient of 'Asylum Piece VI' is also 'as if in a dream'.<sup>48</sup> This preoccupation with sleep could arguably be an oblique reference to narcosis, the treatment Kavan herself received and which she would explore more explicitly in 'Palace of Sleep'.<sup>49</sup>

'Asylum Piece III' begins the sequence of third-person parables of asylum life. The clinic's exclusive status is confirmed by the fears of patient-protagonist Hans that financial difficulties will force him to leave. His conscious desire to remain there makes him unique among these patients, he is uncomfortable even stepping out of the building and into the grounds. Even within the confines of the

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<sup>47</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Asylum Piece V' in *Asylum Piece*, 158.

<sup>48</sup> *Sleep Has His House* (London: Peter Owen, 1973), 139, 168.

<sup>49</sup> 'Palace of Sleep' in *I Am Lazarus* (London: Peter Owen, 1978).

institution, Hans feels an outsider. He wanders the grounds of the asylum looking for some comfort or companionship; finding none, he attempts to send a telegram to his business partner. The motives of the postmaster in destroying his message without sending it are obscure, the act seems to serve no other purpose than to increase Hans' worries by isolating him from the outside world. Keeping him prisoner without his knowledge, the mystery retraces some of the Gothicism of the early stories. Like Hans, Marcel, the protagonist of piece VII, is tied to the asylum in intangible ways. A young French barrister with vague suspicions about his wealthy wife, he decides to leave the clinic by rowing across the lake to France, but though he comes close he is unable to conclude his escape:

What is it that prevents him from stepping ashore? What is it that tells him that it is safer not to think, safer to remain vague, to realize nothing?<sup>50</sup>

Like the narrator's invisible jailer in the earlier stories, the walls of the asylum have become internalized and Marcel comes up against a barricade as impassable as the wire perimeter fence; his own institutionalization. The existential elements of Kavan's writing, explicitly developed in her later work, already haunt this text. The first-person narrator struggles with a pervasive sense of dread, alienation and despair in a world of meaninglessness and absurdity, and inside the asylum the characters' physical and psychological incarceration acts out a troubled preoccupation with free will.

Zelie, the protagonist of 'Asylum Piece IV', is a young girl whose parents have travelled to the clinic to see her but are denied permission by the head doctor. Her mother's quiet despair reveals the maternal love explored in several of these stories, but her child is 'hidden away behind [...] invisible barriers of medical authority and discipline'.<sup>51</sup> The doctor's claim that it is in Zelie's best interests to be kept away from her family is belied by her acute distress when she learns of their visit and her desire to see her mother sends her running into the woods. Halted by the wire fence of the grounds, her obstruction by this physical boundary is a literal rendering of the metaphorical frontiers in many of these stories:

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<sup>50</sup> 'Asylum Piece III' in *Asylum Piece*, 180.

<sup>51</sup> 'Asylum Piece IV' in *Asylum Piece*, 144.

A wood pigeon starts to coo over her head. That gentle summer sound, which when she was a child always made her think of her mother's sewing machine, is more than Zelig can bear. Her heart breaks, she clutches handfuls of the sharp pine needles which pierce her flesh, while from between her thick lips, smeared with saliva and rouge, issues a desolate keening<sup>52</sup>

The call of the wild bird conjures both the domestic comfort of Zelig's childhood and the freedom denied to her. It jars against her own discordant cry; the desperate and inarticulate call of a child for her mother from a mouth incongruously, almost obscenely, rouged.

In the sixth of the 'Asylum Piece' sections, a peasant girl who works as a cleaner in the asylum is moved by the tears of a female patient. Their differing wealth and status makes them 'opposite products of society' but in the inverted world of the asylum, their class difference becomes the means by which they can connect on a human level.<sup>53</sup> Yet, perversely, in this moment of compassion neither protagonist is entirely human. The genuine feeling behind the girl's impulse to embrace the unhappy stranger is tempered by the dehumanising language describing the woman's experience of the encounter – finding 'solace in the subhuman sympathy, the mute caress of an affectionate dog'.<sup>54</sup> The patient herself is a broken-down automaton, she 'might be a mechanical figure but for the tears which continue their soundless rain'.<sup>55</sup> Animal and machine meet in this rare narrative moment of humanity before going their separate ways; the peasant girl is called away to her work, knowing that she has behaved inappropriately, and the invisible barrier in this story is social convention.

The final piece of the 'Asylum Piece' sequence follows the entwined fortunes of two English patients, Freda and Miss Swanson. The older woman's protective feelings towards Freda stem from a 'thwarted maternal instinct' and though she appears unhealthily obsessed with the girl, when Freda's husband comes to take her out for the day, she tries to persuade him to remove his wife from the clinic.<sup>56</sup> This is the 'proof of Miss Swanson's love [...] for without Freda her existence at the clinic would lose its last shred of value', her instincts are those of the adoptive

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<sup>52</sup> Kavan, 'Asylum Piece IV', 151.

<sup>53</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Asylum Piece VI' in *Asylum Piece*, 164.

<sup>54</sup> 'Asylum Piece VI', 167.

<sup>55</sup> 'Asylum Piece VI', 166.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Asylum Piece VIII' in *Asylum Piece*, 185.



mother of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944), willing to sacrifice her own happiness for her child.<sup>57</sup> Freda's husband is much older than her; brusque and fatherly, he suffers with a war wound. There is a terrible pathos in his shame of her innocent love for him; as she sits beside him 'her hand affectionately curled round his fingers. He spreads his coat over their knees so that no one shall see that she is holding his hand'.<sup>58</sup> When he reveals his intention to leave her at the clinic, Freda's 'ceaseless, inarticulate lamentation' recalls Zelig's keening in the earlier piece.<sup>59</sup> In this story too, birds accompany Freda in her attempted flight from the asylum; away from the institution 'the hours fly like happy birds' and when he deserts her, her husband struggles to 'capture her hands which, like desperate sparrows, are beating all about him, clawing at his sleeve'.<sup>60</sup> Caged in the asylum, fragile, avian Freda sickens from a lack of the love he cannot, or will not, give her. Despite her genuine attempt to aid the girl's escape, Miss Swanson is triumphant when Freda is returned to her, her motherly care prevails over the paternalistic husband. Like the peasant maid of the previous piece, she offers a physical, wordless comfort; an uncomplicated love, entirely lacking in the experience of the first-person narrator.

After the 'Asylum Piece' sequence, the collection's two final stories reintroduce the persecuted first-person voice and bring the narrative into its closest intertextual contact with Kafka. If it seemed that nothing could be bleaker than Josef K's dawn execution in 'The End', the final chapter of *The Trial*, this is surpassed by the realization that Kavan's narrator is doomed to 'innumerable lifetimes' of imprisonment and 'There is No End'.<sup>61</sup> In the earlier stories, without hope for the future, her attempts to escape the awful present and to fathom how her situation has come to pass made her backwards-looking; but here the horror of the now stretches forward to infinity. In the penultimate story, 'The End in Sight', she is back at home; three days have passed since the 'fatal pale blue notification' transmitted her final sentence.<sup>62</sup> Now, condemned, she waits for the 'final blow' to fall, feeling 'almost relieved to think that it is all over' and revealing an understanding of her confined existence within the pages of the text; the end of the narrative will spell

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<sup>57</sup> Kavan, 'Asylum Piece VIII', 189.

<sup>58</sup> 'Asylum Piece VIII', 192.

<sup>59</sup> 'Asylum Piece VIII', 195.

<sup>60</sup> 'Asylum Piece VIII', 190, 195.

<sup>61</sup> Anna Kavan, 'There Is No End' in *Asylum Piece*, 211.

<sup>62</sup> 'The End in Sight' in *Asylum Piece*, 204.

the end of her life.<sup>63</sup> As though to counterpoint the horror of her situation, spring has begun to blossom again and 'the chatter of my little girl' delivers to the narrator a child who has been absent, or silent, earlier in the narrative.<sup>64</sup> Under sentence of death, she is isolated from the company that surrounds her, delusional and hearing voices, knowing these are her final hours. But after the false hope and dread of this penultimate story, its awful suspense is deflated and Kavan's narrator understands at the last that there is no escape from her persecution, even through death.

The passage from Psalm 139 which opens the final chapter of *Asylum Piece* illustrates that an omniscient God has been usurped by the narrator's unseen, ever watchful enemy. Though her ruin is now complete, he continues to watch over her, and the insidious suspicion that they are one and the same is finally brought into the open:

Somehow I have the impression from those vague glimpses I have caught of his face that it wears a look that is not vindictive, but kindred, almost as though he were related closely to me by some similarity of brain or blood. And of late the idea has come to me – fantastic enough, I admit – that possibly after all he is not my personal enemy, but a sort of projection of myself, an identification of myself with the cruelty and destructiveness of the world. On a planet where there is so much natural conflict may there not very well exist in certain individuals an overwhelming affinity with frustration and death? And may this not result in an actual materialization, a sort of eidolon moving about the world?<sup>65</sup>

This malign manifestation is not quite a divided self but a monstrous offspring, a dark spirit borne of the world's conflict. Tying these stories to the wider context of their time as well as to Kavan's personal experiences of marital and psychiatric breakdown, the narrator's eidolon has been brought into being by the long shadow of the First World War, the contemporary horror in Abyssinia, Manchuria and Spain and the gathering storm clouds of a second global conflict. The dread of *Asylum Piece* expresses not an unrestrained solipsism but the anxiety of the spirit of its time. Gender adds to the complexity of the relationship between the narrator and her double, for he is a masculine projection of herself; the embodiment of her mental torment and humanity's darker side is male.

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<sup>63</sup> Kavan, 'The End in Sight', 203.

<sup>64</sup> 'The End in Sight', 205.

<sup>65</sup> 'There Is No End', 210-11.

We leave this nameless narrator incarcerated in her prison, actual, psychological or both. The sparseness of Kavan's linguistic style reflects the content of her fictional text – allowing the reader little room for movement and inducing feelings of claustrophobia, we too are trapped in the confining space of the narrator's mind. There is a truth and a beauty to her delusions, an acceptance of her fate – 'the stillness of her ultimate despair':

For, strangely enough, there are windows without bars in this place and doors which are not even locked. Apparently there is nothing to prevent me from walking out whenever I feel inclined. Yet though there is no visible barrier I know only too well that I am surrounded by unseen and impassable walls which tower into the highest domes of the zenith and sink many miles below the surface of the earth.<sup>66</sup>

This final story explicitly draws together the experiences of the first-person narrator and characters in the asylum. In the terrifying expansion of her prison cell, we witness the physical manifestation of Marcel's inability to step ashore to freedom. The shifting boundaries of restraint and selfhood in these stories allow the patients in the asylum to internalize their confinement and the first-person narrator to project her despair. In a dual movement, enemy, jailer and asylum are simultaneously internalized and expanded to infinity; the self is both colonized and projected outwards as other. In the desolation of these final pages not only dream and reality, but self and world, life and death, become indistinguishable:

So it has come upon me, the doom too long awaited, the end without end, the bannerless triumph of the enemy who, after all, appears to be close as a brother. Already it seems to me that I have spent a lifetime in this narrow room whose walls will continue to regard me with secrecy through innumerable lifetimes to come. Is it life, then, or death, stretching like an uncoloured stream behind and in front of me? There is no love here, nor hate, nor any point where feeling accumulates. In this nameless place nothing appears animate, nothing is close, nothing is real; I am pursued by the remembered scent of dust sprinkled with summer rain.

Outside my window there is a garden where nobody ever walks: a garden without seasons, for the trees are all evergreens.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> 'There Is No End', 211.

<sup>67</sup> 'There Is No End', 211-2.

The view from the window of the room is only an extension of its horrifying nullity, a garden without seasons, without love or friendship – no sunshine, no flowers, no people. The song of the real, imagined and metaphorical birds that frequent the *Asylum Piece* stories closes the text; the inattention of the figures in the garden to their call indicates the absence of the hope and happiness they represent. The world outside is as barren as the narrator's prison, there is only the interminable emptiness of despair.

### **The House of the Unconscious**

Perhaps encouraged by the critical praise won by her radical departure with the *Asylum Piece* stories, Kavan went on to experiment with a new, even more daring style in *Sleep Has His House*. She herself identified a structural connection between this text and *Asylum Piece*, planning a later work along the same lines - 'short stories with a connecting thread (something like *Asylum Piece* and *The House of Sleep*)'.<sup>68</sup> Despite their stylistic differences, the two works are connected by their use of spatial metaphor through which they conceive the psychological in architectural terms. In *Sleep Has His House*, the unconscious eventually becomes a house of safety, an internal place of escape; in *Asylum Piece*, it is a confining space, an institution, over which the inmate has no control and no means of escape except by self-destruction. The poor reviews of *Sleep Has His House* expose some inconsistency in Kavan's writing here; powerful passages of incantatory prose are sometimes swamped by clumsy and clichéd writing, and the novel is not a success in its entirety. Perhaps surprisingly, this text has attracted more critical attention than any other piece of Kavan's writing and has inspired both admiration and loathing; Jane Garrity considers it 'the most undervalued' of Kavan's novels, Geoff Ward suggests that it is her 'masterpiece' but Diana Trilling considered it an example of the worst kind of writing.<sup>69</sup> A section of the novel was first published in *Horizon* as 'The Professor' in March 1946, Doubleday brought out the US edition in 1947 under the title *The House of Sleep* and Cassell followed with the English edition *Sleep Has His House* in 1948.<sup>70</sup> Kavan takes a quotation from John Gower's

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<sup>68</sup> Austin, Anna Kavan to Peter Owen, 24 November [1967].

<sup>69</sup> See Jane Garrity, 'Nocturnal Transgressions in *the House of Sleep*: Anna Kavan's Maternal Registers' *Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1994); Ward, 'Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk'; Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties*.

<sup>70</sup> Kavan, 'The Professor' *Horizon* XIII, no. 75 (1946, March).

*Confessio Amantis* in modernized English as her epigraph, a line from which provides the English title, and the US title appears to have been borrowed from Edith Sitwell's heading to the same passage in her compilation *Planet and Glow-worm*.<sup>71</sup> The change of title, likely to have been imposed by the publishers, is unexplained. *Sleep Has His House* adds a drowsy atmosphere in spelling out the acronym 'shhh' but the English title is flawed in its masculine personification of sleep, for Kavan's text makes the night time world feminine and maternal. Though she was happier with the production of the US edition, Kavan used the two titles interchangeably in her correspondence; the text has only ever been reissued as *Sleep Has His House* and this is the title by which I will refer to the text.

Kavan's novel describes 'certain stages in the development of one individual human being' and in the main it is a portrait of childhood and adolescence. She sets out her authorial intentions in a short foreword, stating that her text springs from and expresses 'the tension between the two polarities night and day'.<sup>72</sup> These realms are represented by interspersed third and first-person passages, a method Kavan later described in a letter to Peter Owen as 'alternating objective with subjective pieces'.<sup>73</sup> But the 'objective' pieces are the third-person passages expressing the 'language we have all spoken in childhood and in our dreams'.<sup>74</sup> Kavan takes the dreamlike fluidity of imagery of *Asylum Piece* several steps further in *Sleep Has His House* in her attempt to represent this night-time language. Her third-person narrative is oblique, fragmentary and surrealist in its presentation of random, dissociated images, but much of the subtlety and intriguing uncertainty of *Asylum Piece* is lost. After the novel's critical failure, Kavan's literary career went into decline and this appears to have steered her away from its experimental style, returning in her later work to the tone she set in the early 1940s.

*Sleep Has His House* contains flashes of Kavan's familiar themes and images – perpetual winter; mysterious, unfathomable authorities; the doom of the individual against the collective; multiple birds and the 'slow, padded beat' of the big cat's 'cushioned paws softy approaching'.<sup>75</sup> The night world of the novel begins in darkness, and in the first-person; after the shift into third, Kavan works on

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<sup>71</sup> Edith Sitwell, ed., *Planet and Glow-Worm: A Book for the Sleepless* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1944).

<sup>72</sup> Kavan, *Sleep Has His House*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Austin, Kavan to Peter Owen, 19 September [1958].

<sup>74</sup> Kavan, *Sleep Has His House*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 9.

creating atmosphere by evoking sensual imagery with colour and sound. The narrative is a fragmentary and fluid montage of images that form and disperse; Kavan frames each scene, painting the backdrop, lighting the set and positioning the reader's view, like a camera, 'from the air' or from 'ground-level' and shifting it as 'the dream angle changes a little'.<sup>76</sup> As one scene cuts quickly to another, Kavan continues to direct the shots '[v]ery chaotic detail [...] [v]iew of classrooms [...] [v]ery close detail', but these directorial instructions serve to constantly remind us that she is working on creating these images – they do not simply appear before us.<sup>77</sup> The narrator's emphasis on the visual elements of the dreamscape fails to conjure the emotional significance of the scene. The enigma of the dream-world, which Kavan expressed so well in *Asylum Piece* cannot be spelled out so explicitly. At their least successful, these very literal evocations appear senseless, with clumsy, heavy-handed symbolism. Without a subject, the subjective experience of dream is nothing but a meaningless jumble of images. More successful passages contain striking imagery, especially of the stealthy tigers that stalk these dreams, and some of Kavan's wry satire of post-war Britain raises a smile.

Kavan's habit of identifying her characters by a single initial loses its cryptic air here, her protagonists A and B are named as arbitrarily as algebraic formulae – the woman, 'for the sake of economy she may as well be called A', and the girl 'unmistakably the child of her mother and so could be called B'.<sup>78</sup> In several scenes we see B sleeping and it soon becomes apparent that she is the dreamer but not the narrator of the dream. In a text otherwise populated by stereotypes and marionettes, the sad figure of A haunts even the happiest scenes while B's father is an absent presence, distant and inaccessible. The silence surrounding A's death hints at her suicide:

*No one said anything to me about the death of my mother and I never asked anyone. It was a question which could not possibly ever be asked.*<sup>79</sup>

The lurking presence of this unasked question makes its way into the night-time world as a physical manifestation, the tiger. Without definite answer, it expands and multiplies, turning the night into a 'tiger-garden' as B's unconscious plays out

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<sup>76</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 20, 21, 25.

<sup>77</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 62.

<sup>78</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 22, 26.

<sup>79</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 35.

the possibilities of A's final moments.<sup>80</sup> Jane Garrity psychoanalytically interprets the scene of 'quick red springing wide and away' from 'the fragile exposed curve of the vulnerable white neck', but she does not acknowledge the very literal image of a woman cutting her own throat.<sup>81</sup> The painful gap left by the silence surrounding A's death evokes one of the text's bleakest but most powerful montages, a child's nightmares of her mother's self-inflicted death:

She plunges from towers strict and terrible in their stark fragile strength, delicate as jerboa's bones on the sky, perdurable with granite and steel [...] the screaming skid of wheels spouting slush with her blood. Limp as an old coat not worth a hanger, she is to be found behind numbered doors in hotel bedrooms; or dangling from the trees of country churchyards [...] The weeds of lonely rivers bind her with clammy skeins; the tides of tropical oceans suck off her shoes; crabs scuttle over her eye sockets. Sheeted and anonymous on rubbered wheels she traverses the interminable bleakness of chloroform-loaded corridors.<sup>82</sup>

The sequence ends in a dismal room in a lodging house 'cluttered with glasses, cups, empty whiskey and gin bottles; syringes, scattered tablets, powders spilled from their crumpled papers, needles, empty tubes labelled diamorph'.<sup>83</sup> The stiff shape of a human form under the bedclothes conceals the imagined junky's overdose and this sordid scene is the text's only allusion to drug use. The spectre of suicide haunts the novel, as it does many of Kavan's texts; it is the 'erratic but steadfast seeking, saraband and stalking of death by violence through the indifferent world'.<sup>84</sup>

On the whole, the italicized, confessional sections of the novel are more affective than the longer, 'objective' visions of night between them. Standing alone, these have the sparse beauty and enigma of *Asylum Piece*. According to Kavan's 'Foreword' these passages balance the extended passages of 'night-time language' and indicate 'the corresponding events of the day'.<sup>85</sup> But the waking experiences of this consciousness are almost as strange as the unconscious events of the night. In the first-person segments as well as the dream sequences, the ghost

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<sup>80</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 43.

<sup>81</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 44.

<sup>83</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 44.

<sup>85</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 5.

of A lives on behind panes of glass both transparent and reflective, and she appears to her daughter through windows and in the mirror. The resemblance between mother and daughter extends to make them doubles; A becomes B's 'doppelganger', taking the place of her reflection and B inherits A's sadness along with her looks:

*One day when I combed my hair in front of a mirror, my mother looked out at me with her face of an exiled princess. That was the day I knew I was unhappy.*<sup>86</sup>

As B begins to find it 'hard to tell which face was my own', her window becomes 'a magic glass' and inner and outer worlds become confused.<sup>87</sup>

*Sometimes, looking out of an upstairs window, I could feel my mother looking out of my eyes.*<sup>88</sup>

In the daytime world, the window and the mirror on the wall reveal mysteries, and Sleeping Beauty and the Wicked Queen are interchangeable.

Kavan's haphazard but meaning-laden and highly visual dream montages clearly owe something to surrealist film and in particular recall Dali's dream sequence in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). The text evokes literary as well as cinematic influences; the absurdism of Kafka's arbitrary bureaucracy is present here as it is in *Asylum Piece*, but it is outweighed by the chaotic, disordered irrationality of Lewis Carroll's wonderland. Kavan makes several explicit references to Carroll in order to induce a mood of 'nightmare Alice-in-Wonderland inconsequence' and echo the imagery of a 'mass of papers flying, whirling through the air like Alice's pack of cards'.<sup>89</sup> True to all of Kavan's child heroines, B is a small girl with blond hair and her resemblance to Alice becomes striking here in sequences that recall Carroll's narrative tone and imaginary worlds.

How in the world is she ever going to find her right place in this bear-garden? Nobody seems to care what she does, where she goes [...] People are constantly bumping into her and pushing against her [...] Soon she's [...]

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<sup>86</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 61.

<sup>87</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 183.

<sup>88</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 47.

<sup>89</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 102, 180.



in front of a door which is evidently not meant to be opened, or even to be seen, because it is painted exactly as if it were part of the wall.<sup>90</sup>

In *Sleep Has His House*, nonsense and nightmare combine, the daytime and night-time worlds are equally peculiar and B must follow A through the looking glass to find her home.

Contemporary reviews of *Sleep Has His House* on both sides of the Atlantic were unfavourable, none more so than Diana Trilling's notice in *The Nation*. Trilling refers to Kavan's 'distinguished reputation' in the US, indicating the critical success of her earlier stories.<sup>91</sup> But her critique of *The House of Sleep* is excoriating, stating from the outset that 'nothing makes it worth reading' and calling it 'a pretentious piece of non-communication'.<sup>92</sup> Trilling's review is revealing; she takes the novel to be representative of a growing movement within 'higher literary art' which maintains that 'madness is a normal, even a better than normal, way of life'.<sup>93</sup> Though some of her criticisms of the novel are valid, it is the political rather than aesthetic implications of Kavan's style with which Trilling takes greatest issue. Despite Kavan's stated intention to portray an unconscious 'language we have all spoken in childhood and in our dreams', Trilling interprets the narrative as a representation of the voice of madness.<sup>94</sup> She sums up the novel as a 'kaleidoscope of the subjective states of an increasingly disordered mind, recorded half as if from within the sick psyche and half as if through the eye of an outsider much too closely identified with her subject'.<sup>95</sup> Though she misreads the text as the portrayal of a 'sick' psyche, Trilling's criticism reveals a deep understanding of Kavan's politics. In her review she expresses exactly the position stated by Maxwell Jones in response to Kavan's 1944 *Bill Williams* piece; that 'non-rationality [...] should be under the dominion of reason', and when this is not the case 'the person is sick and of only questionable use to society'.<sup>96</sup> In an earlier review, Trilling refers to Kavan's story 'I Am Lazarus' as 'touching', indicating her comfort with Kavan's more realist style and with the portrayal of a lunatic within the confines of the asylum.<sup>97</sup> For Trilling,

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<sup>90</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 109-110.

<sup>91</sup> Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties*, 220.

<sup>92</sup> *Reviewing the Forties*, 218.

<sup>93</sup> *Reviewing the Forties*, 220, 218.

<sup>94</sup> Kavan, *Sleep Has His House*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties*, 218.

<sup>96</sup> *Reviewing the Forties*, 219.

<sup>97</sup> *Reviewing the Forties*, 160.

Kavan's representation of the unconscious is only the futile ramblings of an unbalanced mind, an example of art without value:

In substitute for an increasingly grim reality we are offered the poetry of non-rationality. In cure of a schizophrenic society we are offered the schizophrenic personality.<sup>98</sup>

This is indeed the prescription for the ills of society that Kavan lays out in *Bill Williams* – the 'tonic epidemic of madness' which is mankind's only hope and the redeeming aspect of her own work, making Trilling's reactionary criticism an accolade to the success of Kavan's artistic aims.<sup>99</sup>

If the surreal style of *Sleep Has His House* encouraged Diana Trilling to interpret the novel as a narrative of madness or schizophrenia, it has also attracted several readings as a narrative of addiction. Kavan's use of Gower's quotation as her epigraph, which refers in passing to 'poppy which is the seed of sleep' does support this interpretation. However, Clive Jordan's long feature on Kavan in *The Telegraph* may have instigated a disproportionate interest in the novel as a text of addiction and extensive quotations from his article appear on the fly leaves of the Peter Owen edition. Jordan focuses enormous attention on Kavan's drug addiction in his discussion of her writing. He describes Kavan's heroin as an 'unenviable lifeline' and emphasizes the 'unmistakable mark' of drugs on her writing, comparing her to Coleridge, De Quincey and Wilkie Collins:

a strong case has been made out that addiction to the opiates (of which heroin is one) leads to a concentration on certain images in the writing. Buried, crumbling cities, staircases stretching to infinity, gloomy walls relentlessly closing in, breakneck journeys, hideous faces, shapeshifting jungle creatures and, above all, cold, snow and ice - these are the images brought back to literature from the drug experience.

In Anna Kavan's case, the *Asylum Piece* sketches, written in the early days of the drug habit, are as clear and deep as the Swiss lake her asylum overlooked. But already there are traces of imagery and experience attributable to drugs [...] Her most systematic exploration of the dream world came in *Sleep Has His House* (1948), a fascinating surrealistic experiment, which claimed to describe her development "in the night-time language" [...] In her last few years, the drug imagery thickened and clotted until it was the whole matter of the story. Her novel *Ice*, with its ceaseless

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<sup>98</sup> *Reviewing the Forties*, 220.

<sup>99</sup> Kavan, 'Bill Williams', 98.

search and flight across a freezing world, is a brilliant metaphor for addiction. The icy world mirrors the despairing loneliness of addiction and emotional solitude.<sup>100</sup>

Jordan refers obliquely to Alethea Hayter's 1968 study of opium and literature in his discussion of the influence of addiction on Kavan's literary imagery.<sup>101</sup> His article pathologizes Kavan's fiction, which he believes to be at its best 'magnificent' and at its worst 'still a fascinating clinical casebook of her individual obsessions and the effects of drugs on her imagination'. Although further comparison between Kavan's fiction and that of other writers of addiction would be worthwhile, Jordan allows Kavan's madness and drug use to overshadow her status as an artist.

Lawrence Driscoll examines *Sleep Has His House* as a discourse of women's drug use in 'Planet Heroin: Women and Drugs' (2000).<sup>102</sup> Looking first at several sociological studies of women addicts written by non-users, he examines how these texts associate drug use with patriarchal ideology, lack of freedom and failure of free will. These narratives figure women addicts as oppressed and alienated and evoke spatial metaphors of otherness; in Driscoll's formulation, they conceive women's substance abuse as 'planet heroin'. Driscoll goes on to consider alternative medical and sociological discourses of women's addiction, and ultimately draws *Sleep Has His House* into his argument as an example of a literary text of addiction. Kavan's novel works for Driscoll's thesis in its use of a spatial metaphor for consciousness and he reads the house of sleep as representing the psychological space inhabited by the addict. He maintains that in *Sleep Has His House* 'a heroin habit is rewritten as a habitat' and that 'Kavan, from within the house of sleep, sees addiction as her home'.<sup>103</sup> Driscoll reads a political message in Kavan's fiction, maintaining that she 'addresses what it means to use drugs in a society that detests the drug user', but this insistence on the novel's representation of the addict both relies on Kavan's biography and misrepresents her life experience.<sup>104</sup> Driscoll simply introduces Kavan as 'heroin addict and writer' (addict first, writer second) without discussing her biography in detail. His interpretation of

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<sup>100</sup> Jordan, *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 1972.

<sup>101</sup> Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination: Addiction and Creativity in De Quincey, Coleridge, Baudelaire and Others* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).

<sup>102</sup> Lawrence Driscoll, 'Planet Heroin: Women and Drugs' in *Reconsidering Drugs: Mapping Victorian and Modern Drug Discourses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> Driscoll, 'Planet Heroin: Women and Drugs', 124, 126.

<sup>104</sup> 'Planet Heroin: Women and Drugs', 120.

*Sleep Has His House* rests on the presumption of her own status as a despised addict, but although Kavan's fiction does address what it means to be an outsider in a society that demands conformity, her drug habit was unknown to most of her acquaintance in the 1940s. Driscoll uses Kavan's novel to counter narratives of women's substance abuse written in the 1980s and 1990s, but he fails to take into account the particularities of her time and her class. Furthermore, although Kavan was using heroin while writing the novel, almost nothing in the text itself suggests that her narrative subject represents the drug user, and the character of B is not an addict but a child. Driscoll's interpretation of the novel is problematic, not least because his citations are difficult to follow. Taking his quotations from the Picador collection of Kavan's work *My Madness* (1990) which reproduces *Sleep Has His House* in its entirety, Driscoll's footnotes are out of sync and then become completely erroneous, misattributing quotations from Kavan's 1969 story of drug addiction 'Julia and the Bazooka' which does not appear in the collection.<sup>105</sup> Driscoll fails to substantiate his interpretation of *Sleep Has His House* as a discourse of women's drug use employing a positive spatial metaphor, and appears to misappropriate Kavan's novel for his own argument.

Geoff Ward also looks at *Sleep Has His House* as a narrative of addiction in his study of 1940s' fiction which explores recurring 'tropes of circularity, generally speaking broken circles' in narratives which anticipate homecoming but are thwarted by the constraints of post-war society.<sup>106</sup> Ward's brief discussion of *Sleep Has His House* picks up on Kavan's critique of 1940s' conventionality, her 'so-do-I parodies of formal speech, formal life, formal servitude and torpor'.<sup>107</sup> Focussing on the often ignored sardonic and parodic elements of her prose, Ward reads Kavan as a writer engaged with her political moment rather than the solipsistic self-obsessive she is often taken for. In a comparison to William Burroughs, he gives a more subtle and revealing account of the consequences of Kavan's heroin addiction for her fiction:

For Burroughs and Kavan the syringe became the neurotic's microscope, Kavan using that detachment to see more clearly 'the whole layout', her architect/ designer's camera-eye recalling the aerial views of 1930s' literary

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<sup>105</sup> Brian W. Aldiss, ed., *My Madness: The Selected Writings of Anna Kavan* (London: Picador, 1990)

<sup>106</sup> Ward, 'Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk', 26.

<sup>107</sup> 'Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk', 42.

cartography while ushering in the neo-surrealism and science fiction interests of the post-war period.<sup>108</sup>

Ward reads the influence of heroin on these writers as politically enabling rather than solipsistic and befuddling. He astutely spotlights Kavan's career as property renovator in his analysis of *Sleep Has His House*, recognizing how her conceptual faculties for design in the physical, spatial arena are put to use here in her fiction. With her capacity to revise and recreate, Kavan was architect of buildings, fiction and self.

The most compelling evidence for *Sleep Has His House* as a text of addiction has not previously been explored by critics but can be found in her association with Dr Bluth. His extensive essay 'The Revival of Schelling' (1945) traces the philosopher's place in a history of Western thought and his interpretation of German Romanticism is revealing in respect to Kavan's heroin addiction. Bluth's letters and poems to Kavan indicate that her drug use was a subject of playfulness between them. His belief that Kavan's heroin use was a form of self-medication with which she managed her severe and chronic depression is complicated by a letter from Binswanger to Dr Ernst Lucas revealing that Bluth had confessed to using small doses of heroin himself.<sup>109</sup> In his piece on Schelling Bluth writes that to the Romantics 'opium was not a dangerous drug not a symbol of delusion, but a draught of reality, and through its influence they found a way to that secret land which they thought of as their true home'.<sup>110</sup> Kavan helped Bluth improve the English of this essay, and they doubtlessly discussed his philosophical interpretation of opiate addiction. For Schelling, Bluth claims:

Opium broke down the barrier between ego and non-ego. It reunited the lonely spirit with nature. Opium was nature itself [...] It was night and the mother-womb of the unconscious into which his solitary and exiled soul longed to return.<sup>111</sup>

Bluth's understanding of the Romantics' experience of opium conceives the unconscious as a nocturnal and maternal home, which resonates strikingly with Kavan's vision in *Sleep Has His House*. He goes on to discuss the importance of

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<sup>108</sup> 'Wibberlee Wobberlee Walk', 43.

<sup>109</sup> Binswanger Archive, Ludwig Binswanger to Dr Ernst Lucas, 1 May 1958.

<sup>110</sup> Karl Theodor Bluth, 'The Revival of Schelling' *Horizon* XII, no. 69 (1945, September), 160.

<sup>111</sup> Bluth, 'The Revival of Schelling', 160.

sleep, symbolism and poetic language to Schelling's natural philosophy, maintaining that '[t]he only true wisdom was that which originated in the world of dreams' and that '[m]yths, dreams and music are symbols describing the structure of the unconscious'.<sup>112</sup> Much of what Bluth draws from Schelling resonates with both Binswanger's theories and with the Romantic inflections in Kavan's work. This correspondence is elucidated in the clear influence of Schelling's philosophy on Heidegger's existentialism in his study of Schelling's *Of Human Freedom* (1809).<sup>113</sup> Herbert Read draws a similar lineage in his essay on 'Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchy' (1954). In these three seemingly diverse strands of thought, Read identifies a preoccupation with the question of freedom, and concludes that 'in my opinion anarchism is the only political theory that combines an essentially revolutionary and contingent attitude with a philosophy of freedom'.<sup>114</sup> Read traces the origin of existentialism back to Schelling's philosophy, and via Schelling maintains that 'we find in Coleridge's lesser-known writings a good deal of existential thought'.<sup>115</sup> Thus the constellation of Romantic philosophy and such seemingly modern areas of thought as existentialism and psychoanalysis appears patent and inevitable. Herbert Read again articulates a relation between aesthetics, existential thought and politics that resonates with, and illuminates, Kavan's work.

### **'The world of the divided self'**

Anaïs Nin's longstanding interest in Kavan was sparked by reading the 1946 US edition of *Asylum Piece* which also included the *I Am Lazarus* stories.<sup>116</sup> Her enthusiasm and advocacy for Kavan's writing are one example of a generous instinct towards other writers whom she considered undervalued. Later, both writers would be published by Peter Owen in the UK, but despite Nin's overtures the two never met. Nin's journals record her feelings of affinity with Kavan's writing and her attempts to promote her fellow writer to greater recognition.<sup>117</sup> She was

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<sup>112</sup> 'The Revival of Schelling', 167, 178.

<sup>113</sup> See Schelling, *Of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1936) and Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985).

<sup>114</sup> Herbert Read, 'Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism' in *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), 158.

<sup>115</sup> Read, 'Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism', 141.

<sup>116</sup> Anna Kavan, *Asylum Piece* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1946).

<sup>117</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin*, 7 vols. (London: Peter Owen, 1980), see vols. 1944-7 and 47-55.

moved to write to Kavan who was undertaking one of her periods of extended travel and the letter was eventually returned. Nin wrote again in 1959 and this second letter again followed Kavan 'around the world', arriving nearly a year late. In 1963 Kavan finally responded by forwarding a copy of the newly published *Who Are You?* but she again failed to answer Nin's reply. Nin's letters to Kavan express effusive and heartfelt enthusiasm for her work:

I was so moved by *Asylum Pieces* [sic]. It seemed to me that this was the first time anyone ever entered the world of madness with such utter clarity and compassion. For the first time all the feelings were made clear, and very humanly understandable [...] Then I read your other books – I loved them. I felt a great affinity with them [...] You did so beautifully, so perfectly what I felt was the task of the writer in our generation. You entered the realm which it was necessary and inevitable to explore.<sup>118</sup>

She goes on to propose that 'someday I would love to republish *Asylum Pieces*' and attempts to engage Kavan in a dialogue about their work.

Nin's early interest in D H Lawrence highlights a correspondence between her literary taste and Kavan's.<sup>119</sup> Though Nin is primarily known for her own erotic writing, her interest in Kavan's work concentrated on the representation of madness, and she expressed less enthusiasm for the overt sexuality of *Ice*. In her letters, she praises above all the clarity of Kavan's writing, calling *Asylum Piece* 'an example of classical lucidity while entering irrational worlds'.<sup>120</sup> Nin formalized her admiration for Kavan's work in *The Novel of the Future* (1968), her literary treatise which aimed to 'study the development and techniques of the poetic novel'.<sup>121</sup> Her analysis focuses extensively on examples from her own work; she unpicks her fictional texts, exploring their symbolism and the psychology of her characters and in many ways her study is most illuminating as an exposé of her literary technique. Influenced by her own endeavours to write not realism but 'psychological reality', Nin draws on psychoanalytic theory in a broad and non-specific way to support her analysis, citing Freud, Jung, Otto Rank and R D Laing. Although no other writer features so prominently in her appendix of recommended reading, she gives little in-depth analysis of Kavan's work. But revealingly, she discusses Kavan's writing in

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<sup>118</sup> Anaïs Nin to Anna Kavan, March 9 1959 reproduced in *Anaïs*, Vol 3, 1985, 63.

<sup>119</sup> See Anaïs Nin, *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1964).

<sup>120</sup> Nin to Kavan, September 4 1963 in *Anaïs*, Vol 3, 1985, 64.

<sup>121</sup> Anaïs Nin, 'The Novel of the Future' in *The Novel of the Future* (London: Peter Owen, 1968), 3-4.

light of Laing's theories, albeit in a loose and ill-defined way. Nin includes *Asylum Piece* with Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927) and Frisch's *I'm Not Stiller* (1954) as texts whose writers 'entered the world of the divided self with skill and clarity'.<sup>122</sup> However, her quotation from both *The Divided Self* and *The Politics of Experience* is limited and her interpretation of Laing's theory is broad.

Laing's deconstruction of the categories of sanity and madness allowed, perhaps invited, the widespread dissemination of his model of the divided self, despite his own specific discussion of the schizophrenic or schizoid person. Nin's interpretation applies the concept of the divided self to her own fictional writing, and indeed to the entire human condition. Her understanding of the Laing's divided self is a split between the conscious and unconscious elements of the self, and she identifies the conscious self with the use of artifice and masquerade. But this reading is not faithful to Laing's original formulation, neglecting the existential foundations of his work. In *The Divided Self* he describes the schizoid 'ontological insecurity' and the divided self is a rift in the experience of 'being-in-the-world', exacerbated by social and familial environment. In *Sleep Has His House*, Kavan too is preoccupied by the demands of post-war social convention, and B's retreat into the unconscious is brought about by her distant and alienated parents and her inability to inhabit 'the daytime world'. Nin does not focus on the connection between Kavan's politics and Laing's, disregarding the implicit critique of traditional psychiatric treatment or the pressure of social norms in her stories. Yet her intuition of Kavan's exploration of the 'world of the divided self' in *Asylum Piece* strikes a chord. From 'Anna Kavan' in *Let Me Alone* to the narrator of *Ice*, Kavan's protagonists and narrators persistently exhibit fractured psyches. In *Asylum Piece* the narrator-protagonist's enemy, close as a brother, turns out to be a manifestation of herself, a hostile double that torments and controls her.

Nin's descriptions of Kavan's work use recurring spatial metaphor as shorthand for the unconscious; she describes Kavan entering 'the world of madness', 'irrational worlds' and 'the realm which it was necessary [...] to explore'. Nin's evocation of space in her reading of Kavan becomes clearer in light of her own fiction. In her ultimately futile attempt to engage Kavan in a dialogue about their writing, she wrote asking if Kavan had read her work, noting that 'I started with

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<sup>122</sup> Nin, 'The Novel of the Future', 139.



*House of Incest*, a book of dreams, which is analogous to your *House of Sleep*'.<sup>123</sup> Nin's identification of an analogy between Kavan's text and her own highlights a startling resemblance that extends beyond the similarity of their American titles. Published in Paris by Henry Miller's Siana Press, *House of Incest* (1936) was Nin's first work of fiction. Its publishing history makes any direct influence on Kavan unlikely, and if she had felt reciprocal admiration for Nin's writing, it was uncharacteristic of her not to have expressed this. In fact, Kavan's estimation of Nin is difficult to fathom, no reference to her appears in the archives apart from a letter sent to John Rolf requesting an advance copy of *Who Are You?*:

I think it would be a very good idea if I sent one to Anaïs Nin. I always feel guilty about not answering her letter, which followed me around the world and reached me nearly a year after it was written. It then seemed too late to answer.

Perhaps if I write in a copy for her she will forgive my rudeness! So will you send me one for this purpose?<sup>124</sup>

Despite Kavan's seeming lack of interest in Nin's work, *House of Incest* is written in a similarly fragmentary and surrealist style to *Sleep Has His House*. Like Kavan's text, Nin's prose-poem begins in darkness, and her subject also experiences an aquatic birth. The house of sleep and the house of incest are feminine spaces and both narratives portray two female protagonists closely connected and at times indistinguishable; the maternal bond between A and B and the more complex, sexually inflected relationship between Nin's narrator and Sabina. Nin's reading of Kavan and 'the world of the divided self' is clearly influenced by her own representation of the unconscious as a dwelling where another self resides.

In a rare feminist reading of Kavan's work, Jane Garrity gives a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Sleep Has His House* which discusses its 'radical "feminine" aesthetic'.<sup>125</sup> Garrity argues for the text's Modernism, citing as evidence its 'indictment of technology, its critique of fascism, its revision of traditional gender relations' and 'the influence of psychoanalysis'.<sup>126</sup> She emphasizes, perhaps too forcefully, Kavan's familiarity with Freudian psychoanalysis in her argument that *Sleep Has His House* is 'indebted to a psychoanalytic paradigm that privileges the

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<sup>123</sup> Nin to Kavan, 9 March 1959 in *Anaïs*, Vol 3, 1985, 63.

<sup>124</sup> Scorpion Press Archive, Tulsa, Kavan to John Rolph, 16 July 1963, Box 5/ 'Anna Kavan' file.

<sup>125</sup> Garrity, 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 254-5.

<sup>126</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 255.

nonrational, nonsequential realm of associative thought'.<sup>127</sup> For Garrity, the text's attempt to communicate meaning in fragmented and ambiguous form gives it an 'allegiance to dream-work'.<sup>128</sup> Her interpretation asserts that Kavan's form of linguistic experimentation and the novel's portrayal of a 'conspiratorial alliance between mother and daughter' subvert masculine cultural values in both form and content.<sup>129</sup> Garrity is fascinated by the interaction of the novel's form and content, maintaining that language 'is the actual subject of Kavan's text'.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, the strongest hints towards an autobiographical influence in the text suggest not that the narrator is mad or an addict, but a writer; B learns to survive in the world by '*changing my anxiety into written words*'.<sup>131</sup>

Garrity's close analysis proposes that *Sleep Has His House* is arguably the most feminist of Kavan's texts and certainly its positive maternal imagery, echoing the maternal love glimpsed in the *Asylum Piece* stories, is rare in Kavan's oeuvre and supports positive essentialist notions of womanhood. Garrity reads B's residence in the house of sleep as a reunion with the maternal body, evoking 'Kristeva's theorization of the semiotic and Nancy Chodorow's examination of the pre-oedipal' and Kavan's text 'exposes both the utility and the limitations of both these theoretical models'.<sup>132</sup> Garrity's emphasis on the central place of the maternal bond in the novel is crucial, but she perhaps takes her interpretation too far in claiming 'A herself is not merely identified with the home, but in effect literally *becomes* the house'.<sup>133</sup> Although Garrity is right to identify B's final resting place as 'a psychic and physical space that is maternally connoted', there is a distinction between the body of A and the body of the house.<sup>134</sup> A surrounds the house, appearing through its windows and in its mirrors; she is not the house itself, but the vast realm in which it resides:

*And in the night my own mother came to the window to meet me, strange,  
solitary; splendid with countless stars; my mother Night; mine, lovely, mine.  
My home.*<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 260.

<sup>128</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 260.

<sup>129</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 262.

<sup>130</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 267.

<sup>131</sup> Kavan, *Sleep Has His House*, 125.

<sup>132</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 257, 258.

<sup>133</sup> 'Nocturnal Transgressions', 270.

<sup>134</sup> Kavan, *Sleep Has His House*, 270.

<sup>135</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 184.

B creates her own house of sleep in the night that is her mother; her unconscious has its own little space in that land, and both are her home. Thus, Kavan grants B a greater measure of autonomy than Garrity's analysis allows. Like other critical analyses of the text, Garrity ignores the issue of A's implied suicide and her identification of the pull towards the maternal figure in the text does not question closely enough whether this is a positive movement. In her feminist interpretation, A leads B away from patriarchal dominance to her benefit, but A is not much of a mother, dead or alive. She lures B from conformity, normalcy and the day-world, she is night, leading her child into darkness and she is always indifferent to, feels no love for, her child; her death by suicide warns that she leads B to a place of self-destruction.

Although the first-person passages speak of creating a safe space of fantasy, the dreams themselves always veer towards nightmare. 'The Elms', the house of B's childhood in which her living mother was so unhappy, is not a home. Its uniform conventionality dominates the novel and it is juxtaposed against the house of sleep, which B finds in the final section. This house is a retreat from the daytime world, a self-created reality. Its architectural features are fluid, it is constantly mutating to show new aspects of itself, B's companions there are 'the many mirrors which hang all over the house'.<sup>136</sup> B spins a web for herself: '*[o]ut of the night-time magic I built in my head a small room as a sanctuary from the day. Phantoms might be my guests there, but no human could enter*'.<sup>137</sup> Only one hint from the day world throws ambiguous light on this place of subjectivity:

*It was my own self in which I trusted, not seeing self as that last cell from which escape can only come too late.*<sup>138</sup>

Here, the echo of *Asylum Piece* sounds for a moment; B's unconscious retreat in the house of sleep is a sanctuary, but perhaps also a solitary prison. Although the title of *Asylum Piece* focuses attention on the psychiatric institution, only the 'Asylum Piece' sequence itself has this explicit setting. Yet the asylum haunts all the stories, representing something more than mere physical location. The internal

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<sup>136</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 187.

<sup>137</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 87.

<sup>138</sup> *Sleep Has His House*, 125.

incarceration and surveillance of the first-person voice makes the institution a state of mind, and madness itself a confinement. Kavan's narrators, exiled in a world which is not their home, inhabit instead the spaces of their conscious and unconscious minds. In *Sleep Has His House*, B finds a place of safety there; the protagonists of *Asylum Piece* are not so lucky, finding themselves trapped in a place of confinement. The fractured, or divided, selves of both texts are manifestations of an alienated existence which appears throughout Kavan's work; a rift brought about variously by psychological breakdown, the experience of difference and displacement, and the pressures of social convention. As Kavan's writing under her new name developed, much of her politics, like those of R D Laing and Michel Foucault, would emerge from the world of the asylum.

## Chapter 2

### Hearts and Minds: 'The Case of Bill Williams' and *I Am Lazarus*

The outbreak of the Second World War came within months of Kavan leaving England and the conflict followed at her heels from Norway to the East Indies. The epic journey she undertook in her attempt to escape her life as Home Counties' wife Helen Edmonds is overshadowed by those of the millions of displaced persons fleeing occupation, persecution and death. Kavan's war years were scarred by bouts of depression, suicide attempts and the loss of her son; but they were also some of her most adventurous, creatively prolific and politically engaged. Her reinvention as Anna Kavan brought with it, if not the hoped-for fresh start in her personal life, the success of *Asylum Piece* and her first experience of real literary acclaim. Despite her nomadic lifestyle and the terrible upheaval of war she produced a substantial amount of work, not all of which has been published. Later in the war, her involvement with the literary journal *Horizon* gave her the opportunity to try her hand at journalism and she published several articles and literary reviews. The war would affect Kavan's writing deeply and lastingly; her late story 'Julia and the Bazooka' (1970) starkly reveals that her time in London during the air raids remained a preoccupation towards the end of her life. Her time working at the Mill Hill Emergency Hospital, and her experiences of progressive psychiatric treatment, would also profoundly alter her understanding of her own mental difficulties and her relationship to the psychiatric profession. Wartime brought Kavan into contact with other creative individuals and networks; in New York she spent time with Walker Evans and Jim Agee, and was introduced to Louis MacNiece and the artistic community of British ex-pats living at the infamous 'February House' on Middagh Street. Back in London she socialized with Peter Watson, Arthur Koestler and Cyril Connolly at *Horizon* and formed friendships with Len Lye, Kay Dick, Max Murray and Maysie Greig. The success of *Asylum Piece* was followed by flattering reviews from Edwin Muir and Desmond MacCarthy for her second collection of stories under her new name, *I Am Lazarus*. Like many of the opportunities that came her way, Kavan failed to take advantage of the chance to form lasting friendships or literary ties and these connections would be severed by disagreement or disperse due to her reclusive habits. A political agenda absent in Kavan's earlier work is revealed in her small output of journalism and in her fiction

of this time. Her writing of the antagonism between psychiatrist and patient is in many ways a wider critique of society, influenced by pacifism and anarchic politics. Perhaps initially cast in her relationship with Ian Hamilton, who was incarcerated in New Zealand for refusing to fight, Kavan's politically radical stance was fired in the furnace of London during the later years of the war.

### **Mill Hill and Bill Williams**

On her return to England late in 1942 after over three years travelling on five continents, Kavan was forced to abandon her plan to journey on to join her mother in South Africa and obliged to settle in London and find war work. After freelancing for the BBC and a failed attempt at finding a permanent role there, she took a job working as a librarian for the Red Cross; sorting, cataloguing and mending books in hospitals. It was through this work that she came to spend four months working with Dr Maxwell Jones at the Mill Hill Emergency Hospital, one of the two neurosis centres into which the Maudsley split during the Second World War. Kavan's letters reveal that her application for the post of librarian at a 'mental hospital' resulted in her being taken on there in a different capacity:

I've now got a job which is extremely interesting and worth while, working with a psychiatrist in a big war hospital for neurotic cases. It would take too long to explain how I got into this (it was mainly through "Asylum Piece").<sup>1</sup>

This vague account suggests that Kavan's writing was influential in her appointment to the job and anecdotal evidence suggests that a fair number of the conscripted women working at the hospital came from creative backgrounds. The 100-bed unit at Mill Hill treated soldiers suffering from effort syndrome. First diagnosed during the American Civil War and originally identified as a cardiac disorder affecting soldiers, this condition has been known variously as cardiac neurosis, neuro-circulatory asthenia, Da Costa's syndrome and more colloquially as 'soldiers' heart'. Symptoms included fatigue, shortness of breath on exertion and pains in the left side of the chest, but these physiological indications were without physical cause and 'effort syndrome' had been recently identified as a psychosomatic disorder, a type of war neurosis. In a June 1941 article in *The Lancet* Maxwell Jones and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Ian Hamilton Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington (Hereafter Hamilton Papers). Kavan to Hamilton, 23 June 1943.

Aubrey Lewis gave an account their work with patients suffering from effort syndrome at Mill Hill. Their research led them to infer that the condition was precipitated by a combination of 'internal' and 'external' causes, and characterized by a combination of physiological symptoms and subjective, emotional reactions. They observed that in addition to this neurotic disorder, many patients also exhibited symptoms of anxiety, depression and hysteria. Many patients initially, and often tenaciously, interpreted their symptoms as weakness or disease of the heart and the treatment at Mill Hill focussed in part in increasing patient's understanding of their own condition.<sup>2</sup>

It was at Mill Hill that the young and charismatic Maxwell Jones first began to develop the method of community therapy that he would go on to pioneer throughout his long career. In his reflections on Mill Hill, Jones describes the active role played by conscripted women at the centre:

At this time we were getting an excellent type of girl to do temporary war-time nursing. These were often educated mature women from the professions who chose to do nursing as their war work. [...] Clearly such people expected and deserved an active role in the treatment programme.<sup>3</sup>

Jones describes a move away from hierarchical roles and more traditional psychiatric nursing at Mill Hill, and a trend towards 'the tutorial system and integration of the work of the doctors and nurses'.<sup>4</sup> This forward-thinking inclusiveness enabled Kavan to become directly involved in the work of the centre and encouraged her to begin studying for the Diploma in Psychological Medicine. In her short time there, her job at Mill Hill allowed Kavan to swap in the role of psychiatric inpatient for that of psychiatric worker. She threw herself into the work with enormous personal interest and it clearly had therapeutic benefits for her as much as for the men she worked with, she wrote to Hamilton – 'it's about saved my life' and described her role to him:

My main job is interviewing the patients one at a time and putting them through a sort of questionnaire which is designed to bring out a general impression of personality and to trace the development of effort syndrome.

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<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Jones and Aubrey Lewis, 'Effort Syndrome' *The Lancet*, no. June 28 (1941).

<sup>3</sup> Maxwell Jones, *Social Psychiatry: A Study of Therapeutic Communities* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1952), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, *Social Psychiatry*, 2.

I spend about 1½-2 hours on each man and its [sic] really like a sort of condensed miniature analysis each time – quite extraordinarily interesting, and exhausting too.<sup>5</sup>

Wartime paper shortages have bequeathed an archival trace of Kavan's time at Mill Hill in the form of a letter written on the reverse of a page of this questionnaire in the Wellington archive. These letters reveal that Kavan felt an uncharacteristic sympathy for the patients she spent time with:

One of the boys was telling me the other day about a traumatic experience he had when a very great pal of his was badly wounded and in the course of his description he said; "I could only smooth the hair back out of his eyes and say, 'Poor Jimmie'; that's about all one can do for anybody else in this world." I found that very moving.<sup>6</sup>

This rare feeling translates later into Kavan's portraits of war-shocked soldier patients in the *I Am Lazarus* stories. Her time studying for the DPM also led her to assess her own psychological difficulties in terms of the psychiatric theory she was engaging with. At around this time, she also had some experience of psychoanalytic therapy, claiming to have 'got out of that very sticky patch of depression (with the help of Kafka's friend at the Tavistock Clinic)'.<sup>7</sup> The relatively short time she had been in the country indicates that this treatment was short-term therapy rather than a full analysis. Kavan's nickname 'Kafka's friend' appears to be a reference to nationality or character rather than to an actual connection with the author and suggests that the analyst she saw, in the drastically reduced wartime operation of the Tavistock Clinic, was the Czech Dr Erwin Popper.<sup>8</sup>

Cyril Connolly's offer of a secretarial job at *Horizon*, which would allow her more time for writing, prompted Kavan to leave Mill Hill after only four months, but her association with Maxwell Jones continued when they jointly contributed to 'The Case of Bill Williams', a three-part article appearing in *Horizon* February 1944. In the first section of this feature, Kavan describes the character of Private Bill Williams, a fictional patient in a military psychiatric hospital. Her imaginary biography is followed by responses from both Maxwell Jones and the psychoanalyst

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<sup>5</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 23 June 1943.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 1 August 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 12 October 1943.

<sup>8</sup> H.V. Dicks, *Fifty Years of the Tavistock Clinic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).



Edward Glover. Kavan had been working at *Horizon* for around five months and Connolly's editorial comment describes her as 'an expert on psychiatric methods, and author of 'Asylum Piece' indicating, along with the participation of such eminent respondents, that her fictional representation of psychiatric treatment held currency.<sup>9</sup>

Kavan uses her account of the fictional Williams to mount an attack on the normative standards of both the psychiatric profession and modern society as a whole:

Private Williams is a neurotic case. Society doesn't approve of Private Williams. The hospital staff takes a very poor view of him. Bill Williams is unpopular with the nurses, and the doctors are anxious to get him out of their wards. They say he has a bad influence on the other patients. They have no time for him because, in spite of pep talks and electrical treatment and benzidrene tablets, he persists in being resentful and unfriendly, apathetic and slovenly, unco-operative and bad-tempered, rebellious and disintegrated.<sup>10</sup>

Lewis and Jones do not record the use of the psychiatric treatments Kavan refers to here in their article on Mill Hill, though they were common enough in the treatment of war neurosis at the time. However, the sonorous resonance between Mill Hill and Bill Will(iams) adds to the suggestion that her portrait of this fictional soldier was influenced by her time there.

The difficult conditions Kavan attributes to Bill Williams' war neurosis apply as much to the inhabitants of Blitz-torn London as to the fighting soldier:

Well, too little sleep, too much tension, too much danger, too much noise, are apt to disintegrate some individuals after a time.<sup>11</sup>

Williams's mental state and hospitalization have been precipitated not by the trauma of combat but by the same strains experienced by passive victims of war, and though the World War is the conspicuous backdrop of the piece, in Kavan's schema Bill Williams is a soldier in another conflict entirely:

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<sup>9</sup> Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon* IX, no. 50 (1944, February), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Kavan, 'Bill Williams', 96-7.

<sup>11</sup> 'Bill Williams', 97.

Inevitably, right from the start, the social machine is the enemy of the individual Bill Williams. [...] Every door closing, every form filled in, every official, every broadcast, every regulation, every propaganda slogan, is a munition in the war; Society versus Bill Williams.<sup>12</sup>

The conflict of individual and society is the real focus of Kavan's narrative, and 'The Case of Bill Williams' is a war cry for the individual. Williams is described as 'One of the heroes of our time [...] refusing to surrender himself to the machine', he 'fights on in neurotic jungles and at nightmare barricades for his own self; the solitary human man against the millions of well-adjusted ratchets and cogs and pistons and belts and wheels.'<sup>13</sup> Kavan draws her metaphors for Williams' struggle from the language of modern warfare, and this use of vocabulary seems a strange choice for a writer with such stridently pacifist views. She reads in the twentieth century's increased mechanisation of warfare a reflection of the apparatus of social control, and the Second World War is only a device in the wider conflict of individual and society. Though wartime exacerbates the crisis of individualism that preoccupies Kavan, she considers these issues hardly less problematic in 'the joyous, comical fight for survival called peace'.<sup>14</sup> Again, the troubling paradox of her pacifist, anti-violence convictions sit uncomfortably with the concept of life itself as conflict. Yet this principle runs deep for Kavan, recurring in her letters and emerging in her fiction of the time:

Society has designed the universe of the machine [...] The units of Society are the parts of the machine, patented, docile; the well-adjusted. Bill Williams struggles for the universe of man, against the universe of the machine. In such a struggle [...] the falling heart is aware of ultimate desolation; the small hyacinth that blooms in the heart withers, loses its scent, turns black, is killed. At the same time Christ is killed, Shakespeare is killed, Columbus perishes. Love also does not survive long.<sup>15</sup>

Kavan's three casualties in the battle between the organic universe of man and the mechanical universe of society suggest that the social machine destroys faith, art and exploration. The image of the hyacinth in the heart recurs throughout Kavan's 1940s' writing, forming part of her private language of this time. This organic,

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<sup>12</sup> 'Bill Williams', 97.

<sup>13</sup> 'Bill Williams', 98.

<sup>14</sup> 'Bill Williams', 98.

<sup>15</sup> 'Bill Williams', 97.

idiosyncratic feature is also fundamentally creative; 'the unique individual element, the unharnessed creative element, the flower which is apt to burst into flame and turn life into a blazing poem'.<sup>16</sup> It is the component that makes literature of life.

It is no coincidence, however, that Bill Williams is a neurotic case. Kavan proposes an intimate relationship between this 'individualism' and behaviours classified as symptoms of mental illness. Her suggestion that his 'neurosis' is the result of his resistance to social norms implies an element of volition to his condition and makes madness a political choice, albeit a difficult one. If he chooses to, Bill Williams could decide to 'co-operate and discard his neurosis and be secure and passive and numbered and nullified'.<sup>17</sup> Highlighting the punitive power of psychiatric treatment and directly anticipating the anti-psychiatry movement, Kavan uses the figure of Williams to suggest that the category of mental illness is a social construct, and that its diagnosis and treatment are a form of social control. Thus, both madness and its treatment are consequences of modern society:

And after all, this Society that we live in is what suits us: we made it, not God or some exterior force. We voted for factories, gas-masks, tanks, torpedoes, dive bombers, flying fortresses, commandos, parachutes, sirens, famines, concentration camps, Lidices, Hamburgs, Leaders, fan-dancers, machinery, machine slaves, psychiatrists, alcohol, drugs, dehydrated foods, artificial sunlight, double summertime, blackouts, contraceptives, jitterbugs, W.A.A.F.S., W.R.E.N.S., A.T.S., poodle dogs, police dogs, schizophrenia, talking lovebirds, gonorrhoea, pyorrhoea, anti-Semitism, spiritualism, collectivism, and so on and so forth. This is our world; and if those are the things we want in it, it's our business alone [...] no god or anything else is coming along to stop us.<sup>18</sup>

This extraordinary inventory of human invention is dominated by the accoutrements of war, both sinister and ridiculous, but includes other accessories to the cultural trends of modern life; a catalogue of folly, hedonism, vice and evil. We have little to feel proud about in our scientific advancement, yet we must take joint responsibility for our world, including schizophrenia and psychiatrists. Kavan's passionate defence of the mentally distressed is not a simple call for tolerance, an end to the stigma of immorality and degeneracy, it is a championing of the condition itself. With no god to save us, she predicts that the fate of mankind is in

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<sup>16</sup> 'Bill Williams', 98.

<sup>17</sup> 'Bill Williams', 98.

<sup>18</sup> 'Bill Williams', 98-9.

peril unless ‘a tonic epidemic of madness blazes across the world like a comet and blasts all the machinery into smithereens’.<sup>19</sup> This is Kavan’s solution to the crisis of humanity – universal neurosis; madness is not a disease but resistance, non-cooperation, salvation, cure.

In the second part of the Bill Williams feature, Maxwell Jones responds to Kavan’s fictional biography. It is difficult to determine what subtext there might be in the dialogue between Kavan and Jones, which might be interpreted as hostile. Six months before the publication of this article Kavan had been working under Jones at Mill Hill, and described him in her private letters as ‘a good guy, very enthusiastic and genuine’. Considering the vitriolic nature of her attack on the psychiatric profession and her description of the psychiatrist as ‘the authorized voice of the social order, the man who knows all the answers’, his agreement to respond to the piece was remarkably game.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that the article reveals a breakdown in Kavan’s personal or professional relationship with Jones but more likely, like her other journalism, she takes a deliberately provocative tone. Her correspondence reveals that the piece was conceived only a month or so after Kavan left Mill Hill, and that Jones was also adopting a persona in his narrative:

Maxwell Jones is replying to my “Bill Williams” outburst with the orthodox state-employed psychiatrist’s attitude. The result should be provocative if nothing else.<sup>21</sup>

It is useful to keep in mind that both Kavan and Jones are drawing on a shared knowledge of his own practices at Mill Hill and some of his more reactionary comments might also be explained if he recognized a real patient, or type of patient, in the character of Bill Williams. Though he was a progressive and experimental psychiatric practitioner, and would go on to pioneer methods of community therapy which privileged the patient and alienated traditionalists in the medical community, Maxwell Jones’ response to Bill Williams’ story appears surprisingly conservative and reactionary, serving to highlight how radical Kavan’s own ideas were at this time.

Interrogating Kavan’s undefined use of the terms ‘neurotic’ and ‘individualist’, Jones justifiably observes that that it is unclear whether or not she

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Bill Williams’, 98.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Bill Williams’, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 14 November 1943.

uses the two terms synonymously. He is also astute in recognizing that, despite Kavan's call for individuality, she has not attempted to represent an individual in the character of Bill Williams, he is merely a figurehead. Observing that 'the personality, background, temperament, training, intelligence, in fact everything that goes to make up Bill Williams as an individual has been omitted', Jones opens his response by stating that there 'is no possibility of knowing what the facts are' and 'under such circumstances I cannot reply as a psychiatrist'.<sup>22</sup> Yet regardless, or perhaps because, of his initial disclaimer, he is drawn into Kavan's fictional world and his engagement with Bill Williams leads him down strange avenues of reasoning. In an attempt to undermine Kavan's expertise, he goes so far as to suggest that she may have misunderstood or misdiagnosed her own fictional creation:

Are you competent to evaluate his particular brand of individualism? It is very easy to be completely misled.<sup>23</sup>

Jones may have had grounds for questioning Kavan's psychiatric qualifications, but this is a peculiar, not to say fictional, patient. Mounting a strong defence of the psychiatric profession and its value, particularly in wartime, Jones appears to agree with some of Kavan's primary tenets with regards to the socially determined category of mental illness and the regulatory nature of psychiatric treatment. Granting, without apparent self-consciousness, that any conflict with organized society might lead an individual to the psychiatrist's couch, he goes on to speculate about the possible motives of an individual such as Bill Williams:

Nor can you depend on the individual himself having any insight into his deficiencies, for instance, the homosexual seldom regards himself as abnormal, and usually feels no shame. If he develops a neurosis it is probably not the result of self-condemnation, but because society is rightly intolerant of behaviour which would jeopardize the normal biological interrelationship of man and woman.<sup>24</sup>

Jones' normative views may not be unusual for their time, but he now appears to have lost all sight of Bill Williams' fictional status, calling into question the

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<sup>22</sup> Kavan, 'Bill Williams', 99.

<sup>23</sup> 'Bill Williams', 101.

<sup>24</sup> 'Bill Williams', 101.

character's sexuality alongside Kavan's authority to speak on psychiatric matters. The long-pervasive classification of homosexuality as mental illness seems to hold no grounds with Jones, he addresses sexuality not as a psychological ailment but as a moral choice. Reinforcing Kavan's negative portrait of the profession's normalizing agenda, he frames his defence of the psychiatrist's role as a utilitarian argument in opposition to Kavan's call for individualism.

Why, when you make this plea for Bill Williams' individuality, did you make him a Private? A moment's thought must make it clear that a war calls for an army which, for the rank and file, must be made up of units [...] The disciplining of the private soldier, and the development of initiative and leadership in the officer, go hand in hand.<sup>25</sup>

For Jones, or for his narrative persona, Private Bill Williams cannot be an individual in war time; war calls for a reinforcement of military hierarchy, at this time still influenced by social class. He refers obliquely to the increasing democratization of the officer class, citing the activity of War Office Selection Boards, but still he identifies Bill Williams as 'socially insignificant'.<sup>26</sup> Agreeing that individualism is acceptable, even vital, in certain ranks of the army, by inference he approves of it only in certain social classes. Yet Jones identifies, perhaps astutely, an unstated agenda in Kavan's argument. Social and economic status become increasingly significant in her writing throughout the 1940s, but it is difficult to pinpoint her position on class in her newfound political perspective. Williams' rank is meaningful, but Kavan fails to follow through with any discussion of its consequences.

In his concluding remarks, Jones recollects Bill Williams's fictional status, but even in doing this he draws the character further into reality by suggesting that he is based on the real life Kavan:

Finally, I cannot avoid the suggestion that these remarks apply more directly to the creator of Bill Williams than to Bill Williams himself. Judged on the brief presentation of his character, he would be socially insignificant, and certainly far less articulate than Miss Kavan who has a remarkable knack of stimulating thought, even when her own attitude towards the subject in hand seems unthought-out and over-emotional.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 'Bill Williams', 102.

<sup>26</sup> 'Bill Williams', 103.

<sup>27</sup> 'Bill Williams', 103.

This identification of a correspondence between Kavan and the character of Bill Williams is presumptuous but also perceptive. Her talent for slipping comfortably between the realms of fact and fiction, and for persuading others to collude with her, is exemplified in 'The Case of Bill Williams' as it is in her adoption of the name of her own fictional persona. 'Bill Williams' and 'Anna Kavan' play a role in destabilizing the distinction between author and character; Kavan not only writes elements of her life into her fictional characters, but is equally at ease relocating her protagonists in real life settings. Yet to confuse Williams with Kavan is to fall into the all too easy trap of failing to recognize the significance of her use of fiction as a medium.

In the third and final part of the article, Edward Glover adds his contribution to the previous remarks. Glover, at this time a considerable force in the British Psycho-Analytic Society, most certainly spoke with as much, if not more, authority on military psychiatric matters as Jones. The appointment of J R Rees, Director of the Tavistock Clinic, as consultant psychiatrist responsible for the expansion of the army psychiatric service at the outbreak of the Second World War resulted in the often marginalized psychoanalytic community having an extraordinary level of involvement in military psychiatry during the conflict. Maxwell Jones and the rest of the Maudsley staff were part of the Emergency Medical Services.<sup>28</sup> Glover manages to avoid the trap of attempting to analyse Bill Williams; he evaluates the debate so far and responds strongly to Maxwell Jones's comments as well as to Kavan's. Critiquing both contributors, he calls attention to gaps in Kavan's argument and identifies Jones's primary mistake of engaging with Kavan on her own terms. Declaring Kavan the winner of the argument, Glover finds that her description of the inherent conflict between individual and society fits well with psychoanalytic premises, agreeing with her diagnosis of society's pathology and going so far as to elevate the status of the madman in treating this:

It is even possible, on the principle of 'set a thief to catch a thief' that the psychopath is better qualified than the normal person to detect and repudiate the psychopathic aspects of Society.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Edgar Jones, 'War and the Practice of Psychotherapy: The UK Experience 1939-1960' *Medical History* 48 (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Edward Glover, 'Bill Williams', 106.

The most curious moment in Glover's contribution is his response to Jones' discussion of anti-social behaviour. In a footnote concerning Kavan's 'hyacinth' and the figures she associates with it – Christ, Columbus, Shakespeare – he retorts to Jones' claim that society has treasured such individuals. Citing Mark 3:21 he asserts that Christ's 'own relatives regarded Him as mad', goes on to point out that Shakespeare 'wrote some very fishy sonnets' and identifies Columbus as a 'queer card'.<sup>30</sup> This aside contends not only that great individuals are rejected and pathologized by the society of their time, but that homosexuality has a valuable contribution to make to it. Glover's conclusion follows Kavan's lead in rubbishing the British psychiatric system, and military psychiatry in particular. His message is vitriolic, predicting disaster for a State Mental Service after the war and his prescription for these ills is not a tonic of neurosis for mankind, but a course of forced psychiatric treatment for all psychiatrists.

The response from *Horizon* readers to the Bill Williams article reveals that they too were comfortable in colluding with Kavan's destabilization of fact and fiction. Letters in the correspondence pages of the next edition follow Maxwell Jones in commenting on the case as though Williams were a living person and he provokes their sympathy. In a gesture of recognition and solidarity, one reader goes so far as to bring the character to life again by claiming that 'I am Bill Williams'. Two months later, in the May 1944 edition of *Horizon*, Bill Williams made a further appearance as a cameo role in Kavan's short story 'Face of My People', later included in the *I Am Lazarus* collection. Set in a military psychiatric hospital, this story's protagonist is a soldier haunted by the thousands of dead faces he has buried in the course of duty. His fellow patient Williams, who attempts to defend him against the ruthlessly efficient hospital staff, is described by them as 'a nuisance', 'a bad type' 'obstructive and stubborn', a 'trouble-maker' and a 'rebellious undesirable'.<sup>31</sup> Williams is instantly recognizable here as Bill, relocated in this purely fictional setting. Leaping to his comrade's defence, we hear Bill Williams' voice for the first time, accusing the staff of 'gestapo methods' and railing against the hospital's practices:<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Glover, 'Bill Williams', 106n.

<sup>31</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Face of My People' in *I Am Lazarus*, 52-3.

<sup>32</sup> Kavan, 'Bill Williams', 60.



‘Bloody racket to get sick men back into the army. Cannon fodder, that’s all they care about. Taking advantage of poor mugs like us. Pep talks. Pills to pep you up. Dope to make you talk. Putting chaps to sleep and giving them electric shocks’<sup>33</sup>

Williams’ list corresponds to those Kavan describes as his own treatment in her earlier article – ‘pep talks and electrical treatment and benzidrene tablets’. The story’s protagonist Kling is dimly aware of Williams’ gesture of solidarity, the attempt at real human contact almost penetrates his despair, but the force of the story’s humanist, anti-psychiatric message lies not in Williams’ confrontation but in Kavan’s sensitive portrayal of Kling’s distress and the failure of the hospital staff to help him.

### **Psychopolitics and Pacifism**

Kavan’s insistence on the social construction of mental illness and her call for the recognition of person rather than patient in both the ‘Bill Williams’ article and the *Lazarus* stories was undoubtedly radical for its time. Her stance anticipates the political aspirations of antipsychiatry and Kavan’s contact with the progenitors of this movement, particularly her exposure to existential psychology at Ludwig Binswanger’s clinic and possibly earlier via Dr Bluth, might go some way towards explaining this correspondence. The work of both Maxwell Jones, the founder of the therapeutic community, and Ludwig Binswanger, proponent of existential analysis, would have enormous influence on R D Laing. However, the specific timbre of antipsychiatry in Kavan’s writing was already highly developed in the early 1940s, years before she was treated at the Bellevue and even before she became Dr Bluth’s patient. Community therapy would become an integral part of Laing’s method, and Maxwell Jones would later accept an invitation to dinner at Laing’s therapeutic community, Kingsley Hall.<sup>34</sup> Yet Jones’ work in this area was only in nascent stages when Kavan spent her short time at Mill Hill. The agenda Kavan sets out in ‘The Case of Bill Williams’, along with her Kafkaesque dystopias, locates ‘madness’ in communal society rather than the individual. Edward Glover’s acceptance of Kavan’s basic premises in his contribution to ‘Bill Williams’ fits with

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Face of My People’, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Mullan, *Mad to Be Normal*, 184.

the Laingian character of her writing, the roots of both existential psychology and anti-psychiatry lie in Freudian psychoanalysis.

Laing's own creative writing is testimony to his interest in literature, but his theoretical writing is also stylistically literary in form and fundamentally concerned with artistic endeavour. Unencumbered by Freud's conflicted desire for a scientific language for psychoanalysis, Laing's theories elevate the imaginative experience and make literary trope an equally, perhaps more, valid vocabulary for the psychological treatise. For Laing as much as Kavan the creative process, and literature in particular, plays a prominent role in the conception of madness and its survival; or as they would both conceive it, in the resistance to the madness of normality. Laing's focus on the importance of the imaginative experience follows very much from Binswanger's ideas in *Dream and Existence*.

Kavan's writing embraces and predicts the human turn in psychiatry, and her use of first and third-person narrative voices can be connected to this. Her asylum stories, in which the madman is confined to his place, use a third-person narrator and realism as their style. The first-person stories that sit alongside these portray a subjective vision of society that is incomprehensible, restrictive and terrifying. 'Glorious Boys' combines characteristics of Kavan's first and third voices, a hybrid of a story in the *Lazarus* collection. Though narrated in the third person and in the first section of the collection, its protagonist strongly recalls the familiar Kavan first-person narrator and her internal dialogues with herself or with the reader nudge it closer to the first person. Also unusual for the third-person stories in this collection, it is not set in the asylum but features a protagonist who is at large in the world. This strongly pacifist protagonist, driven by anger at her old friend's participation in the war as a pilot, accuses him of becoming a murderer. In remorse she tells him not to 'take any notice of me; I suppose I'm a bit crazy', thinking how she has always found it easiest 'to let people think she was a little mad'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, this character allows her unpopular political views, her pacifism, to be explained away as pathological. Mental illness is here nothing but a reason for dismissing opinions unpalatable to society, a way of interpreting behaviour rather than a measure of psychological distress. The protagonist broadens this reassessment of madness:

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<sup>35</sup> Kavan, 'Glorious Boys', 48.

Of course it's lunacy: we've all of us gone insane, she said to herself, thinking of the planes streaming out, crossing the incoming enemy stream up there in the freezing sky [...] The demented human race destroying itself with no god or external sanity intervening. Well, let them get on with it. Let it be over soon.<sup>36</sup>

This subversion of the categories of madness and normality shifts the pathology from the individual patient to society itself. The horrors of war are the ultimate proof of mankind's insanity, a theme echoed directly by Laing in *The Politics of Experience*:

The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man.

Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal.

Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow men in the last fifty years.<sup>37</sup>

Laing's diagnosis of the sickness of society echoes Kavan's; just as Kavan believes the human race to have become demented, Laing too identifies the 'normal' well-adjusted person as being out of their mind. Neither writer proposes a simple denial of 'the myth of mental illness'; they embrace and subvert the category in more than a colloquial sense. Kavan's writing anticipates Laing's call for a redefinition of madness and a re-evaluation of socially-unacceptable patterns of behaviour. Her pacifism is directly connected to her politics of the mentally ill; war is a symptom of the madness of society.

Gavin Miller has illustrated the strong influence of existential theology on Laing's thinking, particularly the writing of Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on a spiritualized, interpretative and subjective Christianity, Laing also invokes the ancient notion of divine madness in his writing. His concept of metanoia conceives psychosis as spiritual experience, similar to moments of religious epiphany. Just as Kavan prescribes a tonic of neurosis for mankind, Laing advocates psychosis as a means to spiritual enlightenment. His mysticism developed further in the late 1960s and 1970s, incorporating a turn to Eastern philosophies and religion.

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<sup>36</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 48.

<sup>37</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (London: Penguin, 1967), 24.

<sup>38</sup> See Gavin Miller, 'R.D. Laing and Theology: The Influence of Christian Existentialism on the Divided Self' *History of the Human Sciences* 22, no. 2 (2009).

An irreverent evocation of Christianity plays a part in Kavan's representation of the psychiatrist in the *Lazarus* collection's early stories, a number of whom are clerical figures. Dr Pope in 'Face of My People' fails to live up to his name – 'He did not look in the least like a holy father, or, for that matter, like any sort of a father' – but the head doctor in 'Palace of Sleep' looks 'more like a country parson than a psychiatrist'. These ecclesiastic allusions reveal a natural identification of traditional patriarchal figures of authority in medicine and the church. Thomas Bow's doctor in 'I Am Lazarus' invites accusations of messianic fantasy in his metaphor of resurrecting the dead. Death and resurrection are a major theme in Kavan's writing at this time. In 'Bill Williams' one consequence of the insidious society of the machine is that 'Christ is killed' ultimately and without resurrection, and his death will not atone for the sins of mankind.<sup>39</sup> Though Anna Kavan's distinctive style was set in *Asylum Piece* there are strange features of imagery and lexicon peculiar to the *I Am Lazarus* stories, a peculiar use of archaic, biblical language especially in the stories' titles.

The biblical references in the *Lazarus* stories reveal a preoccupation with eschatological concerns, perhaps prompted by Kavan's experience of the bombardment of air raids on London – an assault from the heavens heralding the approach of apocalypse. The reader understands the biblical allusion of the title story 'I Am Lazarus' but the words are Eliot's. This is no coincidence, for though there are biblical references throughout the collection, all are taken from interpretation of religious texts, none of it is actual scripture. The narrator's description of the war in 'Glorious Boys' reveals that though apocalypse approaches it will not be followed by a messianic age:

The demented human race destroying itself with no god or external sanity intervening. Well, let them get on with it. Let it be over soon.<sup>40</sup>

The Godlessness of the world painted by Kavan in both these stories and the 'Bill Williams' article sits uneasily with the biblical language in which she renders it. This undermining of religious, particularly Christian, authority is repeated in the stories and delivered not in the idiom of atheist rationalism but through the invocation and

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<sup>39</sup> Kavan, 'Bill Williams', 97.

<sup>40</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 48.

appropriation of religious sources. God and the Messiah are not denied, they exist but they will not, or cannot, intervene:

How did all this atrocious cruelty ever get into the world, that's what I often wonder. No one created it, no one invoked it: and no saint, no genius, no dictator, no millionaire, no, not God's son himself, is able to drive it out.<sup>41</sup>

Good and evil are not controlled by divine forces, the collective madness of mankind itself is to blame. In 'The Heavenly Adversary' the extended passage which opens this story masquerades as a quotation from the writings of 'Lie Bu We' written 'about 300B.C.' yet no such Eastern sage existed. In Kavan's ecumenical dialect, the passage uses the syntax and lexicon of biblical language to invoke Old Testament style prophesy of Armageddon. 'Our City' takes its title and epigraph from a genuine source, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678): 'I did believe, and do still, that the end of our city will be in Fire and Brimstone from above'.<sup>42</sup> In Bunyan's narrative the 'Fire and Brimstone from above' are the wrath of God; in Kavan's tale they are the devastation of German bombers.

### **Somatopsychic Treatments**

Although the *I Am Lazarus* stories were published as a collection in 1945, several had previously appeared in journals and magazines and it is likely that they were all written during 1943-4, wartime paper shortages delaying Cape's publication schedule. Kavan described an advance copy of the collection as looking 'rather a mean and insignificant little starved war baby of a book'.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that Kavan's experiences working at Mill Hill were a strong influence on her writing; five of the fifteen *Lazarus* stories are set in psychiatric hospitals, and of these three take a soldier suffering from war neurosis as their protagonist. However, Kavan chose not to portray the more progressive practices of the early incarnation of the therapeutic community at Mill Hill in these stories and her depiction of psychiatric treatment gives an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the relationship between doctor and patient. Like *Asylum Piece*, these tales set in the psychiatric institution are all in the third person and maintain a more realistic style than the first-person narratives. In

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<sup>41</sup> Anna Kavan, 'The Gannets' in *I Am Lazarus*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> 'Our City' in *I Am Lazarus*; John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Tulsa, Anna Kavan to Rhys Davies, undated [1945], Series II/ Box 2.

*Asylum Piece* physical confinement was the therapeutic or punitive remit of the asylum, but in these stories we witness the impact of more invasive treatment. Kavan begins to introduce more specific references to psychiatric diagnoses and method and paints the psychiatric staff in greater detail; focus shifts away from the institution itself and broadens onto the attitudes and opinions of medics and society as a whole. The circumstantial nature of these patients' psychological difficulties is also brought to the foreground in the emphasis on their class, economic situation and life history.

'I Am Lazarus' and 'Palace of Sleep' both use the character of a visiting doctor to frame an introduction to the asylum; both also play on the uncanny aspects of madness, sleepwalking and death. In these first stories of the collection the action takes place in a world seemingly untouched by war, though thematic preoccupations anticipate the war-related narratives. First published in *Horizon* in May 1943, 'I Am Lazarus' might have been one of the sections of the eight-part 'Asylum Piece' sequence and letters to Ian Hamilton show that the story was written before Kavan returned to London.<sup>44</sup> Elements of the 'Dessones clinic' are familiarly like the foreign clinic of these earlier stories; the handicraft studios for occupational therapy, the jolly gym mistress and even the malicious Italian patient of 'Asylum Piece IV' all make an appearance. The English doctor visiting the clinic is the family GP of the protagonist-patient, Thomas Bow, and he remembers Thomas as 'hopelessly insane' and 'an imbecile' before his arrival here. Mr Bow has a diagnosis of 'dementia praecox' and his fear of the doctor who 'for many months had put him into a hideous sleep with his poisoned needle' indicates that the treatment he has been receiving at the clinic is prolonged narcosis.<sup>45</sup> In the eyes of his old GP, Mr Bow has undergone a miraculous recovery, but he finds the effect distasteful and unnatural and this is the first clue that despite his cure, something is not quite right with Thomas Bow.

Shifting freely and without ceremony from the English doctor's perspective into Mr Bow's, the third-person narrative allows the reader to see into the mind of this resurrected Lazarus. Immediately we understand that his connection with the physical world is more intimate than his relationships with other people:

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<sup>44</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 24 April 1943.

<sup>45</sup> Anna Kavan, 'I Am Lazarus' in *I Am Lazarus*, 15.

All around the table were different coloured shapes whose mouths opened and closed and emitted sounds that meant nothing to him. He did not mind either the shapes or the sounds. They were part of the familiar atmosphere.<sup>46</sup>

Mr Bow sees people as shapes and hears words as sounds; to him the human world is non-figurative, abstract and drained of meaning. Conversely, his response to physical objects is highly sensitive; he feels a deep suspicion toward a row of coats hanging on the wall and keeps half an eye on them 'to make sure they did not get up to anything'.<sup>47</sup> The 'yellow eyes' of moon daisies squint craftily at him and have a 'base and knowing expression'.<sup>48</sup> He longs to 'share his worry with the cloud' and though this desire is part of his peculiarity, his inability to communicate with other people, he is offered little else in the way of emotional contact here for it 'was not the fashion at the clinic to listen to what patients said. There was not enough time'.<sup>49</sup> Instead the natural world is his friend as well as foe:

The grasses whispered together and turned their heads in the breeze. Mr. Bow touched the heads of the grasses with his soft fingers. The grasses responded feline; like thin sensitive cats they arched themselves to receive the caress of his finger-tips.<sup>50</sup>

Seeming to slip from Thomas Bow's internal world into that of the grass, just as it slipped into his own from the mind of the doctor, the narrative reveals something peculiar in the softness of Mr Bow's fingers. Though the narrator's scope appears to extend to the grasses' awareness of the touch and texture of his fingers, it is Mr Bow himself who feels the sensations and reactions of the inanimate world to him. Later, he thinks of the leather belt he has been working and feels 'the belt lonely for him as he was for it'.<sup>51</sup> Thomas Bow enters and inhabits the objects around him, experiencing their sensations and emotions.

As with many of the stories in this collection, the title of 'I Am Lazarus' is ambiguous. Taken from Eliot's *Prufrock*, (1915) it fits with a pattern of titles and epigraphs taken from interpretations of biblical sources and is one example of the

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<sup>46</sup> Kavan, 'I Am Lazarus', 10.

<sup>47</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 12.

<sup>48</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 12.

<sup>49</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 15, 10.

<sup>50</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 11.

<sup>51</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 15.

strong influence of Eliot on Kavan's writing of this time. The metaphorical death and resurrection of Thomas Bow is presented with some irony and the allusion's double edge is illuminated through the dialogue of the medical staff. Two psychiatric nurses remark on the sense of unease that Mr Bow invokes and the air of uncanniness that accompanies him:

'He gives me the creeps,' said the other girl. 'Like an automaton walking about. Like a robot. When you think what he was like when he first came it's uncanny. And he always looks so worried. I believe he'd have been happier left as he was.'<sup>52</sup>

To the nurse, in his cured state Thomas Bow has not been restored to life, he is the walking dead. Conversely, the doctor who administered the treatment is certain that he has performed a miraculous resurrection:

'He doesn't know how lucky he is,' said the dark doctor. 'We've pulled him back literally from a living death. That's the sort of thing that encourages one in this work.'

Mr Bow walked carefully in the sunshine. He did not know how lucky he was and perhaps that was rather lucky as well.<sup>53</sup>

The care that Mr Bow takes in his actions is both unnerving and heartbreaking; walking in sunshine should be carefree. His terrible isolation and the agonizing concentration with which he executes his every move prevent him from ever really feeling alive. The tone of the story's ending suggests that this is a morality tale, but the lesson is difficult to grasp; should we see that Thomas Bow would have been better off 'dead', considered 'hopelessly insane' and imbecilic? Kavan's critique of normative standards is manifest here. Freed from the obligation to conform and given the space to commune with the inanimate world of grass and belt, there might be a place for this Lazarus to feel alive, but not in the asylum which aims to rehabilitate him into society, and not in the society outside of it. Thomas Bow must conform to the social machine and become 'an automaton' and 'a robot'; he is spared only the obligation to feel grateful for his situation.

'Palace of Sleep' shares some thematic correspondences with 'I Am Lazarus' but here we see nothing through the eyes of the asylum patient, for the inmates in

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<sup>52</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 13.

<sup>53</sup> 'I Am Lazarus', 16.



this British psychiatric hospital are denied waking consciousness. The narrator reveals to us only the mind of the visiting doctor and his response to the clinic's method of paraldehyde-induced prolonged narcosis. The joviality of the senior doctor who conducts the tour only adds to the disturbing nature of the treatment and the story's title is taken from his distasteful attempt at humour: 'Welcome to the palace of sleep'.<sup>54</sup> As the uncanniness of madness meets the uncanniness of sleepwalking, this gothic tale again plays with the unnerving associations between life without free will and death itself. The visitor's examination of a young female patient paints her as corpse-like; lying under a white bedspread 'like the covering of a bier', her face is 'absolutely lifeless' as though she has been given 'prematurely to death'.<sup>55</sup> Yet this patient's deathly aspect is less disturbing than the glimpse of a living soul that lies beneath it:

suddenly a tremor disturbed the immobility of the anonymous face, the eyelids quivered under their load of shadows. The man watched, fascinated, almost appalled, as, slowly, with intolerable, incalculable effort, the drugged eyes opened and stared straight into his. Was it imagination, or did he perceive in their clouded greyness a look of terror, of wild suspicion, of frantic, abysmal appeal?<sup>56</sup>

The young doctor feels 'uneasy and almost ashamed' at the sight of this sleeping beauty; she is a prisoner of her own unconscious body and he will not rescue her.<sup>57</sup> His discomfort echoes the reader's own response to some of the starker first-person stories of both *I Am Lazarus* and *Asylum Piece*, leaving him in the position of unwilling voyeur, feeling queasy, spooked and impotent.

A curious strain of mind/ body dualism present in many of these stories is revealed here. The patient's sleeping body is the mind's prison, subject to the treatment and interference of the psychiatric profession. Psyche and body are not entirely dislocated, but their interdependence and intimate relationship have become somehow abusive. This peculiar enmity appears to have some root in the increasing medicalization of early-twentieth-century psychiatry; as madness is reconceived as mental illness, pharmaceutical and surgical treatments address psychiatric problems as they would physical ailments. In contrast, the simultaneous

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<sup>54</sup> 'Palace of Sleep', 18.

<sup>55</sup> 'Palace of Sleep', 19-20.

<sup>56</sup> 'Palace of Sleep', 20.

<sup>57</sup> 'Palace of Sleep', 20.

increase in talking therapies is also a strong theme in these stories. For Kavan the body is the enemy, or at least it is susceptible to interference, the vulnerable point of access to the citadel of the mind.

### **Psychosomatic and Metaphorical Symptoms**

The remaining third-person stories in the collection are all set in England during the Second World War and this provides more than a historical backdrop for the physical and emotional problems of their protagonists; the war shapes and saturates these narratives. Kavan assimilates the atmosphere and incidents of war into the dystopian world she first introduced in *Asylum Piece*, the world conflict only heightens the sense of inevitable doom and horror that her characters live with. One perceptible change in her vision between *Lazarus* and the earlier collection is a shift in the orientation of time. As might be anticipated the war makes the present moment immediate and all-consuming, but perhaps less expectedly the past also becomes increasingly important in these stories. Kavan's pacifism translates in these fictional contexts to make this a war without the possibility of positive conclusion. There is no right side to the conflict, no hope for victory; the human race is destroying itself physically and ideologically. The end that could not be foreseen at the close of *Asylum Piece* is now on the horizon; apocalypse approaches, there is no future. Perhaps because time has no scope to move forward, there is a contrary move backwards in the minds of these protagonists towards earlier days and earlier selves. Memory becomes manifest, as real or more real than the present moment, and as memories take on a life of their own their protagonists lose control over their access to them. Past recollection becomes invasive and uncontrollable, elusive or confused, and memory repeatedly fails as part of an act of self-preservation. The pathology of these patients lies in the disruption of a Bergsonian notion of time and consciousness for without memory their identity is lost.

'Who Has Desired the Sea', 'The Blackout' and 'Face of My People' all show the direct influence of Kavan's time at Mill Hill, taking as their protagonist a hospitalized soldier suffering from war neurosis. Published individually in the war years, these stories testify to a public interest in the character of the traumatized soldier, but these are not the 'shell-shocked' figures one might expect in war literature. Though undergoing treatment in England, two are not British, and

though soldiers, these men are not all combatants; the boy of 'The Blackout' has yet to see action, Kling's only duty in 'Face of My People' is burying bodies, and only Lennie has served as a sailor in 'Who Has Desired the Sea'. The trauma of battle, 'combat fatigue', has not been the sole cause of the psychological damage we see in these characters; childhood experiences and social circumstance play equal parts in these portraits of distress. War exacerbates old psychological wounds and increases the burden of individual social and familial pressures. Feelings of displacement and homesickness, loss of financial security, the awful responsibility for the lives of others and the sight of so much pain and wasted life are, more than violence and bloodshed, the precipitants of their breakdown. Memories haunt these men, of happier times and emotional suffering as well as their war experiences. In all these stories of neurosis the experiences that precipitate psychological distress and its manifestation are conflated and confused, physical experience becomes a model for the experience of psychological trauma. Kavan's fictional representation of neurosis and mental distress has a particularly literary foundation, for the relationship between the psychological trauma and the events leading to it becomes a metaphorical one.

Perhaps unsurprisingly after Kavan's many months aboard ship and her time living by the ocean in New Zealand, the sea is a backdrop to a number of the *Lazarus* stories. 'Who Has Desired the Sea' extends this significance in the tale of a New Zealand soldier who is a patient in a British military neurosis centre. A visit from his fiancé reveals to us only once that his name is Lennie, and his own sense of identity has become fractured and evasive. The hospital in which he is a patient is close to the sea and the sound of the waves disquiets him; childhood memories of the sea mingle with his traumatic memories of war experience. Lennie's remembrance of suffering is accompanied by feelings of guilt; it was his misidentification of an enemy plane that resulted in the explosion of a tanker, delivering him and his comrades to the 'evil water'. The sound of the sea in the present and thoughts of his childhood by the ocean take Lennie always back to this scene of distress, one sea flows perpetually into another. Because of this, memories of childhood and memories of war always come together, juxtaposing the sea of his youth, the sunlit water 'smooth and solid' and 'blue as sapphires'

against the 'piled-up' 'ugly' grey sea of his war experiences.<sup>58</sup> In his distress Lennie is searching for someone, 'he was looking for a young man with thick brown awkward hair and a small scar on his cheek. For a long time he had been looking for this young man. It was absolutely necessary that he should find him.'<sup>59</sup> Later, his intimate knowledge of the childhood origin of this scar is the first hint that although he does not realize it, the man he is searching for is himself. Lennie has become divided from the self of his past, and has become an automaton, functioning automatically and without feeling. Another memory, of his grandmother's clock, becomes the metaphor, perhaps more than metaphor, for his lived experience.

Kavan allows Lennie's fiancé to cut unknowingly to the heart of the matter in her colloquial use of the language of madness and the narrator picks up her cue, describing both Lennie and the sea in terms of insanity:

'You've always been mad on the sea,' a girl's voice was saying.

Yes, the sea was the one thing he had always been crazy about. [...] He remembered the huge seas marching past the tanker, huge and heavy and whale coloured, marching in manic persistence, the staggering deck, the water bursting endlessly over the catwalk.<sup>60</sup>

The sea becomes 'freezing, strangling, devilish', 'murderous', 'lunging pink-stained into oblivion' at sunset.<sup>61</sup> Lennie oscillates between reliving his memories of horror and sensing a complete disconnection from them, and in both states he is dissociated from the world around him. When his feelings do swell up, they threaten to submerge him:

The sickness had come up in his throat now and his lungs, and he could feel it strangling him and he was drowning again in the four-mile-deep icy horror of sickness or water.<sup>62</sup>

In struggling with his anxiety, Lennie replays his struggle in the water; feelings of trauma and the event that caused it are experientially akin. Heading out in pursuit of himself, Lennie finds himself on the cliff top looking at the sea and witnesses a hallucinatory vision of the sea of his childhood:

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<sup>58</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Who Has Desired the Sea' in *I Am Lazarus* (London: Peter Owen, 1978), 25.

<sup>59</sup> Kavan, 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 22.

<sup>60</sup> 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 28.

<sup>61</sup> 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 28.

<sup>62</sup> 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 30.

there, ahead, bright as day, were all the small islands, Cape Promise, and the bay of Mairangi, wide, still, unbelievably peaceful under the full moon. And then he did know where he was going.<sup>63</sup>

As the story closes Lennie is left at the edge of the cliff and the reader is left on the verge of understanding. Lennie knows in this moment that he will return to his homeland; but is his epiphany the first step towards recovery or has the vision in front of him taken over from reality, leading him to walk over the cliff and into the sea?

The protagonist of 'The Blackout' is a recently conscripted soldier with no name other than 'the boy'. Persistently confining him to a childlike state, his name presages the title Kavan gives to a number of her late protagonists; 'the girl'. The wartime blackout of the story's title is a five-day period of amnesia from which a doctor is attempting to help the boy recover. The story is riddled with tunnels and avenues, both real and metaphorical. As the boy attempts to escape the consequences of the doctor's questions his mind runs 'from side to side, seeking the unknown avenues of defence or escape'.<sup>64</sup> In the landscape of the boy's internal world he scrambles for cover like a trapped animal, as we later discover he physically fled in order to evade a too painful reality.

The interrogation begins by establishing that the blackout began on the last day of leave spent by the boy at home with his auntie and this immediately exposes a mine of childhood memories. As he looks 'back down a long tunnel' he recalls the traumatic experiences of a frightened and unhappy child, the squalor and poverty of his infancy, life in a dirty tenement, his ailing mother and alcoholic and abusive father. His only happy early memories are of his auntie, 'so pretty and young and gay' he 'always thought the word auntie was a word you used as a kind of endearment, in the way sweetie and honey were used'.<sup>65</sup> This auntie later takes him in and later still, when illness and arthritis leave her unable to work, the boy is happy that a good job and steady wage allow him return the care she has given him. Here the consequences of war interfere:

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<sup>63</sup> 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 31.

<sup>64</sup> Anna Kavan, 'The Blackout' in *I Am Lazarus*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Kavan, 'The Blackout', 34.

Then he had been called up and he had hated it all, hated the army, hated leaving home, hated losing his good job, hated the idea of being sent overseas to fight: but most of all hated leaving her badly off now, financially insecure, bombs falling perhaps, and she alone with her crippling pains and no one reliable to take care of her.<sup>66</sup>

Not the horrors of battle, but the war's economic impact and the danger to loved ones on the home front, are the shadows behind the boy's bout of amnesia. As the doctor's questions continue, the boy feels the near presence of a nameless 'thing', sensing 'danger skirmishing all about in the green-walled room'. The memory he is repressing and its emotional impact are resurfacing but he senses this as an external threat, and the agent of this menace is the doctor who is probing and pushing him towards remembrance. The boy's resentment towards the compulsion to recollect is counterbalanced by the fear of the force the memory might acquire if left unexposed, not knowing 'if it were through his words or his silence that the danger would strike'.<sup>67</sup> Memory is again a tunnel, now a dangerous one, which he hurtles into:

Running in panic along the tunnel he remembered the alley-way, like something in a film he'd seen once, blank walls leaning nearer and nearer to suffocation, and, at the bend, a lamp-bracket sticking out with a dangling noose; only no corpse was at the end of the rope. And always the hurrying army boots and the bell ringing, till he did not know if it was the noise of his own steps or the church bell inside his head. The noise was part of his hunger, and he remembered, further along the tunnel, scrounging about at night where a street market had been and finding, finally, in the gutter, a piece of sausage, grey, slimy, like the wrist of a dead baby, and the terrible thirst that came on him afterwards, and how he drank out of a horse-trough, scooping the water up with his hands, and it seemed all wrong because they killed animals painlessly.<sup>68</sup>

In this nightmarish scene, consciously cinematic 'like something in a film', the metaphorical tunnel of the boy's memory cuts to the real alleyway in his recent past and the act of remembering echoes the experience itself. The scene's soundtrack highlights its filmic quality, scored by the ringing footsteps and bells inside his head, his confused senses express third and first-person narrative simultaneously, evoking the artifice of a Hitchcockian flashback. We see him during his period of absence

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<sup>66</sup> 'The Blackout', 35.

<sup>67</sup> 'The Blackout', 37.

<sup>68</sup> 'The Blackout', 37.

reduced not merely to the status of an animal ready for slaughter, but one that must suffer torture first. By the end of the interview process he has broken down, remembering the time he was missing, remembering returning to the house to collect his forgotten paybook, but still repressing the moment that prompted his blackout. Denied access to the scene, the reader can only imagine the incident that is too distressing for him to relive. The preceding images – the non-presence of the hanging corpse, the baby's decomposing arm – suggest by their absence that death is close at hand, and make us suspect the very worst. A pattern of absence begins to emerge in the endings to the *Lazarus* stories, the sense that something always remains hidden from the reader. Here, it is the sure knowledge of the death of the boy's beloved auntie. Without necessarily provoking feelings of suspense or dissatisfaction, these gaps indicate certain things that are only felt and not known.

'Face of My People' is the story most directly linked to the 'Bill Williams' article, appearing in *Horizon* two months after it.<sup>69</sup> Like Lennie in 'He Who Desires', the protagonist Kling is a foreigner, and this is only one characteristic that marks him as an outsider. Hailing from one of the occupied European countries, he is now a patient in a British Army psychiatric hospital where his status is ill-defined; we do not know how he has come to be there or how he has become attached to the British Army, only that his war experience has been working on burial duty:

When he thought of the war it was always the digging he thought of because, seeing him so strong and used to work with a spade, they had put him on that job from the beginning; and then there were faces, wrecked or fearful or quiet or obscene faces, far too many of them; how he had laboured and toiled till his saliva ran sour, desperate to hide the faces away from the brutal light.

How many faces had he covered with earth and stones? There surely were thousands; and always thousands more waiting: and he all the time digging demented, always the compulsive urge in him like a frenzy, to hide the ruined faces away<sup>70</sup>

Even before his neurosis Kling's digging is a madness in him, a sickness, just as Lennie was always 'crazy' about the sea. His desperate covering of faces with earth and stones becomes the model for the psychological action he has performed on

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<sup>69</sup> Jennifer Sturm makes an interesting comparison between this story and 'Time of Departure' by New Zealand writer Greville Texidor, suggesting that elements of it were influenced by her time there. See Sturm, ed., *Anna Kavan's New Zealand: A Pacific Interlude in a Turbulent Life*, 238-240.

<sup>70</sup> Kavan, 'Face of My People', 58.

himself and again the lines between both trauma and psychological consequence, metaphor and psychosis blur. Kling has not only buried his own emotions, but he secretly believes there to be a stone lodged inside his body, crushing his breastbone. First thinking that the stone had become embedded in the course of an accident, Kling feels it to be 'a small stone, just a dead spot, a sort of numbness under the breastbone'. But Kling had 'told the MO about it and the MO had laughed, saying there was no stone or possibility of a stone, and after then he had not spoken of it again; never once'. Later the stone 'had grown heavier and heavier until he could not think of anything else, until it crushed out everything else, and he could only carry it by making a very great effort'.<sup>71</sup> Condemned to carry the burden of the wanton loss of life he has witnessed, the stone under Kling's breastbone is the marker of his terrible sorrow and depression, a mechanism that he has employed to suppress emotional pain. Like the glass of the previous story, the stone is emotionally disfiguring but it protects against the force of feelings that cannot be borne. For all these soldier protagonists repression is painful and alienating but also protective. Again, in this story personal tragedy and war trauma become tangled up and Kling's memory of his dead father is conflated with memories of the unknown men he has buried.

Arthur Koestler's intriguing letter to Cyril Connolly on the subject of Kavan's writing and emotional problems refers to 'her Mill-Hill story', an apparent allusion to the recently published 'Face of My People', which supports a link between the hospital and Kavan's writing of this time.<sup>72</sup> Kling suffers more explicitly than any of Kavan's protagonists from symptoms that could be interpreted as effort syndrome; the sensation of weight crushing his chest, signs of excessive exertion disproportionate to his physical actions, 'choking with strangled breath' and the feeling of a 'heaviness in his heart'.<sup>73</sup> Behind these physical symptoms is another case of repressed memory. Kling is not this character's original name, nor is it one he has chosen himself. Names and namelessness are always significant for Kavan's characters, perhaps more so for Kling than for any other:

For many months he had been called Kling, that being the first syllable and not the whole of his name, which was too difficult for these tongues trained

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<sup>71</sup> 'Face of My People', 57.

<sup>72</sup> Cyril Vernon Connolly Papers, Tulsa, Arthur Koestler to Cyril Connolly, 28 June [1944].

<sup>73</sup> Kavan, 'Face of My People', 56-7, 59.



in a different pronunciation. [...] They've taken everything from me, even my name, he thought sometimes when the sullen misery settled on him [...] And then there was that other reason why the sound of the short syllable was disturbing.<sup>74</sup>

That 'other reason' is the onomatopoeic resonance between the articulation of this inauthentic, foreshortened name and the sound of metal on rock, particularly spade on stone. The sound of this name being called and the noise of the spades of the gardening team striking stone initiate a hallucination:

He heard the *Kling!* of his name being shouted, and again a second clattering *kling!* and running heard the spade kling-clink on the stone, he seemed to be holding it now, grasping the handle that slipped painfully in his wet hands, levering the blade under the huge ugly stone and straining finally as another frantic *kling!* came from the spade, and the toppling, heavy, leaden bulk of the stone fell and the old, mutilated face was hidden beneath<sup>75</sup>

Kling's inner turmoil is affected by an extreme synaesthesia; hearing the sound of spade on stone is experienced as the physical act of striking stone, the noise reanimates the memory. This is only one of the many tangled threads of Kling's trauma; the sound of his name and the physical work of burying bodies; the face of the dead man in the gulley and the face of his dead father; the stone he dug and the weight on his chest. Onomatopoeia or paronomasia act as catalysts for memories, causing him to relive his harrowing experiences. For Kling, figurative language and lived experience become indistinguishable; words come into the world and make their presence known. Language is no longer context-specific in a Wittgensteinian sense, its meaning is not defined by its use; words carry always a multiplicity of meaning, performing a poetic function.

Kling is one of Kavan's most heartbreaking protagonists; though he is unable to communicate it to those around him, his pain and depression are palpable to the reader. Looking along the wall of the hospital corridor, he thinks '[h]ow many stones there are in this place; so many faces and stones'.<sup>76</sup> Faces and stones, the trauma of war, fill the asylum; they are the core of its very structure. Dr Pope administers an injection to make Kling talk and Kling feels 'the strangeness of sleep or sickness or death moving up on him'; as he succumbs to sleep the stone shifts

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<sup>74</sup> 'Face of My People', 55.

<sup>75</sup> 'Face of My People', 56.

<sup>76</sup> 'Face of My People', 61.

and moves.<sup>77</sup> Like the boy in 'The Blackout' Kling desires to maintain his silence and his integrity, instinctively knowing that to reveal his suffering will mean nothing to these prying ears. Kavan's narrative represents the barbiturate therapy commonly used at this time to encourage a patient to reach a crisis or relive a repressed memory, the 'narco-analysis' she and Bluth would describe in *The Horse's Tale*.<sup>78</sup> As Kling yields to the 'strange sleep' he sees above him 'a cloud of faces, the entire earth was no graveyard great enough for so many':<sup>79</sup>

The old man was there and had been for some time, not sprawled in leaves now but standing, bent forward, listening; and Kling knew that this time something must pass between them [...] The old man bent over him and blood dripped onto his face and he could not move because of what lay on his breast, and when the old man saw he could not move he bent lower still and Kling could see the tufts of bristly hairs in his father's nostrils. He knew he would have to speak soon, and, staring wildly, with the old man's face almost on his, he could see the side of the face that was only a bloodied hole and he heard a sudden frantic gasp and gush of words in his own language, and that was all he heard because at that moment sleep reached up and covered his face.<sup>80</sup>

Kling addresses this figure, who is both his dead father and the old man he buried in the gully, but the secret he reveals remains a mystery. There is no-one at the hospital who can translate his words and Dr Pope abandons his case. The language barrier excludes the reader along with the psychiatric staff; the narrator cannot or will not translate to us, we can only try to piece together those fragments of Kling's traumatized memory revealed to us. The truth he shares with the faces that haunt him is not a knowledge we can share. This story again denies the reader complete insight into the complexity of the patient's inner life, and this lack contributes to the strength and credibility of these narratives. Kavan quietly shows that we can have no full understanding of another person's suffering.

## Remembrance

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<sup>77</sup> 'Face of My People', 62.

<sup>78</sup> For further detail of this method see J. Stephen Horsley, *Narco-Analysis: A New Technique in Short-Cut Psychotherapy: A Comparison with Other Methods: And Notes on the Barbiturates* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943); Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914-1994* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 207-8.

<sup>79</sup> Kavan, 'Face of My People', 63.

<sup>80</sup> 'Face of My People', 63-4.

The six third-person stories that open the *Lazarus* collection are followed by nine in the first, and the paranoid, unreliable, uncomfortably intimate narrator of *Asylum Piece* returns here. Obscure references to 'my case' and 'my advisor' evoke the Kafkaesque dystopia of these earlier narratives, but in a world at war the layers of secrecy, bureaucracy, and social control are further augmented. The narrator-protagonist's new status of foreigner increases their sense of dislocation in the dystopia they inhabit, now a literal as well as metaphorical outsider. Recalling the structural arrangement of *Asylum Piece*, these first-person stories appear to have a tentative relationship to each other, a sense of continual narrative that the third-person stories do not. Yet there are ambiguous connections between the experiences of the third-person protagonists and the experiences of the first-person narrator(s). The experiences of the patients suffering from war neurosis and other mental illness are mirrored in the world of the first-person narrator. The solipsistic internal experiences of the psychiatric patient bleed into the world inhabited by the first-person narrator, breaching the confines of the individual mind as much as the walls of the asylum. As in the 'Asylum Piece' series, the emotional force of the third-person asylum vignettes is lacking in the more direct narrative pieces; contrary to expectations, Kavan's third-person narratives are always more deeply affecting than the first. There is no pathos to the despair of the first person, often this narrator's own self-pity deprives the reader of the work of compassion, leaving unease in the place of sympathy.

The preoccupation with memory in the war neurosis stories in the collection carries over into the first-person narratives and is the prominent theme of 'A Certain Experience' and 'Now I Know Where My Place Is'. Both stories explore how a particular event or situation can lodge itself in the mind, or be lost and later recovered. The external perspective that allowed us to see the third-person patients as psychologically damaged in their troubled relationship to the past is missing here, we perceive only the raw experience of the first-person. 'A Certain Experience' is one of two very short stories in the *Lazarus* collection, both of which make up in intensity what they lack in length. Opening with conventional storytelling idiom '[o]nce, a very long time ago, an extraordinary thing happened to me' this narrative, like most of Kavan's writing, has no 'happily ever after'.<sup>81</sup> The certain experience of the title is a reprieve from imprisonment, but remembrance

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<sup>81</sup> Anna Kavan, 'A Certain Experience' in *I Am Lazarus*, 106.

of the event is 'like contemplating something in a former existence', and the dislocation of present and past selves is so great that the narrator is 'inclined to think that it did take place in an earlier incarnation'.<sup>82</sup> This evasive memory comes and goes in a pattern of repeated loss and recovery:

sooner or later a glimpse comes to me, as if, in the secret room where it had hidden itself, the memory lifted a corner of the curtain and peeped out of the window. Then at once I hurry off in pursuit. [...] I feel like the owner of some beloved and valuable animal that has been stolen; or the parent of a kidnapped child. I can't rest until the precious memory is safely housed again in my consciousness.<sup>83</sup>

In this story, as in some of the third-person *Lazarus* narratives, the mind is presented as a physical space, here the domestic arena. To retrieve this precious moment of release, the memory of incarceration must also be brought home:

I can describe the courtyard with its high spiked walls, where shuffling, indistinguishable gangs swept the leaves which the guards always re-scattered to be swept again. I can describe the peep-hole in the hookless door, the hard, unsleeping eye-bulb in its cage. I can describe the smells in corridors, the sounds ambiguously interpreted, the sights from which eyes were averted hastily. I can describe the hands under which I suffered; I can describe the visitor with the rolled umbrella who announced my release.<sup>84</sup>

Each sense has its own stark impression of this experience, a Proustian overload of sinister smells, sounds, sights and sensations. This institution recalls the asylum stories earlier in the collection; the peep-hole, the caged bulb, the hook-less door all suggest a prison or asylum, but the guards re-scattering leaves intimates the narrator's paranoia or some sinister dystopia. The umbrella, the mysterious visitor's only distinguishing feature, a part of the uniform of a city gent or civil servant, hints towards some official status. An experience we might think best forgotten is, for this narrator, worth remembering to achieve the recollection of its end. Yet the speaker undermines the value of their own account:

But all these descriptions, no matter how detailed, give only the bare shell of the experience, the true significance of which beats within them like a heart that can never die. The objective side of the matter does in fact die; or at

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<sup>82</sup> Kavan, 'A Certain Experience', 106.

<sup>83</sup> 'A Certain Experience', 106.

<sup>84</sup> 'A Certain Experience', 107.

least it can be said to grow old and desiccated and frail as a beetle's discarded carapace. But the mysterious and private heart never ceases to beat. Indestructible and immortal, the heart beats on, independent, and beating for me alone. It's the personal nature of the experience which is incommunicable and which gives it its supreme value.<sup>85</sup>

The continually beating heart of experience reveals that this is a memory with a life of its own, a body of its own, and recalls the metaphorical significance of the symptoms of effort syndrome. Here Kavan's narrator seems to capture something central to her vision as a writer. Her deeply, often unsettlingly, subjective representation of experience attempts to portray its real value, that incommunicable personal element which is more precious, meaningful and enduring. The 'objective side of the matter' – what actually happened – is a bare shell that withers away, and we see little of it in Kavan's writing after she changed her name.

Rare in the *Lazarus* collection and in Kavan's writing generally, 'Now I Know Where My Place Is' transpires to be a hopeful, even uplifting story in its own way. The female narrator's visit to a mysterious hotel establishes early on elements of Gothic suspense which are later subverted; the ghost she finds in this haunted house is herself and she is overwhelmed not by a sense of horror but of homecoming. War does not touch the land in which the action of this story plays out, but the *Lazarus* themes of memory, imagination, and sense of place are at the fore. Reader and narrator are equally unsure of the veracity of her vague childhood recollection of the hotel, she describes how it lingers 'on the horizons of my consciousness', a 'tenuous picture' that appears 'in that vague twilight between sleep and waking'.<sup>86</sup> Her self-doubt reveals an enigmatic side to her existence, a 'queer dream-plasma which flows along like a sub-life', a hint that this narrator, despite her down to earth tone, is a peculiar or unreliable witness.<sup>87</sup> Whether fantasy or memory, the experience exposes childhood unhappiness or neglect, a little girl who sits alone and occupies herself with 'solitary pursuits, too grave to come into the category of games'. She is 'a small, serious and rather lonely figure with straight fair hair' and we recognise her immediately when she reappears in the present:

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<sup>85</sup> 'A Certain Experience', 107.

<sup>86</sup> Anna Kavan, 'Now I Know Where My Place Is' in *I Am Lazarus*, 119.

<sup>87</sup> Kavan, 'Now I Know Where My Place Is', 120.

Would the presence of other people have deterred the small figure with straight fair hair who gravely approached me between beds of cannas that twilight had already deprived of their colours? And after all, why should I deny her? In this world of false friends and dangerous ambiguities where nothing is as it seems, isn't it best to accept whatever comes without resistance or inquiry, relying only upon the unassailable knowledge that in one's heart a hyacinth is secretly and inviolably blooming?<sup>88</sup>

The dream-child or phantom of memory has become a changeling, a permanent inhabitant lost in this enchanted place. The pathological neurosis of Lennie in 'Who Has Desired' is here incarnated, the self of the past has become manifest as another being. 'Now I Know' is a tale of self-discovery, the past becomes consolation as the narrator quite literally finds herself.

This story's hyacinth in the heart reiterates the corrupted image Kavan uses in her *Horizon* articles. In 'Bill Williams' 'the small hyacinth that blooms in the heart withers, loses its scent, turns black, is killed' and in a later review 'the machine versus the individual man, the wheel against the hyacinth in the heart'.<sup>89</sup> This figure also occurs early in the story, on first hearing the name of the hotel mentioned something stirs in the narrator – 'the little hyacinth that blooms inside my heart quietly unfurled a new petal.'<sup>90</sup> This spring flower represents for Kavan not simply happiness but the essence of individuality, something tender and secret, a life source. The hyacinth is one example of an image from Helen Ferguson's writing that endures and mutates in Kavan's work. In *The Dark Sisters* (1930), Karen finds comfort in these 'cool and quiet and solitary' flowers – '[w]ith the blue and white hyacinths she consoled herself for the jarring contacts of humanity. Like the flowers, she would be calm and self-sufficient and careless of the rest of the world'.<sup>91</sup> Though the title story of this collection 'I Am Lazarus' evokes Eliot's *Prufrock*, the hyacinth is also one of many references in these stories that recalls *The Waste Land* (1922). The influence of Eliot on Kavan can be seen in her liberal quotations from his work in her correspondence throughout the war years and, in a letter from New York in late 1940, she writes: 'I rely on Eliot more and more as the

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<sup>88</sup> 'Now I Know Where My Place Is', 122.

<sup>89</sup> 'Bill Williams', 97; 'Horizon 59', 360.

<sup>90</sup> Kavan, 'Now I Know Where My Place Is', 119.

<sup>91</sup> Helen Ferguson, *The Dark Sisters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), 83-4.

circumstances of my life get more disastrous'.<sup>92</sup> Echoes of *The Waste Land* reverberate throughout the *Lazarus* collection, a testament to the prescience of Eliot's poem for the Second World War. Eliot's 'hyacinth girl' invokes the flower blooming in the heart, Thomas Bow is 'neither living nor dead' and Kling is haunted by his frantic burial of the dead.<sup>93</sup>

### **'Fire and brimstone from above'**

Kavan's journey from New Zealand to London in late 1942 can be charted in detail in her letters to Ian Hamilton. As German submarine power reached the pinnacle of its destructive strength, she could hardly have chosen a more dangerous moment to travel across the globe by boat. When compared to the histrionic language with which she often describes the perceived hardships of her everyday life in peace time, her account of her journey through U-boat infested waters is strikingly composed:

But it wasn't bad really. The ship just beside us was torpedoed in daylight and that was an extraordinary thing to watch. Her back was broken and she seemed to be almost in two, with a very tall, black, evil looking smoke standing over her like a demon. It was extraordinary, but not really shattering at all. Of course, everything that happens always seems slightly familiar because of the movies.<sup>94</sup>

Kavan's detached sensation of cinematic spectatorship indicates a certain derealization in the face of extreme danger, and her correspondence reveals that, like her protagonist in 'Glorious Boys', the impact of the war only hit her with full force on her arrival in England:

The war had always been there in the different countries, but it had taken London to bring her the apprehension of war.<sup>95</sup>

The sight of the damage done to the capital during the Blitz, and the dull terror of everyday life in London during the war, penetrated Kavan's self-assurance more profoundly than the very real hazards she had risked in crossing the oceans. The

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<sup>92</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 11 November 1940.

<sup>93</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 'The Waste Land', 'I. The Burial of the Dead', 42, lines 136-140.

<sup>94</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 24 January 1943.

<sup>95</sup> Kavan, 'Glorious Boys', 48.

movie-like experience of high adventure and danger did not prepare her for the relentless misery of the blackout, poor food, rationing and the atmosphere of terrible apprehension. She writes '[o] but it's dreary here, the war and the winter, the blackout, the dismal faces, the cold, the shabbiness, the feeling of death in the air'.<sup>96</sup>

The symbolic significance of birds in *Asylum Piece* is developed further in this collection. In 'I Am Lazarus' as in the 'Asylum Piece' sequence, the patients in the clinic display bird-like behaviour, flocking and twittering, like 'nervous birds' and 'timid cage-birds'; the aviary of the asylum confines but also exhibits its inmates as creatures for display.<sup>97</sup> The character 'A' in 'All Kinds of Grief Shall Arrive', so tempting to identify as Kavan, is described as 'a quiet young woman fond of birds' and this seemingly innocuous trait is meaningful in light of the 'protracted sentence' she finds herself under.<sup>98</sup> The narrator of 'The Heavenly Adversary' wishes for 'freedom to live in peace, in sunshine, in a country where birds had not learnt to fly in terror from the sound of a falling bomb', but as the influence of the Second World War is increasingly felt in this collection, this peacetime icon of flight and freedom mutates into its sinister and dreadful opposite.<sup>99</sup>

Mystical birds materialize on the edges of the troubled memory of many of these protagonists. The unlikely night-time presence of the birds that flock around Lennie at the conclusion of 'He Who Desires' marks a transition from the present moment into the past:

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, bright as day, were all the small islands, Cape Promise, and the bay of Mairangi, wide, still, unbelievably peaceful under the full moon.<sup>100</sup>

Transporting him into the world of his memory, these unreal birds are the opening title to Lennie's hallucination, the catalyst that delivers him from his tormented present. If this vision induces him to walk into the sea, they are also his doom. A symbolic, sinister bird also hovers around the narrator-protagonist's recurring

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<sup>96</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 14 Nov 1943.

<sup>97</sup> Kavan, 'I Am Lazarus', 10, 13.

<sup>98</sup> Anna Kavan, 'All Kinds of Grief Shall Arrive' in *I Am Lazarus*, 89.

<sup>99</sup> 'The Heavenly Adversary' in *I Am Lazarus*, 68.

<sup>100</sup> Kavan, 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 31.



memory of 'A Certain Experience'; ever-present, its company is bound up with the loss rather than retrieval of memory:

For quite long periods the memory seems to withdraw itself, to go into retreat, as it were. When this happens I become restless, and the great bird which always hovers above me swoops lower and fills my head with the stridence of his black wing-beats.<sup>101</sup>

This bird represents an unshakable curse and the 'shadow of threatening wings' follows the narrator like a black dog.<sup>102</sup>

In the *Lazarus* stories Kavan follows a tradition of associating birds with omen or prophesy which follows from classical ornithomancy and augury, but this trope is at odds with her original representation of the bird in *Asylum Piece*. A contradictory rift between the images of bird as a symbol of freedom and as a harbinger of doom begins in this collection and fails to be reconciled in her later writing. In these stories birds are not only portentous; they become vicious, cruel, agents of destruction. The key to the corruption of the bird in *I Am Lazarus* can perhaps be found in the image of 'a huge formation of bombers' flying 'so high as to seem no larger than a migration of birds' in 'Our City'.<sup>103</sup> This vision suggests that the proliferation of airpower during the Second World War radically undermined Kavan's conception of the winged creatures of the sky. Birds are nowhere more prominent in the collection than in the Hitchcockian horror story 'The Gannets'. This chilling vision, a story of only two pages, recalls some of Kavan's very late stories. In it the narrator watches in horror as a group of children offer another child in sacrifice to these birds; its eyes already torn out, they delight in their ghastly sport or ritual. A seemingly senseless and bloody tale, it is possible that Kavan was influenced here by the new generation of German dive bombers prevalent during the Battle of Britain; their inverted gull wings, diving tactics and flocking formation would have evoked a resemblance to a flock of large sea birds. As they round on their prey, the advance of the gannets recalls the approach of attacking aircraft:

And hardly had the flock sighted the children than they seemed to be menacing them, screaming headlong towards them in horrid haste.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> 'A Certain Experience', 106.

<sup>102</sup> 'A Certain Experience', 107.

<sup>103</sup> 'Our City', 133.

<sup>104</sup> 'The Gannets', 81.

The image of the sacrificial child also recalls some of Kavan's most striking artwork, eyeless figures in poses of execution dominate these 'dark' paintings, many of them apparently destroyed by her executors after her death.

The nameless protagonist's visions of the past in 'Glorious Boys' are accompanied by a hallucinatory birdcall; her memory of the morepork's 'mournful cry' transports her back to the time and place in which she heard it.<sup>105</sup> This unsettling memory is prompted by a reunion with Ken, who was a new conscript when they heard the bird's cry. Now he wears his pilot's uniform with ease and confesses to being more comfortable in a plane than on the ground, especially during a raid, explaining; "I don't feel at home down here. I don't belong any more".<sup>106</sup> The morepork's traditional association with omen is fulfilled with symbolic precision as Ken himself becomes bird-like, a creature of the sky. A night bird, heard and not seen, the morepork's repetitive cry evokes the call of the brainfever bird that haunts Kavan's 1963 novel *Who Are You?*

The air raids of 'Glorious Boys' and 'Our City' are the most graphic evocations war in *I Am Lazarus* and the protagonists of these two stories share a certain sensibility; both are nameless and their peculiarities of perception are strikingly similar. Though they experience the external world in similar ways, our impression of their perspective is differentiated by the subjectivity involved. The correspondence between these stories offers an opportunity to explore the relation between Kavan's first and third-person voices, and illuminates a general trend in both *Asylum Piece* and *I Am Lazarus*. The representation of psychotic or unconventional perception is reversed in Kavan's first and third-person narratives. The third-person narratives of the asylum patient show clearly the highly subjective nature of their perception, but the first-person narrators tell of the bizarre reality of the world around them; they do not doubt, and the reader only half suspects, the authenticity of this. These first-person narrators are not subject to psychiatric intervention, unless we explicitly identify the shadowy 'advisor' as inhabiting this role. Like the 'Asylum Piece' sequence, 'Our City' is split into sections marked by Roman numerals; in a reverse of the earlier narrative nine of the ten sections are in the first person while section III slips almost imperceptibly into the third. The

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<sup>105</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 44.

<sup>106</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 46.

stealth of this narrative move, as in 'Asylum Piece', leaves the reader uncertain whether the narrator simply observes the 'foreign girl' who weeps at the sight of a butterfly, or has stepped outside of herself.

The misanthropic and paranoid protagonist of 'Glorious Boys' exhibits all the qualities of the familiar Kavan persona, and her recent arrival in war-torn London from 'the underside of the world' invites biographical speculation. The story's free indirect narrative moves firmly into the mind of this nameless 'she' in the act of some self-diagnosis, recognizing in herself 'non-specific depressive traits' in her lack of social success and tendency to be a dreamer.<sup>107</sup> Musing on the difficulty of inhabiting a body, she sees the relationship of mind and body not as one of symbiotic or harmonious partnership, but of dictatorship and terrible enmity:

The terrifying independence of the body. Its endless opposition. The appalling underground movements of the nerves, muscles, viscera, upon which, like a hated and sadistic gauleiter, one unremittingly imposed an implacable threat of insubordination. The perpetual fear of being sabotaged into some sudden shameful exposure.<sup>108</sup>

Kavan's gauleiter of the mind appropriates the newly horrifying idiom of the Nazi Party to illustrate the hostile collaboration of body and mind; the mind's suppression of the body is likened not to the impact of German warmongering, but to authoritarian rule inside the Reich. In this ongoing battle the threat and fear of sabotage work both ways. The body can expose the mind, a medium through which the psyche's privacy will be involuntarily laid bare; and the mind's sadistic and ruthless threat of insubordination over the body can only be suicide. This protagonist explicitly states the peculiar mind/body dualism of the entire collection. Ultimately inseparable yet irreconcilable, body and mind make up a self divided by conflict as pervasive as that of individual and society in the 'Bill Williams' article.

This protagonist's liking for physical, inanimate things and her desire for intimacy with them recalls other characters in the *Lazarus* collection, particularly Thomas Bow in 'I Am Lazarus'. Yet unlike Mr Bow, this protagonist is aware that this trait is considered peculiar by others and in turn finds it odd 'how normal

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<sup>107</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 40.

<sup>108</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 39.

people have no time except for other people'.<sup>109</sup> She remembers witnessing an air-raid for the first time the night she arrived in London:

She had stood watching out in the street, and while the big building burned, and she was feeling the anguish of exploded walls, burst roof, torn girders wrenching away, smoke, flames, blinding up, spouting up through the crazy avalanching of stone, the crashing ruinous death of all that mass of stone and durability struck down with a single blow<sup>110</sup>

Here the character's empathy for the non-human becomes manifest, she experiences the agonies of the burning building itself. In this scene most explicitly, the experience of this third-person protagonist resonates with that of the first-person narrator of 'Our City', but the correspondence in their peculiar ways of seeing is not unambiguous. The protagonist of 'Glorious Boys' sees, thinks, feels, and behaves in ways that she recognizes are peculiar to social norms, her story describes her struggle to get along in a world in which her views are out of place. In 'Our City' we see through the eyes of the seemingly normal and rational first-person narrator a world that is itself awfully peculiar.

The last and longest of the *Lazarus* stories, 'Our City' depicts a fantastic, war-ravaged world in the disarmingly offhand tone of Kavan's familiar first-person voice. Like many of her protagonists, the metropolis of the title is nameless, but this city under siege, with all its peculiarities, is clearly identifiable as London. The war-induced feelings of dislocation and unreality Kavan describes in her letters are here incarnated in her fictional representation of war, for in 'Our City' the utterly fantastic becomes matter of fact and normal. As the air attacks destroy any clear distinction between home and military fronts, so too the boundaries between the city and the things and people in it become indistinct. Deciphering the identity of the inclusive first-person plural of the story's title is problematic, for the narrative voice does not evoke the collective spirit of the Blitz but speaks from the position of a terribly frightened and isolated figure. The intimate tone with the reader suggests that we may be the others referred to in 'our city', implicating us in an uncomfortable alliance with the narrator. Ungendered, unnamed and unidentified, this enigmatic narrator has a peculiarly intimate relationship with the un-named city.

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<sup>109</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 40.

<sup>110</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 41.

From the outset of the story, the city is set against the narrator; its enmity can be sensed in streets with an air of meanness, malevolence and the smell of spite. The happenings of the story are the stuff of outright fantasy, but though the narrator freely admits to the bizarre and paradoxical nature of this state of affairs they do not question its truth. As the story opens the narrator is struck first by the city's plurality, its ability to be many things simultaneously. In this bizarre vision of metamorphosis the city is transformed into an octopus, a toothed animal trap and a judge, all at the same time. The octopus, the trap and the judge manifest the organic, the mechanical and the ethical; the city is all things, and all are ensnaring and confining. Each fantastic incarnation plays a role in an unexplained act of persecution as the city catches, holds and passes sentence on the narrator. In Kavan's distinctively paranoid prose, the wartime city has condemned her narrator to the impossible paradox of being both its exile and its prisoner simultaneously.

Waking just before the sound of the air raid siren in the fourth section of the story, the narrator makes no attempt to take cover and does no more throughout the attack than check the time, switch on the light and turn it off again. All the action of this scene is played out in the environment both in and outside of the narrator's bedroom:

Mobile guns grind elephantinely over me. A plane buzzes round my head. Outside the black windows the searchlights climb questing. I can feel the broad beams sawing and the narrow beams scissoring through my nerves. Then suddenly from far away over the city, dull, muffled, heavy noise. Pandemonium is starting up; is coming nearer and nearer, implacably, is here, ultimately, on top of me.<sup>111</sup>

Following the pattern of the protagonist's first experience of an air-raid in 'Glorious Boys', in the course of the raid, the distinction between unnamed city and unnamed narrator becomes indistinct. The room 'floats irresponsibly in the shattering noise' like 'a lighted bubble', but the integrity of its walls has become unsound.<sup>112</sup> The air raid outside comes in, and inside the room, things begin to act in a peculiar way. What is at one moment outside the black windows, far away over the city, is in the next buzzing 'round my head', 'sawing' and 'scissoring through my nerves', 'over me', 'ultimately on top of me'. What the city experiences, the narrator experiences

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<sup>111</sup> 'Our City', 129-30.

<sup>112</sup> 'Our City', 130.

too via a sort of osmosis. As the narrator and the city become fleetingly inseparable, the room's furnishings become fellow protagonists, responding in their own ways to the situation. The clock remains diligent and indefatigable, the bottles on the dressing-table snigger against one another, the curtains flutter a little, but the pale blue carpet doesn't turn a hair.<sup>113</sup> The anthropomorphic animation of these objects adds to the nightmarish quality of the scene. But in the midst of the bizarre metamorphoses and absolute chaos there is one thing the narrator cannot believe to be true:

Impossible to imagine that people are connected in any way with the racket that's going on. It's an absolutely inhuman excess of noise, the rage of the city itself. Our city itself is ravening at the night.<sup>114</sup>

Impossible to imagine that people are connected with it, it is the inhumanity of the air raid which implicates the nonhuman. More possible to imagine are the involvement and responses of furniture, buildings and the city itself; this is a war not of people, but of London and the things in it.

In the wake of the bombing, the destruction is followed by a dreadful regeneration:

The noise is over. But now something begins to happen that is in its way as sensational, as appalling. Through the darkness of the blacked-out windows I am aware of an indescribable movement throughout the city, a soundless spinning of motion in the streets and among the ruins, an unseen upward surge of building: the silence industriously, insecurely, building itself up. The silence gathers itself together in the parks and the squares and the gaps and the empty houses. Like a spider's web rapidly woven, the frail edifice mounts up quickly towards the moon. Soon the precarious work is finished, the whole city is roofed, covered in with silence, as if lying under a black cloche [...] every citizen crouches uneasily, peering up at the transparent black bell of silence hanging over our city. Is it going to break?<sup>115</sup>

As the city's buildings are razed to the ground, they are replaced by a phantom metropolis, a city of silence and fear. There is no trace in this story of the cultural myth of the Blitz – the unifying experience, the triumph of grit and resilience, the Londoner's cheery motto 'we can take it'. Instead Kavan's literary representation

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<sup>113</sup> 'Our City', 130.

<sup>114</sup> 'Our City', 130.

<sup>115</sup> 'Our City', 131.

reveals the awful apprehension and emotional fragility of London's inhabitants during the Second World War. This story both subverts the mythology and drags London itself into the conflict, the metropolis of 'Our City' is not the passive site of war, but one of its protagonists.

Kavan described her feelings on returning to Blitz-torn London early in 1943 with few possessions and fewer friends:

And then the awful force of inanimate things: a broken umbrella on the steps of a blitzed house, a barrage balloon on the ground in an empty park in the rain. It's very ridiculous that those things should make you feel as if your heart were broken up in small pieces.<sup>116</sup>

This letter usefully calls attention to the peculiar status of inanimate objects in wartime London – their awful force. In Kavan's stories of wartime London the familiar, the comfortable, the quotidian become strange and absurd; their poignant incongruity skews into a complicity in the horror. Things play a prominent role in many of the *Lazarus* stories and in 'Our City' they become genuine protagonists. The relentless frivolity of the pale blue carpet, the narrator's nemesis, is the root of its power to horrify. The pretty comfort of the furnishings in the house mocks our narrator's state of persecution. Throughout the story all beauty and all human empathy are denied to this inhabitant of the war-torn city, and blossom in springtime or the smiles of a couple in love are felt as a terrible affront.

Things conspire and delight in the narrator's fear but they can also be benign, even allies. In the penultimate section, we encounter the few possessions that the narrator holds dear:

They are honourable and precious to me, these books, in proportion to their great heroism. They are like members of a suicide squad who do not hesitate to engage the enormously superior enemy, life, on my behalf.<sup>117</sup>

Kavan's narrator hints towards that other war described in her 'Bill Williams' article; there is no happiness even in peacetime, only ways of getting through. Literature weighs in to the battle, a salvation not from death but from life, and the redemptive power of fiction endures in her work.

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<sup>116</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, 14 February 1943.

<sup>117</sup> Kavan, 'Our City', 140.

In 'The Heavenly Adversary' we are introduced to the effect of war on a city, recognizable as London, through the intimate portrait of a single domestic space. Narrated by an unnamed female protagonist, at its opening the story purports to be an account of the man who has left her, but in fact the house she lives in emerges as by far its most prominent character. While her lover was shadowy and somehow absent even before he left, in recent times it is the house and its contents that seem to have diminished:

When I look round at my few possessions, each one of which carries inextricably in its essence some amusing or tender association, I feel as though I were confronting a dear relative, perhaps a brother, whose brain a sudden tragedy had unhinged. Everything is the same; the features, the figure, the hair: only the one vital element is missing without which the human being has no significance, no entity, no individual soul.<sup>118</sup>

That inanimate objects are without a soul is deeply odd and disturbing to this narrator. In this collection as human beings become reified so things become personified in contrary motion. In a bizarre exchange, the souls that have deserted the inhabitants of this war-torn city resurface in the inanimate objects around them. To this first-person narrator her home and the things in it have become once again mere objects and having lost its soul, the house itself has also lost its mind:

Yes, it's just as if one were forced to live with someone out of his mind, or, worse still, with the actual physical corpse of a loved person which a diabolical chemistry had rendered immune from the process of dissolution.<sup>119</sup>

In a bizarre reworking of the uncanny, the lack of animism in lifeless objects spooks the narrator. The cause of this effect on the house is the destruction of the environment in which it stands; the spirit of place has deserted this ravaged city, leaving only the eerie shell of the building behind. She wonders '[w]hy do these walls still stand? [w]hen every day and night, all over the city, buildings are being struck down', and somehow this very endurance increases her horror.<sup>120</sup> Her formerly intimate relationship with this space is impossible to sustain as she sees it reduced to madness:

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<sup>118</sup> 'The Heavenly Adversary', 66-7.

<sup>119</sup> 'The Heavenly Adversary', 67.

<sup>120</sup> 'The Heavenly Adversary', 67.



I have never heard of anybody who loved a mad person. I should think it would be impossible to do so. Pity or aversion one would feel, but not love.<sup>121</sup>

A terribly odd sentiment from a narrator in this collection, this is a guilty secret shared with the reader. So many of these stories advocate the case of the sufferer of mental illness and highlight the anguish caused by others' lack of understanding and compassion, but the first person here tells it how it is – pity or aversion is all they can expect. The callousness of this position strikes an uncomfortable chord with the reader of Kavan's first-person narratives; just as the narrator cannot imagine feeling love towards the 'mad person', we reciprocate the sentiment. We experience sometimes pity, sometimes aversion, towards Kavan's peculiar first-person narrators, but rarely real empathy.

Kavan's soulless, reified characters are represented by sinister or uncanny machines. In his madness Lennie in 'Who Has Desired' becomes an automaton, only functioning, not feeling:

And now suddenly there was nothing but the skeleton in the transparent cell, brass midriff and spine, wheels and frangible springs, the hollow man, bloodless, heartless, headless; only the crazy pendulum swinging in place of head.<sup>122</sup>

The automaton or the controlling machine, already present in *Asylum Piece* and in the Helen Ferguson novels, is given a new significance by the Second World War. Lennie and Thomas Bow become automata in their states of mental distress and in 'Glorious Boys' war precipitates the same condition in Ken, imagined by his friend as an unfeeling murder:

having no clear idea of the inside of a plane, she saw only an anonymous robot, padded, helmeted, hung about with accoutrements and surrounded by switches and dials, sowing catastrophe from a lighted box in the sky.<sup>123</sup>

The politics of this story, which echo the sentiments of the 'Bill Williams' article, lie behind this bizarre transformation:

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<sup>121</sup> 'The Heavenly Adversary', 67.

<sup>122</sup> 'Who Has Desired the Sea', 25.

<sup>123</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 47.

It destroyed very thoroughly this war machine, this incinerator of individuality and talent and life, forging the sensitive and creative young into the steel fabric of death, turning them out by the million, the murder men, members of Murder Inc., the big firm, the global organization.<sup>124</sup>

Ken has been assimilated by the war machine. The well-adjusted, functioning member of society is an automaton in these stories, robots who have become part of the wider social or military machine. The production line of war evoked here links the rejection of mechanisation to anti-industrialisation and anti-capitalism. The machine is society, it is war; the man who is agent of these things and who obeys their rules uncomprehendingly is merely a cog in its mechanism.

Mill Hill is a readily observable influence on Kavan's representation of the war-shocked soldier in the *Lazarus* collection, but her work with soldiers suffering from effort syndrome can also be seen to shape her narratives in other ways. The intimacy of the psychological and the physiological which characterizes the symptoms of effort syndrome surfaces in Kavan's representations of the effects of war throughout the collection. Edward Glover was a member of a committee of psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts set up in London as early as 1938 in the anticipation of a war involving civilian bombardment. Their remit was to plan for 'the prospect of an epidemic of shell-shock similar in type to that observed in the Army during the war of 1914-18'. However, by 1941 the general conclusion reached was that there had been 'no outbreak of war neuroses in the civilian population'.<sup>125</sup> Yet, Kavan's writing of the experience of living in London during the bombing suggests parallels with the experience of soldiers suffering from effort syndrome.

It is worth re-examining Kavan's Valentine's Day letter of 1943 in which she stresses 'the awful force of inanimate things' and the way in which those things 'make you feel as if your heart were broken up in small pieces'. Kavan's heartbreak recalls the significance of the symptoms of war neurosis in her patients. Here, the evidence of war brings on a metaphorically broken heart, just as war brings on the psychosomatic symptoms of the same thing in effort syndrome. The broken heart becomes an inherent component of literary or metaphorical expression of suffering

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<sup>124</sup> 'Glorious Boys', 46.

<sup>125</sup> Edward Glover, 'Notes on the Psychological Effects of War Conditions on the Civilian Population' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 22 (1941), 132-3.

and war experience. The manifestation of psychological trauma as physical symptom in effort syndrome is a model for some of the strange happenings in 'Our City'. The symptoms of war are exhibited on the body of the city itself:

The bald, excrescent shelter which I'm now passing has a curious morbid look, like some kind of tumour that has stopped being painful and hardened into a static, permanent lump.<sup>126</sup>

The physical devastation of the bombing is not the only harm London suffers in its war experience, war is also a sickness and an emotional ordeal. In Kavan's Blitz stories, war initiates a radical dissolution of the boundaries between persons, things, and the city of London itself. Bodies and emotions, people and things, the city and its inhabitants, are in one moment bitter enemies and in the next indistinguishable.

The psychosomatic nature of effort syndrome and the holistic style of treatment advocated by antipsychiatry sit uncomfortably with the antipathy between mind and body Kavan portrays in the *Lazarus* stories. Yet Kavan's emotionally-damaged protagonists are speaking from the perspective of a divided or, in her own terms, 'disintegrated' self at war with itself and with the world around it. Kavan's 'Bill Williams' article sets out a political stance that resonates profoundly with the central tenets of antipsychiatry, themes that also emerge powerfully but more ambiguously in the *Lazarus* stories. Laing's association of metaphor and psychosis can be observed in both Kavan's soldier patients and in her literary representation of the experience of wartime London. Fiction is not only the forum for many of these ideas, but at the very heart of them. Edwin Muir best captured the force of these stories in his review of *I Am Lazarus* when he wrote 'we do not know the world in which these things are happening, and yet we feel their truth, and feel that they are telling us something which could be told in no other way'.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Kavan, 'Our City', 125-6.

<sup>127</sup> Edwin Muir, 'New Novels' review of *I Am Lazarus*, *The Listener*, 5 April 1945.

## Chapter 3

### Existence and Identity: *Who Are You?*

After her moderate success in the 1940s, Kavan's literary career stalled in the 1950s and she was troubled by difficulty with publishers, unfavourable reviews and poor sales. In 1956 Angus Downie went bankrupt immediately after publishing *A Scarcity of Love* and most of the print-run was destroyed. The same year brought good fortune in an introduction from Diana Johns to the independent publisher Peter Owen, who would encourage Kavan throughout their twelve year association and continue to champion her work after her death. *Eagles' Nest* and *A Bright Green Field* were published by Peter Owen in 1957 and 1958 respectively. In 1962 Owen liked the manuscript of *Who Are You?* but rejected it as too short, suggesting that it might be supplemented by stories for publication. Instead Kavan signed an unfavourable contract with the Scorpion Press, foregoing any advance. Her customary dissatisfaction with publication timetables and marketing decisions is charted in increasingly acrimonious letters to her editor John Rolph. Eventually published in July 1963, the novel's lack of success led to her break with agent Derek Savage, but did not deter her from approaching Rolph again in 1966 about the possibility of submitting another manuscript to him, presumably *Ice*.<sup>1</sup> Though one of Kavan's lesser known works, *Who Are You?* is significant in part because it is unmistakably a rewriting of the final section of *Let Me Alone*, the Helen Ferguson novel which first introduced the character 'Anna Kavan'. Influenced by Kavan's time living in Burma with her first husband, Donald Ferguson, the story told by the two texts is almost identical but the writing is very different, each respectively displaying the characteristic narrative styles of Helen Ferguson and Anna Kavan. Having sacrificed her name to her author, in *Who Are You?* the rewritten 'Anna Kavan' character is always referred as 'the girl'. Her return to this semi-autobiographical episode thirty-three years after the publication of *Let Me Alone* indicates the significance of the fictional Anna Kavan to the writer who appropriated her name, and a determination not only to disown the identity of Helen Ferguson but to rewrite her work.

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<sup>1</sup> The Scorpion Press Archive, Tulsa, Box 5/ Anna Kavan.

### **The Fictional 'Anna Kavan'**

Published in 1935 by Jonathan Cape, *Let Me Alone* is a bildungsroman with a dark side. As with all the Ferguson novels, what is in some ways a very conventional narrative is suffused with dark themes and the language of terrible despair. The uneven quality of Helen Ferguson's writing is evident and passages of rich descriptive writing sit alongside overblown melodrama. After the early death of her mother, Anna Forrester is brought up in isolation by her father towards whom she feels a sense of misanthropic understanding. However, he displays no affection for Anna, experiencing mixed emotions of pity and animosity towards her and even a recurring desire for her death. When she reaches her teens he develops a disturbing physical interest in his daughter and as their relationship becomes more sinister and frightening he commits suicide, shooting himself. From this point, Anna's life at school and with her Aunt Laretta is a catalogue of social failure and ill-fated friendships. Her ambitions to write are crushed when she fails to be published and her aunt refuses to support her in taking up a place at Oxford. Pressured into marriage with Matthew Kavan, a man she barely knows, she returns with him to his post in Burma and this is the point in Anna's story at which *Who Are You?* picks up. Trapped in an abusive marriage, isolated and estranged in the ex-pat community, Anna is horrified to find that she is pregnant. Fleeing into the monsoon rains after a confrontation with her husband, she later miscarries the child and the novel ends with her resolve to leave him.

'Anna Kavan' was Helen Ferguson's first heroine; her earlier novels do not privilege one character in this way. Strong parallels between Anna's traumatic story and episodes in Ferguson's own life make *Let Me Alone* the source of much apocryphal biography, and the thoughts and feelings of the character 'Anna Kavan' have frequently been attributed to her author. Yet the striking differences between the life of the fictional Anna Kavan and the real Helen Ferguson arouse suspicion about the extent to which the novel is autobiographical. The elements of the 'Anna Kavan' story that divert significantly from Helen Ferguson's life invite a reductive psychoanalytic reading and would be particularly disturbing if interpreted as phantasy or wish-fulfilment; Anna Forrester's mother dies young while Ferguson's own mother, whom she despised, would live into her seventies; Anna's father desires his teenaged daughter, Ferguson's father was a distant figure who killed himself before she reached puberty; Anna miscarries her pregnancy, Ferguson gave

birth to a son, Bryan. More troubling still, given that this fictional account is a much darker rendering of Ferguson's life, is her decision to later take the name Anna Kavan as her own. We witness the fictional Anna acknowledging her new name after her marriage and it is hard to read these words without thinking of the same action performed by her author:

'My name is Kavan now,' she said, forcing, with difficulty, a slight smile. The words sounded foolish as they came out of her mouth.<sup>2</sup>

But the archival evidence showing that Helen Edmonds conceived her change of name as a way of completely reinventing herself, suggests that she did not consider the character of 'Anna Kavan' to be a direct representation of her younger self.

Any discussion of this text and its author invites confusion; in future references I will refer to the character Anna or 'Anna Kavan' and her author Kavan or Anna Kavan. In *Let Me Alone* there is some self-consciousness surrounding the narrative's fictional category. Ferguson uses literary genre as trope to create mood, identifying ex-pat society with 'the sort of atmosphere which one expects to meet in mid-Victorian fiction' and portraying Anna's first impressions of Burma as 'a fairy-tale country come alive'.<sup>3</sup> More significantly, Anna's life itself is represented metaphorically as a text;

So the first bright infantile page of Anna's life was turned, and before her lay a new page, neither so bright nor so innocent, a page whereon the shadows were already beginning to fall.<sup>4</sup>

This self-consciously storybook rendering of Anna's development again reinforces the notion that Helen Ferguson wrote the character 'Anna Kavan' not as a testimonial account of her life, but as a deliberate fiction. Reading the character not as an autobiographical representation of Helen Ferguson as she was, but as an artful projection of herself into the fictional dimension, alters the principle of her renaming; in taking the name Anna Kavan she resolves to be her own creation, the author of her own life with the agency to write her own fate. Like the

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Kavan, *Who Are You?* (London: Peter Owen, 2002), 204.

<sup>3</sup> *Let Me Alone* (London: Peter Owen, 1974), 244, 255.

<sup>4</sup> Kavan, *Let Me Alone*, 23.

hypertextuality of her writing, in taking this name Kavan draws attention to her fictional craft.

If the narrator of *Let Me Alone* is conscious of 'Anna Kavan's' fictional status, Anna herself experiences feelings of unreality, of her own fictionality, feelings induced by the man from whom she takes her name – her husband Matthew Kavan. Pressured into marriage by her Aunt Lauretta, Anna agrees to the match as a means of escape from her stifling existence with her aunt and uncle, becoming almost lifeless with submission during her short engagement. Entirely incompatible in age and temperament, the couple's relationship is doomed to oscillate between benign indifference and absolute hatred. To Anna, Matthew is unreal and inhuman, a sort of empty mechanical figure, an automaton, an agent of the machine of social conformity that will feature in Kavan's later work. Their psychological estrangement, together with Anna's rejection of any sexual contact, leads to enmity, violence and marital rape. Her revulsion and fear of physical intimacy can be traced to the scene early in the novel when Anna's father approaches her while she is bathing:

Anna would have liked to jump away from the stealthy touch; but she was ashamed to do that. So she sat still, very tense and uncomfortable, while James Forrester's hand moved down her arm with the strangest, softest, most disturbing touch imaginable. Then raised itself and touched, just lightly touched with bent fingers the cool curve of her neck where tiny runnels of water were still creeping from her wet hair.<sup>5</sup>

James Forrester's desire for his thirteen year old daughter in *Let Me Alone* seems to have no autobiographical basis; Kavan's own father jumped to his death from the prow of a ship when she was just ten years old, suggesting some genetic precedent to the severe depression that would affect her throughout her life. This disturbing episode colours Anna's future relationships with both friends and lovers and there are unsettling correlations between her father and husband, who is of course much older than her. White flowers on her wedding day remind her 'of funerals, and of her father' as she feels prepared for sacrifice in her simple white dress.<sup>6</sup> The thought of sexual contact with her new husband horrifies her as 'something shocking and unnatural' and later the idea of her conceiving a child by him is again

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<sup>5</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 135.

'unnatural, almost shocking', feelings that seem more appropriate to the early encounter with her father.<sup>7</sup> As their relationship deteriorates, Anna's indifference to Matthew makes him 'feel he could kill her' and like her father before him, he feels both sexual desire and murderous intent towards her.<sup>8</sup>

Never willingly engaging in any physical contact with her husband, Anna's level of physical resistance to him varies but not her lack of desire. Locking herself in the bathroom on their wedding night, she evades Matthew's advances for as long as she can, seemingly bewitched or possessed in this action of defiance. The physical confrontation between them finally takes place en route to Burma:

Her blood ran cold with the horror of his unreality, with the horror of the thing he threatened, and with humiliation, and with the bitterness of lonely despair. She was a helpless traveller alone in the night. And what was he? She felt herself his victim.

Just for a moment, she struggled wildly to defend herself. But when she felt his strength, the tough, monkeyish strength of his long arms about her, she knew she had no chance against him.<sup>9</sup>

This horror of Matthew's unreality troubles Anna with something more than a sense of the uncanny; as the marriage goes on, her prolonged contact with him begins to infect her with the same symptoms, inducing in her sensations of the unreality that she perceives in him:

Matthew's unreality affected her strangely. It seemed to make her unreal also. [...] She was unreal. She was not herself. [...] She felt as though she had lost herself. Her personality was absent. She was like a mechanical thing moving about, with no real existence.<sup>10</sup>

Matthew's lack of actuality robs Anna of her own, she too becomes a clock-work figure, performing the role expected of her in ex-pat social life but without real existence. Like a character in a play her conversation becomes like 'a dialogue heard in a theatre' but rather than acting the part, Anna is her own audience, watching herself from the outside.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 125, 290.

<sup>8</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 289.

<sup>9</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 251.

<sup>10</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 285.

<sup>11</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 286.



With a vague surprise she heard her own voice speaking. But it was not she herself who spoke. She was simply not there. She had no contact with anything. There was no meaning in the world in which she now moved, it was made up of shapes and noises, without reality or consequence. [...] Then everything became blank. The loneliness completely extinguished her, it washed over even her fictitious self. She was nothing.<sup>12</sup>

Anna's 'fictitious self' participates in her life while she is curiously absent, emotionally disengaged but observing. She seems to slip in and out of her self, sometimes being Anna and sometimes watching Anna, and when she is fully engaged she is horrified, even terrified, by her existence. In this early text, Helen Ferguson's description of her character's feelings of dislocation predicts R D Laing's 'divided self' by over thirty years. Biography muddies rather than illuminates a reading of this text; as a fictional representation of Helen Ferguson, Anna splits into authentic and fictional selves, only to be given new ontological status by Helen Edmonds when she takes her name. To be conscious of the author's life here is to find oneself in a literary hall of mirrors, attempting to follow the reflections of an ever increasing number of 'real' and fictional Anna Kavans.

The horror Anna feels at Matthew's unreality is connected to a fear of her own existential annihilation, never more strongly experienced than when she is the object of his sexual desire. In her marriage she is sentenced to be her own spectator, exiled from her very existence, with no agency over her own life. Even before their marriage, under Matthew's gaze she feels 'as if he would stare her out of existence altogether'.<sup>13</sup> Anna's sensation of being looked at by both Matthew and herself recalls John Berger's formative 1972 analysis of the male gaze. Berger maintains that within traditional patriarchal frameworks, like the social world Anna inhabits, the presence of men and women differs. His argument is encapsulated in his statement that '[m]en look at women [...] [w]omen watch themselves being looked at', and Berger proposes that women's sense of self is affected by their position as an object of spectacle for men:<sup>14</sup>

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within

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<sup>12</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 286.

<sup>13</sup> *Who Are You?*, 131.

<sup>14</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), 41.

such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.<sup>15</sup>

This split described by Berger appears key to Anna's perception of her two selves. It is in the presence of Matthew or the men at the club that she finds herself watching her 'fictional self' performing her gender. The watched self acts out her social duties as mature female, wife, woman and potential mother; the watching self is the girl, if not a child perhaps an adolescent. Kavan takes this even further, Anna is not only split in two but also engulfed, she disappears entirely.

In a conflation of emotional and atmospheric tension prevalent in Kavan's work, the conflict between Anna and Matthew intensifies with the approach of monsoon and reaches its climax on the night the storm finally breaks. Anna is expecting a child and the realization of her pregnancy is a shameful disaster to her; a child will tie her to Matthew and the degradation of finally capitulating to his dominance is intensified by her feelings of bodily desecration. The peculiar revulsion she has always felt for the mature female form is now turned in on herself and as she becomes physically more womanly she begins to despise her own body. Anna's desire to remain childlike and androgynous can be understood in the light of her early experience with her father, but the asexuality of Helen Ferguson's protagonist in *Let Me Alone* is a feature that carries over into the greater part of Anna Kavan's writing. The child-woman reappears throughout Kavan's later writing, becoming her archetypal female protagonist. In *Who Are You?* 'the girl' lives up to her name in her physically childlike and asexual characteristics, and the nameless 'girl' reappears over and over again in her stories. By 1967 'the girl' reaches her most extreme embodiment in *Ice*; white blond, nameless, fragile, boyishly slender and always the object of a terrible male desire for sexual domination. Kavan's fictional portrayal of women's feelings of profound physical degradation during sex, pregnancy and childbirth can also be witnessed in Celia Hanzell in *Change the Name* and both Regina and Mona in *A Scarcity of Love*. Anna's denial of conjugal rights is also a feature of a number of other Kavan/ Ferguson texts, most notably *Goose Cross* in which Judith Spender's miscarriage has extinguished her desire for a physical relationship with her husband Thomas. This sexless and childlike

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<sup>15</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 40.

protagonist is neither entirely woman nor girl, perhaps closer to the transitional stage of adolescence.

In *Let Me Alone*, Anna is not simply stuck in this liminal state; she desires to remain there, refusing the determining force of her fixed identity as a woman, and in particular as a mother. Growing up, Anna dresses as a boy and at school she rejects both feminine triviality and the aping of masculine pursuits; she has a suspicion of conventionally male and female attributes, maintaining a strict androgyny. Hints towards a 'romantic' relationship with her female school-friend Sidney do not point conclusively towards lesbian desire, for Anna is revolted by mature female sexuality as much as by male. Rather, what attracts her to Sidney is that same unfixed, androgynous sexual identity she herself displays. Anna's aggressive rejection of normative sexuality and gender roles cannot be reconciled with her marriage to Matthew and lies at the heart of their antagonism. On the night the rains come Anna rejects another of Matthew's drink-fuelled sexual advances and, ignorant of the pregnancy, he begins to beat her. Walking out into the tropical storm she is bludgeoned and buffeted by the wind and rain, and returning to the house she falls ill and miscarries the child:

She seemed to have suffered an unnatural partial death. Her spirit was dead. Why did her body still linger in life?

She was dead, and yet she was alive. [...] There would be no child. She was glad of that. She was glad that Matthew had not known about the child, that no one had known. It would be a secret now, for ever.<sup>16</sup>

Despite her terrible dismay at the thought of having Matthew's child, its loss, brought on by Matthew's beating or by her ordeal in the tropical storm, is experienced by Anna as a 'partial death'. Dead and yet alive, she becomes even more the unreal automaton, a zombie. Though the child tied her to Matthew, to her non-existence as his wife, and the miscarriage releases her from her determined role of woman, she still experiences the loss of this part of herself.

Both Anna and Matthew Kavan reappear in Helen Ferguson's next novel *A Stranger Still*, published five years after *Let Me Alone*. The autobiographical element of Ferguson's writing is further troubled by this book's disclaimer that 'no portrait is intended of any real character, alive or dead'. Picking up their story two

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<sup>16</sup> Kavan, *Let Me Alone*, 317.

years after we left them, Anna has walked out on her marriage and is living in London while Matthew remains in Burma. No longer the focus of the narrative, Anna becomes only one of a number of protagonists in the complex action of the novel, but she exhibits greater levels of self-analysis and her psychological drama is played out against the plot intrigues of the other characters. Her story centres on her love affair with artist Martin Lewison, whose life history bears a strong resemblance to that of Kavan's second husband Stuart Edmonds. Feeling that his artistic drive would be compromised by their relationship, Martin chooses to end the affair and the novel ends with the likelihood of Anna's reconciliation with Matthew Kavan. Though her story is woven into the larger narrative, Anna's significance is highlighted in both the novel's title and its final scene. 'A stranger still' are the words of a song that sticks in Anna's head after the break from Martin. In one of her deep depressions she takes this to express her condition as emotional exile; '[t]here was no home for her now in life. Anna Kavan was condemned to remain a stranger until she died'.<sup>17</sup> Anna's bleak existence and moments of terrible despair in *A Stranger Still* again place a question mark against Ferguson's decision to take this name. But this character's profound sense of non-belonging strongly presages Kavan's later writing of protagonists predestined for lives as dispossessed outsiders.

At the novel's conclusion Martin thinks of 'the girl Anna Kavan' and decides to paint her portrait as a monument to the time they spent together.<sup>18</sup> The painting turns out to be his artistic epiphany and masterpiece, a testament to Anna, his thanks for their time together. Under his gaze, the painting of her becomes oddly animated:

He gazed at the woman upon the canvas, and from the canvas the woman gazed back at him with her blue-grey eyes, innocent, serious, remote, glamorous, strangely moving, as if watching him from a dream.<sup>19</sup>

From her dreamscape, 'Anna Kavan' looks out at Martin Lewison and unlike Matthew Kavan his gaze animates rather than objectifies her. As an artwork rather than a woman Anna has both an agency and a certain enchantment in which it is possible to recognize something of Walter Benjamin's concept of the aura. For

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<sup>17</sup> Anna Kavan, *A Stranger Still* (London: Peter Owen, 1995), 231.

<sup>18</sup> Kavan, *A Stranger Still*, 297.

<sup>19</sup> *A Stranger Still*, 301.

Benjamin, the unique quality of authority and authenticity which makes up the aura of a work of art derives from its historical testimony and its spatial and temporal presence. The aura animates the traditional work of art with life-like characteristics:

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man [...] To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.<sup>20</sup>

Anna's portrait represents this reciprocal gaze in a very literal sense but the aura, so bound up with the temporal existence of the artwork, is that of the painting and not Anna's own. The transposition of human response identified by Benjamin can be seen played out in Martin's feelings toward the picture, which echo those he had for Anna when they fell in love. In ending their affair Martin sought to protect his integrity as a artist, and in keeping with this he is more beguiled by the aura of the artwork than by the aura of Anna herself; the painted Anna moves him more than the living one. Though he is enthralled by her in paint, she is an undemanding substitute for the woman he has rejected; the 'Anna Kavan' of the painting has none of the economic or emotional needs of a real woman. Returning to John Berger's useful thoughts on the male gaze and the representation of woman in art, he too makes reference to a type of aura, emanating not from the artwork but from women:

Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura.<sup>21</sup>

Although Berger credits the influence of Benjamin on his thinking, his gendered aura is not equivalent to Benjamin's formulation; this presence of woman is neither authentic nor autonomous but a constructed persona, a survival technique. Berger applies his feminist argument to a category of art in which women are the principal subjects – the figure of the nude in European oil painting. He demonstrates that the nudity of the women depicted is nakedness on display and just as the nude is female, the assumed gender of the spectator is male. The women in these

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', *Illuminations*, trans. by. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 184.

<sup>21</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 40.

paintings perform the function of objects for the gaze of the spectator-owner. Yet while Berger argues convincingly that these paintings objectify their subjects, the painted 'Anna Kavan' becomes conversely animated and exempt from the objectification of male desire. The painted Anna is Martin's creation but she is neither a Pygmalion nor a narcissistic reflection of himself but an autonomous instance of Benjamin's traditional artwork. This painted image is the last representation of the fictional 'Anna Kavan' in Helen Ferguson's work before she claimed the name as her own. Brought to life in Martin's painting as she was in Ferguson's novel, Anna Kavan is destined to reside in the work of art. She is a dream figure, a spectre, she thrives in the realms of fantasy – the work of art, the dream.

In 1963, over three decades after *Let Me Alone* was published, the plot and characters from the Burmese episode of 'Anna Kavan's' life are clearly recognizable in *Who Are You?*. The marriage of Anna and Matthew Kavan is rewritten here not once but twice – a peculiar temporal schism disturbs the otherwise linear development of the novel as the narrative skips back unexpectedly to an earlier moment in the plot, repeating the previous events with minor changes. This reiteration is a replaying rather than a retelling of the events; the third-person narrator's perspective remains the same but the situation and the characters' experiences of it are subtly altered. Burma in *Who Are You?* becomes an unidentified British colony and the protagonists too lose their names, identified instead by monikers determined by their physical, or perhaps psychological, attributes; Matthew Kavan becomes Mr Dog Head and Anna is simply 'the girl'. The background to the couple's dysfunctional relationship is lost but their antagonism remains; yet the girl is more emotionally detached from her husband than Anna from Matthew and she is less truly horrified and intimidated by him. The novels' titles reveal their shift in perspective; Anna's anguished plea of persecution 'Let Me Alone' turns inward and becomes a cry of existential uncertainty 'Who Are You?'. On the whole the Kavan texts are substantially shorter than the Ferguson novels; *Who Are You?* is no exception, covering less than a fifth of the action of *Let Me Alone*. A comparison of the two texts is a revealing exercise in charting the changes that Helen Ferguson's writing style underwent in becoming Anna Kavan's. The excess of emotion in *Let Me Alone* is typical of the Ferguson novels; Anna's every experience is a dreadful torment, an incredible confirmation of the awfulness of her

existence. *Who Are You?* is written in the bleaker, sparser language that characterizes the Kavan texts; less melodramatic, it is more effective in expressing despair, describing a bleaker mode of existence, a quiet fatality – no less awful, but more nihilistic. In the second run of events in *Who Are You?* the language is further condensed, even starker than the first.

Close reading of the two texts side by side shows that in places Kavan directly reworked her earlier narrative, compiling, condensing and rearranging descriptive passages. The images become stronger, weirder, more hallucinatory in the rewriting and yet more commonplace at the same time. A good comparative illustration can be drawn from the description of the approach of monsoon; spread over two chapters of *Let Me Alone* it is first condensed into several pages of *Who Are You?* and in the second run summarily dealt with in a couple of sentences. In the Ferguson text the sequence opens '[b]y the middle of April it was almost too hot to live'.<sup>22</sup> The temporal specificity becomes more immediate in *Who Are You?* and '[i]t has now become almost too hot to live'; in the second iteration the passage becomes even further condensed to '[n]ow it becomes almost too hot to live'.<sup>23</sup> The shifting tense of these three phrases marks the increasing urgency in the telling of events, from past tense to perfect to the present, heightening the immediacy of experience and amplifying the reader's involvement in the experience. The following passages in *Who Are You?* take impressions from across an entire chapter of *Let Me Alone*. Some motifs remain almost unchanged in the translation from Ferguson to Kavan. In the original *Let Me Alone*:

A curious coppery film, like a veil of electricity made visible, hung in the upper air.<sup>24</sup>

Only the change in tense marks any substantial difference in *Who Are You?*:

A peculiar coppery film hangs in the upper air, as though electricity were made visible.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, on the whole, even the same images are altered in the later text. Kavan strips Ferguson's descriptions of any explicit sense of the bizarre, often changing simile to

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<sup>22</sup> Kavan, *Let Me Alone*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> *Who Are You?*, 78, 110.

<sup>24</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 306.

<sup>25</sup> *Who Are You?*, 78-9.

metaphor and editing out most references to Anna's aesthetic or emotional response. In *Let Me Alone*, Anna is disturbed by the extraordinary and surreal beauty of the landscape:

There was a changing, eerie beauty about the landscape. From day to day it altered, assuming gradually a strange, coppery, metallic brilliance, almost orange-coloured, like a Martian landscape. There was something unbelievable about it, really other-worldly. You could imagine yourself on some other planet.<sup>26</sup>

In the rewriting of this passage the language is condensed, the human response is lost, and the alien and the incredible become commonplace. The metamorphosis of the environment is less strange and less beautiful:

The world is assuming a uniform coppery tinge with shades of orange, like a Martian landscape.<sup>27</sup>

In contrary motion, as Anna's response is edited out the landscape itself displays human characteristics, in *Let Me Alone*:

Every day a little hotter than the last, with the hot sun riding up, blinding bright, into the burning sky, and the cauldron-like earth simmering below. [...] There was a strange electric stirring and undulating in the fiery atmosphere.<sup>28</sup>

This same sketch in *Who Are You?* animates the environment:

Each morning the sun leaps triumphantly, unchallenged, into an empty sky [...] while the red-hot earth seethes like an immense cauldron in the eerie thunderlight of an eclipse, electric tremors vibrating in the breathless air.<sup>29</sup>

The measure of the rising sun's force is no longer its effect (blinding), but its mood (leaping wilfully and triumphantly), and the hyperbole of Ferguson's 'fiery atmosphere' works harder but achieves less than Kavan's description of the air itself struggling for breath. Bleeding Ferguson's protagonist of both affect and physical sensation, Kavan transfuses these into the landscape, redistributing the tremendous

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<sup>26</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 292-3.

<sup>27</sup> *Who Are You?*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 299-300.

<sup>29</sup> *Who Are You?*, 78.



weight of Anna's emotion into the world itself. Helen Ferguson fails to render a convincing portrait of genuine depression in the character of 'Anna Kavan'; experiencing every emotional difficulty as a dreadful torment, she is only a prima-donna who commands little empathy from the reader. Writing as Anna Kavan, her nameless protagonists are the victims not of a self-indulgent excess of emotion but of a world that conspires in their misery.

### **Ornithology and Ontology**

The significant connection between *Who Are You?* and *Let Me Alone* sheds revealing light on Anna Kavan's literary style and project. Less obvious but very productive rewards can be gained from a comparison of *Who Are You?* with another text, Jean Rhys' literary triumph *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Rhys is often evoked as a comparable writer in references to Kavan, though Kavan is virtually ignored by the extensive and growing body of Rhys scholarship. There are superficial similarities between the two. Both drew heavily on autobiographical material for their fiction, writing novels and stories of isolated, dispossessed and socially stigmatized women, neglected and abused by unloving families and cruel men. Each perceived the overwhelming force of conventional society as a machine. Both writers had a publishing history spanning from the late 1920s to the late 1960s, disappearing from public consciousness after some early success and re-emerging with their most popular work late in life. Yet while *Ice* brought Kavan increased popularity and cult status with a particular readership, the enormous success of *Wide Sargasso Sea* prompted critics of various literary genres to claim Rhys as feminist writer, Caribbean writer, post-colonial writer, Modernist. Though her writing is arguably no more explicitly Modernist in style, Rhys now has a comfortable foothold in the Modernist canon, while Kavan remains on the whole a literary anomaly. Rhys worked on *Wide Sargasso Sea* over a period of many years, revising and rewriting extensively. In a letter to Francis Wyndham reporting on the novel's progress in 1964, she explained:

I've never read a long novel about a mad mind or an unusual mind or anybody's mind at all. Yet it is the only thing that matters and so difficult to get over without being dull.

Anna Kavan's stories I like, and I have her novel *Who Are You?* Very short but what a splendid title. If only I'd thought of it – but it would have been too late in any case.<sup>30</sup>

*Wide Sargasso Sea* was eventually published three years after *Who Are You?* in 1966; Rhys' letter implies that she was reading Kavan's novel while in the final stages of drafting her own and perhaps suggests some influence of Kavan's work on her writing. I would like to explore some profound textual correspondences between these two novels.

Set in the Windward Islands, the second of the three distinct sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea* resonates most strongly with Kavan's novel. Like Kavan's protagonist, Rhys' tragic heroine Antoinette is young and newly married to an Englishman, and like Kavan's text the narrative charts the brief evolution of a marriage in a tropical landscape from which the parties involved are to varying degrees estranged. Rhys' story of the first Mrs Rochester is also the progeny of an earlier text, arising from and engaging closely with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Names, or their lack, are significant in both texts; neither husband's name is revealed to the reader. In Kavan's novel Mr Dog Head is the name by which his native servants refer to him; this title transpires to reveal as much about his psychology as his physical characteristics. Antoinette's husband is addressed as 'Master' or 'Sir' by their servants, and never directly by his wife, and in this way Rhys avoids any direct reference to the name Rochester. As their relationship deteriorates, this man without a name in turn takes Antoinette's name from her and re-identifies her. She queries but disregards this action:

'My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?'  
'Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.'  
'It doesn't matter,' she said.<sup>31</sup>

In the novel's final section Antoinette revokes her dismissal of this speech act, recognising its radical consequences for her sense of self:

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<sup>30</sup> Jean Rhys, *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-66*, ed. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (London: Penguin, 1985), 254-5 (7 March 1964).

<sup>31</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968: Penguin, 1968), 111.

Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass.<sup>32</sup>

The subject of this sentence, the 'I' that watched Antoinette disappear, is unnamed and unidentifiable, for this brutal renaming has banished Antoinette along with her name. Kavan's heroine has no name at all and Rhys' has hers taken from her, and the extent to which they are both left plagued by doubts about their identity is the proof that names do matter.

The naming, or un-naming, of both protagonists is further complicated by their gender and in particular by their status as newly-married woman. In the tradition of bride taking her husband's family name in place of her father's, she is explicitly identified as commodity, the object of a patriarchal transaction in which surname performs the genitive function. Yet the girl is not 'Mrs Dog Head', nor is Antoinette ever 'Mrs Rochester', and their names seem to deny rather than reinforce their position as married women. The girl's title is determined by her youth and childlike condition; though her marriage should have marked a transition into womanhood her name implies the opposite and evokes disturbing echoes of the incest of *Let Me Alone*. We witness Antoinette's name changing throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*; she is born Cosway, becomes Mason through her mother's marriage and now (as the reader knows) Rochester through her own. Although she has already surrendered her surname to her husband he must take her given name from her too, the name which identifies her not as his chattel but as an individual, the part of her that should have remained constant despite her legal status. His justification for this action – 'I think of you as Bertha' – is as insidious as it is nonsensical, within a power structure of masculine dominance his whims rule her reality and identity. Rhys' interpretation of the name given on Rochester's marriage certificate in *Jane Eyre*, 'Bertha Antoinetta Mason', reveals a consciousness of the shifting patterns of control that lie behind a woman's name.

The sexual politics inherent in both Rhys' and Kavan's fiction belie biographical claims that they were anti-feminist and disliked women. Their perceived complicity in patriarchal hegemony is undermined by their fictional representations of women's lived reality. The constellation of name, gender and

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<sup>32</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 147.

identity in the act of matrimony jinxed both their heroines and their own lives; names mattered personally to these writers. Helen Woods became Helen Ferguson and then Helen Edmonds by marriage. Her resolve first to publish under and then take another name coincided with the breakdown of her second marriage; in naming herself Anna Kavan she broke this cycle and with it her identification as male possession, choosing a name associated with her financial and personal autonomy as a writer. Like Anna Kavan, Jean Rhys wrote under another name; born Ella Rees Williams she became Ella Lenglet through marriage and was rechristened Jean Rhys by Ford Madox Ford at the time of her first publication.<sup>33</sup> Though this name was given to her by a man it was not possessive, not his name, and it marked the beginnings of her career as a writer. Rhys' correspondence shows that though she used her nom de plume with friends and literary acquaintances, she still used her married names Ella Tilden Smith and Ella Hamer for practical purposes when necessary, she never fully inhabited her new name as Kavan did.

*Who Are You?*, the 'splendid' title admired by Rhys, is also the call of the brain-fever bird which opens the narrative:

All day long, in the tamarinds behind the house, a tropical bird keeps repeating its monotonous cry, which consists of the same three inquiring notes. Who-are-you? Who-are-you? Who-are-you? Loud, flat, harsh and piercing, the repetitive cry bores its way through the ear-drums with the exasperating persistence of a machine that can't be switched off.<sup>34</sup>

Extending and subverting the significant role of birds in Kavan's earlier work, in *Who Are You?* they no longer represent freedom and joy but revert to their role as cultural symbols of portent. The unrelenting cry of the brain-fever bird recurs throughout the novel, penetrating the girl's consciousness and creeping 'right into her head'.<sup>35</sup> Her impression of the sound is of a perpetual and inevitable mechanism, and though it emanates from the tropical landscape it appears to spring from some unnatural, even supernatural, source. To the girl the insistent questioning of her identity is an assault upon her sanity, its 'sole function seems to be to drive people mad'.<sup>36</sup> The cry is not arbitrary, opening and closing the novel, it marks significant moments in the plot and acts as a literary framing device for the

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<sup>33</sup> Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990), 138.

<sup>34</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Who Are You?*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Who Are You?*, 62.

narrative's temporal schism. As an echo from some external or extra-dimensional plane, the bird sounds the far off call of an omnipresent authorial voice, questioning the identity of this anonymous girl and augmenting the precociously postmodern blurring of Anna Kavan the author and 'Anna Kavan' the character.

An interrogative birdcall also haunts *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Coco, the parrot owned by Antoinette's mother Annette, has a vocabulary limited to the cry 'Qui est là? Qui est là?' and the answer 'Ché Coco'.<sup>37</sup> Coco's plummet from the railings of the family's burning villa early in the novel presages Antoinette's own fatal leap, a scene unwitnessed by the reader of both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. The bad luck associated with seeing a parrot killed distracts the family's persecutors and allows them to make their escape. Like the brain-fever bird's 'Who-are-you?' in Kavan's narrative, Coco's enquiring 'Qui est là?' becomes a refrain in the novel. As birdcall or mimicry both 'Who are you?' and 'Qui est là?' are robbed of real meaning, yet these phrases instigate or express a sense of doubt in the consciousness of the two protagonists which escalates into deep existential anxiety. In both cases, the avian speaker of the question is notably absent; Coco perishes early in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the brain-fever birds always 'remain invisible' in the branches of the tamarinds in *Who Are You?*.<sup>38</sup> In Kavan's narrative the question's disembodied nature augments its power, for '[d]ivorced from its cause, this lingering irritation is able to attach itself to anything in the dark'.<sup>39</sup> It appears that the bird, in both novels, is merely a device with which to introduce a question without a speaker. The call seems to be internalized by the heroine as self doubt, literally 'who am I?', but the grammatical construction of a second person, the 'you' of 'who are you?', the 'there' rather than 'here' of 'who is there?', divides the questioner and respondent. Questioner and answerer are the same person but they do not recognize themselves as such, they are a self divided.

Only towards the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* does the reader learn that Coco's call was always prompted by the sight of a stranger, and the boundary of questioner and respondent is further subverted by his bizarre habit of answering

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<sup>37</sup> Carole Angier's biography of Rhys reports that Coco's cry has its origins in the call of her grandmother's parrot. Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* (London: André Deutsch, 1990). Jennifer Sturm draws a parallel between Rhys' birdcall and Kavan's and suggests that these indigenous birds augment an analogy between marriage and colonisation in the two texts. Jennifer Sturm 'Fictionalising the Facts' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Auckland, 2006), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Who Are You?*, 12.

the question with his own name. The phrase 'Qui est la?', having lost its comforting response, is first taken up by Antoinette's mother as she cries out in grief at her son's death. Significantly, Christophene later describes Annette's experience in terms of a subjective misplacement:

'When she lose her son she lose herself for a while and they shut her away. They tell her she is mad'<sup>40</sup>

Having lost herself she has no answer to the question – Annette remains a stranger to herself. The phrase returns again in the novel's final section when Antoinette, like her mother, has been driven to lose her mind. In her premonitory dream of the burning house she again hears the call 'Qui est la?' and the Rochester character calling 'Bertha, Bertha' as though in response. Here the answer to the question of her identity is the name of her doppelgänger, Antoinette's mad twin, the stranger who has usurped her. Likewise Kavan's girl has no name with which to answer the question 'Who are you?', renamed or nameless, they are both left without a sense of self.

Though the plot and the tropical setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea's* middle section correspond most closely with *Who Are You?*, Antoinette's incarceration in England has a reflective resonance with Kavan's narrative, reversing the situation of the two heroines. Kavan's girl is exiled from England in the tropics, Antoinette is incarcerated in England and thinking of the Caribbean. Memories of their homelands and past lives lead both to the existential doubt expressed by the tropical bird call. The girl wonders '[w]ho am I?', '[w]hy am I here?' and Antoinette asks herself '[w]hat am I doing in this place and who am I?'<sup>41</sup> Being out of place also engenders being out of self.

The moments of tormented self doubt precipitated or expressed by the birds' questions in both novels are something akin to instances of existential angst or anguish. Heidegger's non-theological *angst*, later developed by Sartre and Beauvoir into *angoisse*, seems very close to the deep disquiet and uncertainty experienced by Rhys and Kavan's protagonists. For Heidegger, as for these later

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<sup>40</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 129.

<sup>41</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 30; Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 147.

existentialists, there is a distinction between fear of an entity in the world and 'anxiety' towards that which is 'completely indefinite':<sup>42</sup>

Anxiety 'does not know' what that in the face of which it is anxious is ... it is already 'there', and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one's breath, and yet it is nowhere.<sup>43</sup>

This unsituated yet omnipresent 'anxiety' captures something of the problematic nature of 'Qui est la?' and 'Who are you?', and accommodates the element of doubt as to whether these questions originate from within the protagonists or from without. 'Anxiety' allows for the unanswerable, almost nonsensical nature of the uncertainty expressed by the birds and the genuine yet indefinable terror it inspires. Heidegger describes 'anxiety' as nothing and nowhere, yet the nothingness of 'anxiety' is the nothingness of the world itself – '[t]hat which anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the-world itself'.<sup>44</sup> The phenomenological existentialism of *Being and Time* takes as its focus not a disembodied 'subject' but a Being always already situated in the world, literally *Dasein*. The 'anxiety' of *Dasein* is intrinsically bound up with self awareness and with the opposite, inauthentic everyday involvement in the world characterized by Heidegger as a state of 'falling'. To fall is to live immanently, in the moment, to concern oneself with quotidian matters and to close oneself off from Being – '[i]n falling, *Dasein* turns away from itself'.<sup>45</sup> Here lies both the cause and potential usefulness of *angst* for 'as *Dasein* falls, anxiety brings it back from its absorption in the 'world'.<sup>46</sup> 'Anxiety' does not bring about authenticity, but it calls *Dasein* out of its state of falling, making it aware of its potential for both authentic and inauthentic being:

Anxiety makes manifest in *Dasein* its *Being towards* its ownmost potentiality-for-Being – that is, its *Being-free for* the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1962), 231.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 231.

<sup>44</sup> *Being and Time*, 232.

<sup>45</sup> *Being and Time*, 230.

<sup>46</sup> *Being and Time*, 232.

<sup>47</sup> *Being and Time*, 232.

'Anxiety' makes *Dasein* aware of the possibility of choosing the freedom from which it has fled through falling. While both the 'Who are you?' of Kavan's narrative and the 'Qui est la?' of Rhys' have the character of existential 'anxiety', only a broader investigation of the nature of Being presented in these texts will reveal whether they are the expression of existential *angst* in a strict sense. Though the question plagues the girl, she can think of no purpose to it except to drive the hearer to madness, it does not seem to her to be connected to her difficult life situation. Yet the reader can observe its intrinsic relation to her awareness of this situation, her exploration of the possibility of changing her fate and to the dimensional split in the narrative. For the girl her 'anxiety', like the cries of the birds, is almost relentless, but in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the call of 'Qui est la?' and the moments of existential uncertainty are infrequent. In Heidegger's account, though instances of 'anxiety' are rare it is a basic state-of-mind; all fear, seemingly distinct from 'anxiety', is only a manifestation of 'anxiety' displaced, '[f]ear is anxiety, fallen into the 'world', inauthentic, and, as such, hidden from itself'.<sup>48</sup> Though existential questioning does not saturate Rhys' text in the way it does Kavan's, her high opinion of Kavan's title – 'If only I'd thought of it' – indicates that this doubt about identity is also central to her narrative.

### **Imagination and Existence**

John Rolph suggested one major editorial change to the manuscript of *Who Are You?* to which Kavan readily agreed – the exclusion of the novel's original opening page which was to take the form of an authorial message to the reader:<sup>49</sup>

There's no answer to the brain-fever bird's question because the process of becoming an individual is complete only when life is. Each person has many identities, according to the changing pressures and conditions of his existence. The "you" of one situation is not the you of another.

Who you are at any given moment in life is determined by unpredictable circumstances, beyond your control – you are the product of your environment etc.

The people in this story live through the same situations twice over. But they are not the same, and the outcome is different, because the element of nightmare which predominates in the first experience is in

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<sup>48</sup> *Being and Time*, 234.

<sup>49</sup> The Scorpion Press Archive, Tulsa, Box 5/ Anna Kavan.



abeyance later. Their identities are equally real or unreal in both cases. The you of the birds' question could be either, or both of them – or neither.<sup>50</sup>

This discarded note poses as a key to the novel, but in fact reveals very little, only refusing to answer the problems presented by the text. What it does suggest is that Kavan may have been quite consciously working from existentialist principles in *Who Are You?*. Her central theme of the unfixed and unknowable nature of identity is a fundamental existential concern – existence before essence – and her statement that the process of becoming an individual is complete only when life is reads very like Heidegger's being-unto-death. Yet while the pressures and conditions of existence she refers to can be explained by the existential notion of facticity, Kavan's focus on the determining nature of circumstance and the tyranny of that which is beyond our control does not sit easily with existentialist theory. This note suggests an existentialism without the deep hope of ultimate freedom; environmental factors determine identity and individuality, the question will never be answered, the dread never abates.

It is possible to read the two episodes of *Who Are You?* as an existentially influenced exposition of the problem of identity. The repetition of the girl's situation takes further the split experienced by the character of 'Anna Kavan' in *Let Me Alone*; Anna's sense of being divided into real and fictional selves is made manifest in *Who Are You?* as the girl lives out her existence in two entirely different dimensions. Three decades of increasing familiarity with philosophical and psychological theory inform Anna Kavan's text, but the pull between determining social forces and an existentially authentic unfixed identity is already inherent in Helen Ferguson's early novel. Kavan's unpublished assertion that the outcomes of the two episodes of *Who Are You?* are different is difficult to interpret, for though this unpublished comment points towards the possibility of agency and change the published version of the novel remains ambiguous. In the first telling, Anna walks out into the storm and this is the only outcome the reader is shown, what happens to her there remains unknown. In the second telling if she walks out of the house she has somewhere to go to, there is the possibility that she will leave her husband for good. She pauses to consider her actions but the reader only knows that she thinks about changing her behaviour, not that she does:

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<sup>50</sup> Scorpion Press Archive, Austin, Folder 1.6.

On the spur of the moment, she's made up her mind that chance shall decide her fate.<sup>51</sup>

Later, the opportunity of knowing the story's outcome is dangled in front of the reader as Mr Dog Head almost looks into his wife's room but then does not:

The occupant of the room must be keeping quiet deliberately; or else sleeping soundly. It is also possible that she is not there at all and that the room is empty.<sup>52</sup>

What really changes in this second run of events is not the outcome itself, which remains deliberately indeterminate, but that the girl understands that she has some choice in it. The *angst* of the perpetual 'Who are you?' seems to have drawn attention to her potential for authentic being but her decision to leave her fate to chance is an existentially inauthentic act. The girl's belief that she is ill-fated, that things will go wrong for her whatever she tries to do, denies her freedom and more than this, in not recognizing her freedom she is making a choice.

A dim awareness of the peculiar double nature of the narrative lurks at the back of the girl's mind, surfacing most perceptibly in her conversations with the character identified by his 'Suède Boots', a recreation of Whitaker in *Let Me Alone*. In the earlier text there is no particular affinity between Anna and Whitaker, he instigates visits to her for afternoon tea until Matthew discovers him there and puts a stop to it. The episode is more significant in *Who Are You?* because Anna finds a real friend in Suède Boots and he is fond of and concerned for her, even 'fancies he's falling a little in love with the girl, though not seriously'.<sup>53</sup> Though their liaisons are innocent, she confides in him about her unhappy marriage explaining that her mother dislikes her and has married her off, refiguring the Aunt Laretta character in *Let Me Alone*. Suède Boots plans to introduce the girl to his family as a means of escape from her unhappy situation. In the first telling she cannot bring herself to entertain this possibility, or the idea that she can leave the marriage if she chooses to do so. Suède Boots voices the concerns of the reader in his frustration with her

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<sup>51</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 114.

<sup>52</sup> *Who Are You?*, 116.

<sup>53</sup> *Who Are You?*, 57.

lack of adult autonomy and her inability to act or even hope for change. The girl's feelings presage the jump from the first telling of the story to the second:

If it were possible, she'd like to go on forever re-living that first afternoon, having the same identical conversation ad infinitum. Though she won't admit it, at the back of her mind is a constant dread of some fatal nightmare moment when everything will have to stop.<sup>54</sup>

This re-living comes to pass when the second episode begins, taking the reader back to the girl's conversation with Suède Boots. First time around, Mr Dog Head returns as they are speaking and throws the younger man out of the house with threats of violence; he never returns. In the second iteration of events the girl's conversation with Suède Boots shows more explicitly her instinctive awareness of the narrative repetition. This time she confides in him:

'Before I met you I used to feel as if I was in a nightmare,' she tells him, 'and that I'd never escape.' But she no longer remembers this feeling with any distinctness, and might be describing the sensations of a girl in a book.<sup>55</sup>

Following the 'nightmare climax' of the story's previous incarnation the girl's words suggest that this second experience follows on from the first in a linear progression. Literary reflexivity surfaces again, for she is describing the sensations of a 'girl' in a book. Yet it is impossible to discern whether this girl is herself, a previous 'girl' in the same book, or 'Anna Kavan' whose life was repeatedly described as nightmare in *Let Me Alone*. The dilemma within this text applies to the greater part of Kavan's fiction; she represents girls in books, in dreams and nightmares, all of whom look in many ways like each other, and in many ways like their author. As she reveals 'the you of one situation is not the you of another', we understand that the connection between these Kavan-like figures is both intimate and tenuous. More confusing still is Kavan's statement about the characters in *Who Are You?* whose 'identities are equally real or unreal in both cases'. Second time around, as the girl and Suède Boots discuss her future she allows herself to imagine alternative possibilities for her life, '[t]hey make up all sorts of different plans, each leading to a fresh favourable outcome'.<sup>56</sup> In this dimension the girl is able to grasp a little more of her

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<sup>54</sup> *Who Are You?*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> *Who Are You?*, 98.

<sup>56</sup> *Who Are You?*, 99.

potentiality for freedom, she comes a little closer to authenticity than in the other. Yet she is unable to sustain this optimism and pushes the opportunity for a happy future back into a fictional arena telling him '[i]t's just a fairy tale you've made up about me – it can't possibly come true'.<sup>57</sup> This time when Dog Head returns he restrains himself to the point of simply ignoring the younger man, refusing to speak to him or shake his hand and later Suède Boots secretly returns to see Anna, urging her to leave her husband. If she comes to him he will send her back to his family in England who are prepared to help her. The possibility of a fairytale happy ending is offered to the girl and perhaps this is the different outcome Kavan refers to, but she will not fully acknowledge her own freedom and Kavan's note reveals that her author will not recognize it either. Kavan's appeal to circumstances beyond the girl's control is a disavowal of freedom through which she absolves her character of any responsibility for her situation, but in existential terms it is this very responsibility, the freedom to act, that is the root of existential *angst*.

The echoes of existential theory in Kavan's writing recall her time spent at Ludwig Binswanger's Swiss clinic in 1947 and again in 1948. Binswanger was familiar with Kavan's fictional writing and discussed it with her in the course of her treatment, specifically her stories of the psychiatric patient's experience. Her professional study of psychiatry made her an informed and curious patient and she was familiar with the principles of his method. Binswanger's term *Daseinsanalyse* for his fusion of philosophy, psychiatry and psychoanalysis immediately reveals the strong influence of both Heidegger and Freud on his thinking. However, it is necessary to be wary of taking the Freudian or Heideggerian concepts employed by Binswanger as directly correspondent to their originals. Binswanger's particular style of analysis deviated substantially from Freud's teachings, though this did not damage Freud and Binswanger's longstanding friendship and their disagreements were always very cordial. His thought remains more faithful in intention to the work of Martin Heidegger but his interpretation of some Heideggerian concepts has been subject to charges of misinterpretation and his own evaluation of 'productive misunderstanding'. In his essay *Dream and Existence* (1930) Binswanger works through a selective cultural history, drawing on diverse sources from Greek drama and philosophy to nineteenth century German literature and psychoanalysis for evidence in his analysis. His central tenet that dream is a state of existence, a realm

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<sup>57</sup> *Who Are You?*, 99.

that is 'nothing other than a definite mode of the Being of man', diverges considerably from a Freudian notion of dream as a window into the unconscious.<sup>58</sup> Freud's interest in a connection between fiction and the unconscious is evident both in his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-dreaming' (1907) and more generally in the preoccupation with classical literature which shapes his work. But for Binswanger not only the substance of fiction but poetic language itself sits at the very core of his existential analysis. *Dream and Existence* opens with an examination of literary metaphor and simile and its significance to ontology:

The nature of poetic similes lies in the deepest roots of our existence (*Existenz*) where the living, spiritual form and the living, spiritual content are still bound together.<sup>59</sup>

For Binswanger this unity of form and content, so vital to literary language, expresses something fundamental to our existence. Poetic language does not simply signify meaning, it cannot be translated or interpreted in its fullest sense. Metaphor and simile are not a linguistic synthesis but an expression of an intrinsically integrated structure of meaning:

When, for example, we speak of a high and a low tower, a high and a low tone, high and low morals, high and low spirits, what is involved is not a linguistic carrying over from one sphere of Being [...] to the others, but, rather, a general meaning matrix in which all particular regional spheres have an equal "share", i.e., which contains within it these same particular, specific meanings (spatial, acoustic, spiritual, psychic, etc.) Sinking or falling thus represent a general meaning matrix, a vector meaning pointing from above to below, which contains a particular existential significance "for" our Dasein<sup>60</sup>

Binswanger takes his thoughts on the existential significance of literary language and applies them equally to the realm of dream; like literary figuration the meaning of dream cannot be fully divided from the expression of this meaning. This is Binswanger's radical departure from Freudian dream analysis, his interest in dream lies not in what it might signify but in the expressive act and experience of dream itself. Just as the form and content of poetic language are bound together, the

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<sup>58</sup> Binswanger, *Dream and Existence*, 85.

<sup>59</sup> *Dream and Existence*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> *Dream and Existence*, 82.

imaginative quality of the dream experience is as vital as the meaning that can be drawn from it. Not only are the structures of dream and literary language the same, both also involve experiences of the imagination. Taking an example from Mörke, Binswanger elucidates the way in which simile is experienced by the reader who 'no longer notices it as a simile, but rather, straight away pricks up his ear convinced that: "It is I who am involved, it is I who am the mortally stricken bird of prey"'.<sup>61</sup> If the experience of dream is a mode of being for Binswanger, so is the experience of literature, and he argues in *Dream and Existence* that they are not only analogous to the character of existence, they spring from it; '[l]anguage, the imagination of the poet, and – above all – the dream, draw from this essential ontological structure'.<sup>62</sup> For Binswanger then, the stuff of dream and literature are akin; both take their nature from existence itself and this makes them vital to a hermeneutics of Being:

the question as to who "we human beings" actually are has never received less of an answer than it has in our age [...] the answer has been given by poetry, myth and dream rather than by science and philosophy. [...] With respect to the rising and falling of our Dasein, for example, poets have always known that it is equally valid to express the subject, the "who" of this Dasein, by either our bodily form (or by a part of member of this form), or through any property belonging to it or anything that justifies our existence in the world, to the extent that it can serve somehow to express this rising and falling.<sup>63</sup>

Thus metaphor and simile can express truth not only poetically but existentially. Binswanger rejects mind/body dualism as well as the division of form and content in poetic language and the meaning matrix of language emulates the unified ontological structure of existence. Paul de Man found Binswanger's work critically significant enough to discuss his ideas on ontology and literature in 'Ludwig Binswanger and the Sublimation of the Self' (1966) and later to include the essay in his collection *Blindness & Insight* (1971). De Man notes that Binswanger's 'contribution to literary criticism has received too little attention' and his influence has been felt most prominently in the field of existential psychology.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Dream and Existence*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> *Dream and Existence*, 83.

<sup>63</sup> *Dream and Existence*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Paul de Man, 'Ludwig Binswanger and the Sublimation of the Self' in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 36.

Binswanger's existential treatise opens new areas for interpreting the 'anxiety' of both *Who Are You?* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Though the *angst* of both protagonists comes from nowhere, from the non-presence of the tropical birds, these agents of confusion and disquiet might be less arbitrary than they appear. For Kavan in particular the bird is a pervasive symbol in her work; birds populate her stories, sometimes fulfilling superstitions of portent but more often suggesting what is wild, free and beautiful. Real and metaphorical birds haunt *Asylum Piece* and *I Am Lazarus* in particular, as the poignant other of the caged psychiatric patient. In *Dream and Existence*, Binswanger places particular emphasis on one symbol or trope in particular – the bird in both dream and literature:

If it is true of both ancient and modern poetry, and true of dreams and myths of all ages and peoples – that again and again we find that the eagle or the falcon, the kite or the hawk, personify our existence as rising or longing to rise and as falling – this merely indicates how essential to our Dasein it is to determine itself as rising or falling.<sup>65</sup>

From Binswanger's perspective the significance of the parrot and the brain fever bird to the existential elements of Rhys and Kavan's literary texts is not incidental. Coco's wings have been clipped by Mr Mason, his potential for flight has been curtailed and this ultimately results in his doom; unable to fly from the burning villa, like Antoinette he plummets instead to his death. The brain fever birds announce their presence but are never seen and only heard, they inhabit the impenetrable branches of the tamarind trees and not the sky. We never witness these birds in flight, they are grounded, not actually falling as Coco does but never utilizing their capacity to rise, only pursuing their ambiguous and disquieting calls. Following Binswanger's theories they do not simply represent the protagonists' state of being fallen, as symbol the birds allow the reader, through the imaginary experience of the text, to become involved in the *angst* and unfreedom these novels portray. Binswanger's focus on the bird as symbol is relevant to Kavan's text in particular, for her protagonist matches most closely Heidegger's description of the state of being fallen, which Sartre would later characterize as bad faith. Binswanger concludes his thoughts in *Dream and Existence* by reaffirming the ontological significance of dream to an examination of existence and 'anxiety':

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<sup>65</sup> Binswanger, *Dream and Existence*, 85.

This is the basic ontological element of all dreaming and its relatedness to anxiety. To dream means: I don't know what is happening to me. From the I and the Me there again emerges, to be sure, the individual [...] in no way, however, does the individual emerge as he who makes the dream, but rather as the one for whom – “he knows not how” – the dream occurs. And this individual is, here, none other than “the selfsame” in the sense of “personal numerical identity” (Kant): purely formal indication, without substance, it is the plaything of rising and falling life, the roar of the sea and the stillness of death, the brilliance of sun-bathed colour and shadowy night, the sublime form of the eagle in flight and the chaotic heap of paper upon the floor, the splendour of a young maiden, the scent of seaweed, the corpse of a fallen bird, the powerful, terrible bird of prey, and the gentle dove. An individual turns from mere self-identity to becoming a self or “the” individual, and the dreamer awakens in that unfathomable moment when he decides not only to seek to know “what hit him”, but seeks also to strike into and take hold of the dynamics in these events, “himself” – the moment, that is, when he resolves to bring continuity or consequence into a life that rises and falls, falls and rises.<sup>66</sup>

Binswanger's extraordinary conclusion resonates with many of the elusive elements of Kavan's *Who Are You?*. Though he gives no definition of the term 'anxiety', we can take it from his consistent use of Heideggerian terminology that he bases this upon Heidegger's concept which seems to fit comfortably with the *angst* of Kavan's protagonist. The I and the Me of the dream identified by Binswanger recall the 'I' and the 'you' of 'Who are you?', the apparently split self in its anxious confusion of identity. For Binswanger this split is merely an illusion of 'anxiety' and again his break with Freudian dream analysis is demonstrable. For Freud the dreaming subject 'represents' the dreamer and is objectified, for Binswanger the dreaming subject is “the selfsame” as the dreamer, the dream is an experience of existence itself. Though for Binswanger as well as Kavan 'there's no answer' to the question of identity, the questioning itself is a turning from 'mere self-identity' and a step in reaching towards the continuity or consequence of authentic existence. The experience of dream, and by inference the experience of literature, can bring us closer to ontological understanding; though we can never know the answer to the question of 'Who are you?', in grasping freedom there is the potential for the question to cease.

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<sup>66</sup> *Dream and Existence*, 102.



## Sex and Existence

The existential analysis of both Heidegger and Binswanger are very pertinent to *Who Are You?* and to Kavan's writing more generally, but what is missing in the analysis of both these thinkers is gender. Perhaps it is enough in existential theory to put sexual politics down to the contingency of life situation, to consider the social circumstances of men and women as mere facticity which can limit our choices but cannot determine the choice made and does not deny our freedom. But the texts of both Kavan and Rhys seem to point to limitations in women's lived experience which restrict all choice, and which can constitute and confuse their sense of identity. The particularly feminine *angst* of both texts expresses the problems of a mode of existence which cannot be found in the existentialist writings of Heidegger or Sartre, but in the gendered experience of inauthenticity described by Simone de Beauvoir. Many of the themes of these literary texts – sex, marriage, economic dependence – are specifically explored in Beauvoir's feminist existential treatise *The Second Sex*. Though her thesis does not depart dramatically from the existential principles of her male counterparts, her focus on gender does shift emphasis from Heidegger's study of transcendent being into a more political arena:

Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. [...] The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential.<sup>67</sup>

Beauvoir's existentialism sticks firm to the principle that existence precedes essence but she places greater emphasis on situation, dedicating a substantial portion of her study to this. She broadens the existential implications of circumstance from mere facticity to take account of the deep psychological repercussions of social inequality. It is possible to take from Beauvoir's argument the suggestion that in a world without gender equality, freedom and potentiality for being cannot mean exactly the same thing for men and women. If woman's choice is more limited it follows that she will suffer greater *angst* and this is 'the drama of woman' we see played out in the fiction of Rhys and Kavan. Yet if *angst* implies the potential for freedom,

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<sup>67</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M.Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), 29.

this places the responsibility for women's oppression squarely at their own door. The explicitly moral interpretation of authenticity and inauthenticity – good and bad faith – introduced by Sartre and Beauvoir is also troubling in this respect. Beauvoir's philosophy leaves men and women equally culpable and equally excusable for the parts they play in a social inequality that involves the bad faith of all who are involved in creating or complying with it. Resistance to oppression and inequality is certainly possible for Beauvoir, and much of *The Second Sex* examines the ways in which women choose to refuse or comply with their situation, but situation itself guides women away from freedom as well as towards it:

it is not a mysterious essence that compels men and women to act in good or in bad faith, it is their situation that inclines them more or less towards the search for truth<sup>68</sup>

The emphasis on women's situation in *The Second Sex* sits more comfortably with Kavan's exegesis of her characters in *Who Are You?* than a less politically positioned existentialism. Beauvoir's inclusion of gender inequality creates a space, however small, for the 'circumstances beyond your control' that Kavan's 'girl' is subject to in her struggle for freedom and identity.

The split caused by *angst*-ridden confusion of identity in *Who Are You?* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the self divided as questioner and respondent or as watcher and watched, sits in close relation to the self reflected, the mirror image. The powerful symbolic significance of the looking glass in *Wide Sargasso Sea* repeatedly calls up the image of a self not cleaved in two but doubled. Antoinette's reflection appears in places other than mirrors throughout the text, most strikingly in the face of her childhood friend Tia. In the moment Tia throws a stone at her, the complex legacy of racial hatred which is the root of Antoinette's unhappiness is summoned most poignantly:

We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.<sup>69</sup>

The reflection Antoinette sees in Tia's face brings to the foreground her own liminal status – neither black nor wholly white. This act of hatred, not fully understood by

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<sup>68</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 38.

either girl, paradoxically brings them closer. Here the reflected image metaphorically represents a confusion of identity, but literally it can also achieve the opposite. The looking-glass is one of the items associated with Antoinette's identity that she sees drift out of the window when she is renamed:

There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself.<sup>70</sup>

Significantly, without her mirror image Antoinette doubts 'what I *am* like' and not 'what I *look* like'; the reflection plays a role in reinforcing self-knowledge. Yet the girl in the glass is 'myself yet not quite myself' at one and the same time, the reflected image can both reinforce and destabilize sense of identity. As she wanders through the house in England unsupervised Antoinette does catch sight of herself in the mirror, but she misrecognises her own reflection.

In an episode in *Who Are You?* that does not feature in *Let Me Alone*, Mr Dog Head wanders drunk and naked into his wife's room hoping to admire his full reflection 'far from clear in his own mind whether it is his wife or the mirror he wants'.<sup>71</sup> His inebriated conflation of woman and looking glass follows the pattern of Matthew's desire for Anna in *Let Me Alone*:

The horrid part was that though he stared hungrily at Anna, he did not seem to see her at all, as an individual. She, personally, did not exist as far as he was concerned; he had reduced her to a sort of extension of himself.<sup>72</sup>

Mr Dog Head's search for a reflection of himself in his wife, like Matthew's projection of himself onto Anna, represents male desire as narcissism in which woman plays the role of looking glass, obliterating her as a person. In an irrational temper Mr Dog Head smashes the only full-length mirror in the house:

A tremendous crash follows, and then the prolonged tinkle of falling glass. The chair has crashed into the mirror and smashed it to smithereens, which sobers him up slightly. He feels a fugitive, remote guilt connected with the destruction of the glittering eye on the wall.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 147.

<sup>71</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 150-1.

<sup>73</sup> *Who Are You?*, 27.

The significance of this action is never fully explicated, but like the disembodied voice channelled by the brain-fever bird, the eye on the wall points again to an external presence, to something or someone looking into the world of the text. The girl never looks at herself in a mirror, just as she is without a name she has no reflected image, but the influence of autobiography on both *Let Me Alone* and *Who Are You?* again calls to notice the murky line between the world of Kavan's text and reality; the character of 'Anna Kavan' was Helen Ferguson's literary reflection, in an uncanny twist she stepped out of the mirror of fiction to take her author's place.

The mirror image is a recurring feature of Kavan's work and her earlier writing displays a preoccupation with the dual meaning of 'glass'; the seemingly distinct occurrences of the looking glass and glass in its transparent form; for Kavan the latter represents an invisible division between self and others, self and the world, the metaphorical bell jar of isolating solipsism. Anna experiences this in *Let Me Alone*; struck by the beauty and dignity of the native people she longs to become a part of their world but cannot, watching it as if 'through a glass window'.<sup>74</sup> In her story 'Who Has Desired the Sea' (1945) Kavan takes this further in the mind of her soldier protagonist, hospitalized for war neurosis.<sup>75</sup> His disengagement from both the world around him and his own emotional responses is experienced as imprisonment in a glass cell. This isolation places him beyond the help of others but also protects him from the emotional pain of the trauma he has suffered. He is preoccupied by an endless search for an unnamed young man and slowly the reader begins to realize that although he is unaware of it, he is looking for himself, for the self of his past.

Kavan's story plays on the word 'glass' as the narrative shifts between his reflection in the mirror and his sense of isolation behind the invisible walls of his glass cell. Like Antoinette's misrecognition of her own reflection as a ghost surrounded by a gilt frame at the close of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, he is unable to equate the image in the mirror with the memory of the young man he knows he must find. Only when he catches sight of himself accidentally does he recognize the man he remembers, but he cannot comprehend that he is the original of the reflected image. In both his memories and in his search for his lost self, this soldier is looking at, and for, a man who is not himself; he is split in two. It is the passage of time and

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<sup>74</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 280.

<sup>75</sup> Anna Kavan, *I Am Lazarus* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945).

his war experience that have caused the division in his sense of self. He does not recognize the innocent self of his past as the self of his present, and he does not recognize his reflection as himself. The childhood memory of his Grandmother's glass-fronted clock provides an internal image for his state of being and brings together in this one story some of Kavan's greatest preoccupations – time, mechanisation, the divided and the reflected self. The pathological self-misrecognition and lack of stable identity of this soldier suffering from war neurosis is a concentrated manifestation of the girl's existential doubt in *Who Are You?*. This is one instance of Kavan's relocation of the symptoms she paints in her stories of psychiatric breakdown into her writing of the everyday existence of her (female) protagonists.

Many of the themes of Kavan's 1940s writing of the psychiatric experience can be seen in nascent form in the Helen Ferguson novels and later carry into her post-war writing, but these characters are most certainly not mad. Indeed on the whole her representations of psychiatric patients depict not the experience of psychiatric breakdown itself but the encounter with medical professionals and a judgmental and stigmatizing society. In *Who Are You?* the 'madness' or 'delirium' induced by the brain fever bird is the psychic torment of confused identity and existential dread. This aside, any madness in the novel is most apparent not in the girl herself but in her husband, his hatred towards her escalating until he begins to lose all rationality and self-control:

His blue, blazing, lustful eyes are quite close to hers; now, for the first time, she sees in them something dangerous and demented, reminding her of a mad dog, and strains away from him with all her strength.<sup>76</sup>

This description of Mr Dog Head follows from those of Matthew Kavan in *Let Me Alone* whose vicious attacks of temper are characterized as hysteria. As the brain-fever birds' intent seems to the girl to induce madness, she provokes the same feeling in her husband, and he accuses her; 'I believe you're trying to drive me insane!'.<sup>77</sup> But Mr Dog Head's madness is not the tormented self-questioning of *angst*. Despite her calls for society to reevaluate the psychiatric patient, Kavan uses madness here as metaphor, taking the stereotyped qualities of the madman to

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<sup>76</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 112.

<sup>77</sup> *Who Are You?*, 47.

describe behaviour that is dangerous and out of control, the 'mad dog' that is Mr Dog Head.

There are parallels in the politics of Rhys' rewriting of Brontë's madwoman in the attic and Kavan's writing about the social construct of mental illness, though by the 1960s Rhys' approach was less radical than Kavan's contentious writing of the 1940s. Antoinette's madness begins as a mere construct of island gossip and her husband's prejudice and suspicion. His thoughts about and evidence for her insanity are deeply irrational, but they are a nonsense that cannot be argued with and the weight of his judgement eventually erodes Antoinette's own reason, driving her out of her mind. Like the character 'Anna Kavan', a childhood scarred by trauma and neglect influences her adult relationships; Anna's rejection of Matthew's final physical approach towards her which gives Ferguson's novel its title "[l]et me alone", is echoed in the child Antoinette's dismissal by her mother "let me alone [...] let me alone".<sup>78</sup> Less explicitly but just as compellingly as Kavan, Rhys' writing contends that the effects of childhood suffering and social circumstance contribute to psychiatric breakdown.

The marriages of both *Who Are You?* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* have been to the financial advantage of the husband and both men feel themselves to have been bought. A conflicting sense of ownership and of being owned underlies their hostility towards their wives. Mr Dog Head 'wonders why they are married' and 'feels he's been tricked' into it, and the Rochester-character reflects that 'I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks'.<sup>79</sup> This resentment is ill-founded, for both unions have been arranged by the bride's family, against her wishes. Tales of newlyweds in a tropical paradise, the escalation of enmity and abuse in both novels creates the mood of a honeymoon gone horribly wrong. Though both marriages involve sexual violence, the couples' physical relationships are differentiated by desire, or its lack. In *Who Are You?* Mr Dog Head half recollects his infatuation with the girl he married but his former passion has turned to hostility and there is no love on either side of their marriage. Childlike and asexual, the girl is endlessly bewildered by his behaviour and physically intimidated by him; he is infuriated by her passivity and apparent immunity to his explosive temper. Mr Dog Head's passion for his wife springs not from desire but from hatred, his need to

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<sup>78</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 311; Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 20; Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 59.

dominate her, a 'fierce, almost insane antagonism in him, the lust to conquer her'.<sup>80</sup> Even more starkly than *Let Me Alone*, the novel depicts what is plainly a marital rape, carrying the implication that this may be one of many such attacks. In this instance it is a deliberate act of punishment, a husband's attempt to assert ownership of his wife, to act out his hatred towards her and in the first play of events, to tie her to him by forcing her to conceive. In one of the greatest divergences between the stories of *Who Are You?* and *Let Me Alone* the girl, unlike Anna, is not already pregnant. This assault occurs as the storm which has been building finally breaks, and both the first version and the replayed attack are experienced by the girl as a death. In the first instance '... she can't stand it another second ... she's dying ... being horribly murdered ...' and in the second '[s]he's suffocating ... dying ... she's being murdered ...'.<sup>81</sup> Just as the character of Anna lost her sense of real existence as the object of male sexual desire in *Let Me Alone*, sex for the girl is experienced as an assault which will end in her annihilation.

The relationship between Antoinette and her husband is more complex than the reciprocal loathing of *Who Are You?* and shifts more dramatically in the course of Rhys' narrative. The brutal nature of the couple's physical relationship is exposed in the Rochester character's descriptions of his own savage desire, and by the marks that Christophine discovers on Antoinette's body. A torn garment on the bedroom floor is metonymical of an act of sexual violence:

Her torn shift was on the floor, I drew the sheet over her gently as if I covered a dead girl.<sup>82</sup>

Recalling the same trope in *Who Are You?*:

the torn halves of her nightdress, lying among the scattered clothes the man has left where they fell.<sup>83</sup>

Yet in contrast to *Who Are You?* these violent encounters are seemingly with Antoinette's consent, and though her husband's desire for her seems purely physical she begins to love him passionately. As in Kavan's narrative the sexual act becomes a death:

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<sup>80</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 309.

<sup>81</sup> *Who Are You?*, 82, 112.

<sup>82</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 84.

'Say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.'

'Die then! Die!' I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight. ... Very soon she was as eager for what's called loving as I was – more lost and drowned afterwards.<sup>84</sup>

Told as it is from the perspective of the husband, Antoinette's 'death' is not her own experience of orgasm, '*la petite mort*', but rather his perception of her. Her willing admission of subservience to him – 'say die and watch me die' – acknowledges his power over her and the potentially obliterating force of her love for him, but even in this period of relative happiness he engages only in 'what's called loving', not in loving itself. Like his refusal to use her name, their sexual union destroys Antoinette – it is fatal to her. Her pleasure in their physical relationship later becomes a motive for his hatred of her, her sexuality the basis for her madness, and he re-enacts his violence in this misogynist attack.

The distinct narrative positions of the two texts stage sexual violence quite differently; the third-person narrative of *Who Are You?* describes the girl experiencing her own death as she is raped but it is the first-person of Antoinette's husband who observes hers in their violent union. Despite this, in both novels sex is an annihilation of the female by the male – a murder, a death his way. The divergence in consent to the sexual encounters of the two novels becomes immaterial in a legal sense, for at the time both novels were conceived and published, a marriage contract was the measure of consent under any circumstance. Marriage not only frames the experience of these sexual encounters but defines them, for within the bounds of matrimony 'the girl's' experience is without the legal status of rape, it is a non-event. Catherine MacKinnon's analysis of rape questions the way it is both culturally and legally defined, and her study concerns the representation of Antoinette's sexual experience as much as the girl's. She argues that while rape is both common and socially permissible, it is pathologized as a rare and prohibited act. One problem resulting from this paradox is that '[o]nce an act is labelled rape there is an epistemological problem with

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<sup>84</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 77.



seeing it as sex'.<sup>85</sup> For MacKinnon the value of conceptually reconnecting rape and sex is that this can aid in exposing broader structures of inequality in male/female relations:

Considering rape as violence not sex evades, at the moment it most seems to confront, the issue of who controls women's sexuality and the dominance/ submission dynamic that has defined it.<sup>86</sup>

MacKinnon's analysis of rape finds that categories of freedom and consent become impossible to delineate within a social and legal system that privileges men. The violence of the marital sex in Rhys' and Kavan's texts becomes less distinguishable in MacKinnon's terms, for if force and desire in any sexual contact cannot be separated from socially unequal power relations neither heroine is in control of her sexuality. Her study of the status quo of inequality applies the more so to Antoinette who consents to her husband's violence and eroticizes his domination of her. MacKinnon's playful and deeply serious aphorism that '[a]ll women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water' questions the prospect of changing women's situation as she sees it.<sup>87</sup> Her denial of agency to women living under male privilege rejects the central principle of freedom in existentialist thinking, yet her own project is predicated on the intention of practical as well as theoretical transformation. The major difference between MacKinnon's feminist analysis and an existentialist theory of freedom is the force she grants to political reality, taking Beauvoir's allowance for situation much further in her belief that it undermines women's agency for change. Both Antoinette and the girl have the opportunity to leave their abusive marriages, the possibility is proposed to Antoinette by Christophine and to the girl by Suède Boots. They each choose an existentially inauthentic road but their absolute responsibility for doing so is far from certain.

### **Dream-space and Dream-time**

In different ways, both *Who Are You?* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are concerned with unconscious experiences of place and time, temporal and phenomenological happenings governed more by the workings of inner life than the laws of time and

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<sup>85</sup> Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 145.

<sup>86</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 178.

<sup>87</sup> *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 149.

space. To complicate matters, boundaries between dream, delusion and reality are effaced in the texts; both the characters' lived experience and the reader's understanding rely on an overlapping, a type of seepage between the realms of dream and reality. The reader of *Jane Eyre* knows, as Antoinette cannot, that she dreams the future in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, just as the reader of *Who Are You?* sees the girl play out the same episode of her life in two different dimensions. The experiences of dream, madness and delirium in both novels do not stay in their discrete situations, what is represented as objectively 'real' does not stand entirely outside these spheres of unconscious experience and affect.

In *Who Are You?* the descriptive passages of the tropical country that was Burma in *Let Me Alone*, sound is more evocative than sight; the landscape is saturated by noise, not only the unrelenting cry of the brain fever birds but the calls of insects and frogs, the creaking timbers of the house and the chanting of the natives. These sounds seem to carry more meaning than the sparse dialogue of the girl and her husband. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Granbois overwhelms the Rochester character's senses; sound, scent, taste, colour, scale – '[e]verything is too much' for him.<sup>88</sup> Many images of the tropical landscape represented in *Who Are You?* match those of *Wide Sargasso Sea* but their significance does not always correspond. The live rats that Mr Dog Head bats towards his wife in his perverse game of tennis, and which in turn attack him, are the repellent vermin of a post-plague western culture, but the rats Antoinette remembers at Granbois are benign, even mystical creatures. Night insects attracted by light in both novels also seem to be antonymic. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

A great many moths and beetles found their way into the room, flew into the candles and fell dead on the tablecloth.<sup>89</sup>

One moth in particular recalls Brontë's Rochester on the night he reveals his love for Jane in *Jane Eyre*:

"Look at his wings," said he, "he reminds me rather of a West Indian insect; one does not often see so large and gay a night-rover in England: there! he is flown."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 59.

<sup>89</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 67.

<sup>90</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 249.

Rhys echoes this moment in *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

A large moth, so large that I thought it was a bird, blundered into one of the candles, put it out and fell to the floor. 'He's a big fellow,' I said.<sup>91</sup>

Rhys draws a parallel between Antoinette and Jane here and the moth, like the parrot, also stands for Antoinette; only stunned by the flames, its fate is kinder than Antoinette's when her husband helps it to fly away. The flying insects that swarm to a bare electric bulb in Kavan's text are both less benign and have a more gruesome destiny:

Their numbers make them unrecognizable in flight, as they are in death, and their scorched, charred, singed, or still spasmodically twitching bodies pile up on the tabletop [...] a few feebly and lop-sidedly drag their maimed legs, fire-shrivelled wings, and broken antennae some inches further, before they finally twist into lifeless shreds of detritus.<sup>92</sup>

The common images and tableaux of the tropics are on the whole negative in *Who Are You?* and positive in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It is the corresponding features of the environments of the two novels which mark some of the greatest divergences between the narratives.

Reading the colonial spaces in which the dramas of the two marriages are enacted as true representations is problematic, for there is an uncomfortably intimate relationship between the physical environment and the emotional activity which takes place in it. Kavan's heroine is physically exhausted by the tropical heat and mentally estranged from the landscape of her new home, and the hostile and alien environment mirrors her relationship with her husband. Conversely, Antoinette loves the Caribbean island '[a]s if it were a person [...] [m]ore than a person' and much of her suffering springs from her ambiguous relationship to the place and its people, her concurrent belonging and not belonging there.<sup>93</sup> Her affinity with the place plays a part in her estrangement from her husband; conversely her husband is first beguiled then repelled by the island, like Kavan's heroine his feelings for his spouse and his feelings towards the landscape concur.

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<sup>91</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 68.

<sup>92</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 74.

The ways in which the narratives of both texts project these feelings and relationships onto the landscape is difficult to navigate; neither the ostensibly impartial third person of Kavan's text nor the first-person of the Rochester character represent these worlds as we might expect. Granbois is Antoinette's home, it belongs to her; though the bulk of this segment of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is related by her husband, the place retains an aura of positivity that is entirely lacking in Kavan's text. His first-person narrative describes the land as benign and beautiful, despite his own unease there, as though Antoinette's voice can be heard behind his. She asks him '[i]s it true [...] that England is like a dream?' and he responds 'that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream'.<sup>94</sup> What is unreal about the place to him is not translated to the reader; we feel the unreality and dreamlike quality of England when Antoinette finds herself there, but though Granbois is narrated in the voice of Antoinette's husband our sense of it is through her perspective. In *Who Are You?* circumstance has brought the girl to a foreign place but the third-person narrative does not simply portray an unhappy girl in a place she does not know, we are shown the landscape through the prism of her misery. Without announcing any particular allegiance to the girl, the narrator fails to discern the girl's emotion from the environment and it is steeped in her despair. Described time and again as dreamlike and even more often as nightmare, her adoptive country has become confused with the substance of her inner life.

Rhys' novel was set to fit with Brontë's nineteenth-century narrative and Kavan's text can be located in the first half of the twentieth century towards the end of empire, but cut off from the world in tropical isolation, the events of both seem to occur out of time. More radically, both texts subvert conventional understandings of linear temporality in their use of repetition and precognition. The temporal schism in *Who Are You?*, so significant and yet so unexplained, seems to reconstitute time almost casually. In her deleted commentary Kavan fails to address the implications of a dimension or dimensions in which it is possible for her characters to play out the alternative possibilities of their unfixed identity. Experiencing the novel's temporality as a reader is an unsettling recurring dream, or a dream within a dream. In fiction, as in dream, the linear constraints of time do not apply but the predominant realism of the rest of the text sits uneasily with the

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<sup>94</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 67.

sudden shift. Both the opening of the novel and the passage preceding the jump to the second episode are marked by the cry of the brain fever birds reaching a fever pitch, and their existential questioning seems intrinsically connected to the peculiar representation or experience of time. As the first sequence of events comes to an end:

. . . driving the crazed hearer into delirium . . . until the ultimate nightmare climax – when suddenly everything stops . . .<sup>95</sup>

This is a repetition of the opening page of the novel:

As probably they do in another dimension, to which the listener may be conveyed in delirium . . . until the ultimate nightmare climax . . . when suddenly everything stops . . .<sup>96</sup>

The duplication of these passages suggests a circularity to the events, a sequence that has begun before the reader accesses the scene and will continue in endless repetition. The narrative relocation to another dimension which is reached through delirium is perhaps the madness always threatened by the brain fever birds. The girl's present reality is dreamlike to her but her past is also like a dream, she has become trapped in a subjective, solipsistic universe. The 'element of nightmare' Kavan describes in the deleted authorial note is difficult to unravel, for despite her claim it does not seem to have abated in the second episode as she suggests.

Kavan's interest in John William Dunne's work on time and consciousness is worth attention in relation to this narrative peculiarity. In an unpublished manuscript her narrator describes a dream that 'was just another confirmation of Dunne's theory that you sometimes dream the future as well as the past'.<sup>97</sup> Dunne's popular study of precognition in dreams *An Experiment with Time* (1927) proposes a restructuring of our concept of time, and our conscious and unconscious experience of it.<sup>98</sup> His theory of serialism maintains that past, present and future exist simultaneously in a series of multitudinous dimensions. Dunne maintains that our linear understanding of time is the result of our own conscious understanding

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<sup>95</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 97.

<sup>96</sup> *Who Are You?*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Tulsa, Series I/ Box 1/ Folder 16., *The Cactus Sign*, 387 (126).

<sup>98</sup> J.W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, Macmillan Publishers, 1981).

of it and that we are able to access time differently through the unconscious medium of dream. Yet despite Kavan's knowledge of Dunne's work it seems more appropriate to Antoinette's precognitive dreams in *Wide Sargasso Sea* than to the temporal anomaly in *Who Are You?*. The delirium induced by the brain fever birds which opens the porthole to this alternative dimension is intrinsically connected to the question of identity itself. Mr Dog Head's malarial hallucination makes manifest the novel's preoccupation with time when '[i]n front of his eyes his wife's face turns into a pallid clock face, solemnly ticking'.<sup>99</sup> His Daliesque vision connects time and the unconscious mind, and the girl becomes an embodied mutation of time.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* dream-time relates to reality in a peculiar way. Antoinette sees the future in a series of prophetic dreams throughout the novel, the novel's intertextuality highlights this precognitive experience of time; only the reader of *Jane Eyre* knows that her prophetic vision of triumphant conflagration will come to pass. In her madness, Antoinette's disturbance of consciousness disturbs her experience of time. Her husband identifies her as a 'lunatic who always knows the time [... b]ut never does'.<sup>100</sup> This paradox is paradigmatic of the impossible double-bind his (un)reasoning creates for her which eventually causes her to lose her own reason. In Antoinette's own measure of the incarceration he subjects her to:

only I know how long I have been here. Nights and days and days and nights, hundreds of them slipping through my fingers. But that does not matter. Time has no meaning.<sup>101</sup>

Perhaps Antoinette's understanding is the key to the seemingly complex presentation of time in both novels, not a radical restructuring of time, but a time which has no meaning. The experience of time as infinite is presaged in her dream early in the novel, in the dream as in her madness 'the seconds pass and each one is a thousand years'. In the unconscious realms of dream, nightmare and madness in both novels, linear temporality is devastated along with any clear boundary between reality and these altered states of consciousness.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Kavan, *Who Are You?*, 45.

<sup>100</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 136.

<sup>101</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 151.

<sup>102</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 50.

*Who Are You?* occupies a peculiar place in Kavan's oeuvre; sandwiched between her psychiatric stories of the 1940s and the hallucinogenic odyssey of *Ice*, its subject matter is prosaic compared with her more popular work. It is arguably the most explicitly philosophical of her texts and one of the most self-conscious; her return to her early writing and the attention she draws to her own art of fiction show her repositioning herself in relation to Helen Ferguson. We see a concern with identity which in many ways was already present in the Helen Ferguson period enhanced and matured by her exposure to existential psychology and progressive psychiatric and psychoanalytic practices. The value of *Who Are You?* for a feminist reading is also undeniable; whether she intended this or not, her representation of the lived experience of women links gender to sense of identity and self-determination. In Kavan's inimitable style, these concerns are played out in a dreamlike world in which characters are nameless, the physical world is animate, wildlife express philosophical problems and time is not as it conventionally seems. Whether Rhys was influenced by Kavan or she simply recognized some fellow feeling in her writing, *Wide Sargasso Sea* also indicates a preoccupation with these issues and this provides more legitimate grounds than biographical similarities to read these two writers together. The issue of autobiography in Kavan's writing is inescapable and colours any analysis of *Let Me Alone* and its afterlife as *Who Are You?*. It is impossible to consider Kavan's writing on identity and fictionality without reflecting on Helen Ferguson's reincarnation as Anna Kavan. Just as the girl is haunted by the unanswerable question of her own identity, the reader is troubled by that equally impossible and intriguing persona 'Anna Kavan'.

## Chapter 4

### Heroine Addiction: *Ice*

This chapter covers Kavan's last and best known work, *Ice*. After decades of obscurity, during which she lived reclusively due to bouts of serious illness and injury, its publication brought her back to the attention of the world and drew a new generation of admirers to her writing. Finding favour with the 1960s' zeitgeist, it finally made Kavan a writer of her time. Critics have connected its dreamlike fantasy to her life in various ways, linking its apocalyptic atmosphere to her experiences during the Second World War and taking the ice of the story as a manifestation of heroin or withdrawal. Letters between Kavan and Peter Owen in the Austin archive reveal that she herself was unsurprised, even flattered, by a reader's report appraising the novel as 'a mixture of Kafka and the Avengers' and that she considered it to be 'a sort of present day fable'.<sup>1</sup> Though it exhibits many of the characteristics of genre fiction, *Ice* still defies genre. Characters don and discard roles in a quick-change act, taking the reader from medieval legend to Bondesque spy drama. Full of high-speed chases and pursuits, in parts it is a mystery and an adventure story. Despite awarding it best sci-fi novel of 1967, Brian Aldiss would later claim that '*Ice* is not sci-fi, and only marginally science fiction' and the scenes of sexual dominance, though not graphic, also invite enquiry into the text's relation to sado-masochistic pornography.<sup>2</sup> Without relinquishing her aim to write high literature, Kavan revels here in the clichés of popular fiction – pornography, science fiction, romance, mystery; Kafka and *The Avengers* sit comfortably together. Most recently, Christopher Priest's introduction to the 2006 edition of *Ice* emphasizes its cinematic qualities and identifies the novel as 'literary slipstream'. Difficult to classify, Aldiss has declared that '*Ice* is unique' and Doris Lessing has echoed his sentiment by pronouncing that there is 'nothing else like it'.<sup>3</sup> A 'phantasmagoria' and 'a rollercoaster ride to death', its narrative ambiguity and

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<sup>1</sup> Austin, Kavan to Peter Owen, 24 March 1966; 29 March 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Aldiss, 'Kafka's Sister' in *The Detached Retina* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 142.

<sup>3</sup> 'Introduction' in *Ice*, Anna Kavan (London: Picador, 1973), 9; Lessing, 'Anna Kavan' in *Time Bites* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 143.



scope for interpretation remain part of its appeal.<sup>4</sup> As in all Kavan's texts, her characters are troubled by profoundly unstable identity, yet, for all its dark terror, there is a playfulness to *Ice* absent from much of her earlier writing. The thrilling pace of the narrator's adventures, the atmosphere of cosmic fantasy, and even something approximating a happy ending combine to take the edge off the despair characteristic of Kavan's work. Scratch beneath the surface of its fantastic veneer and *Ice* reveals itself as a profound observation on modern life, exploring the complexity and multiplicity of the human character, the nature of obsession and the lure of dominance and cruelty.

Recounted in the past tense, *Ice* is the narrator's tale of his flight from the imminent catastrophe of a new Ice Age and his search for a lost girl. His journey takes him to foreign lands, through apocalyptic landscapes, on a voyage repeatedly broken by proleptic visions of the approaching ice and the girl he pursues. Despite its intrigue and fast-paced action, the plot of *Ice* is secondary to the interplay between its three protagonists. Typically, the reader never discovers the name of the first-person narrator and knows little of his history. His thoughts and actions are driven by his desire to possess the girl who is white-blonde and childlike, with the fated air of a victim. The novel's third principle character, the cruel and arrogant 'warden', shares the narrator's obsession with the girl and is sometimes his nemesis, sometimes his double. For much of the novel the girl is in his power, abused and dominated by him, as the narrator pursues with ambiguous intent. There is a lack of psychological depth to these characters, allowing them to appear and reappear in multiple guises, taking on and discarding specific roles in an assortment of fantastic scenarios.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator recollects his history with the girl – his tentative courtship and plans to propose to her thwarted by her marriage to another man. He visits the couple and witnesses the happiness they share, made welcome until the man's sudden turn to murderous hostility. A second, more recent, visit shows the marriage turned sour; he drunk and vicious, and she fearful and withdrawn. Later, the husband will reappear as 'the warden' and this will remain his most constant role in the novel. The three are locked into a triangle of interconnected affect; acting, being acted upon, and watching; dominator,

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<sup>4</sup> Lessing, 'Anna Kavan', 143; Victoria Nelson, 'Symmes Hole, or the South Polar Romance' *Raritan* Fall 1997, no. 17:2 (1997), 161.

dominated and spectator. Always, the girl is the victim – abused wife, captured prisoner, sacrificial offering, and the other man is her persecutor – husband, warden, king. The narrator’s subject position is more complex and flexible; principally he is voyeur, a mere bystander, but at times he plays a part in the action and at others he appears to experience the sensations of both victim and persecutor. In their perpetual game of cat and mouse, he alone has an intimate knowledge of the positions of each of the players. The narrative peculiarity of *Ice* lies in the narrator’s perspective of impossibility; even following the novel’s own internal logic, he cannot be party to all that he declares to know or see. In a twist on the stream of consciousness narrative, this first-person narrator appears to have access to the inner worlds of the other characters, experiencing their thoughts and feelings as his own. Slipping into the perspective of the victim herself, he derives pleasure from both watching her fear and telling it. His antagonism towards the warden is counterbalanced by a strong sense of identification with him, even to the extent of becoming confused about his own identity. Each of the other characters is in some way a part of him and in the brutal world of the novel, the boundaries between victim, persecutor and protector are repeatedly blurred and transgressed.

Even more than in her previous writing, Kavan’s use of an unreliable first-person narrator makes for disquieting reading here. Early in his narration, he reveals cryptically that reality has ‘always been something of an unknown quantity to me’ and this puzzling declaration plants a seed of doubt about the extent to which the entire novel might turn out to be dream or hallucination.<sup>5</sup> His ambiguous relation to the text’s objective truth is mirrored in his association with the other characters. Though he professes concern about the girl’s welfare at the hands of the other man, we quickly understand that the narrator’s fascination with her is driven by his own seemingly uncontradictory desires to both protect her and cause her pain. Realizing that the world of the novel is presented through the eyes of a sadistic fantasist, the reader must suspend not only disbelief but moral judgement and allow *Ice* to take us on its bizarre and troubling journey.

### **Unreality**

In *Ice*, as in her previous writing, Kavan does not create a detailed replica of another world; her narrative has a deliberate quality of fantasy and the narrator is often

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Kavan, *Ice* (London: Peter Owen, 1967), 6.

acutely conscious of a sense of unreality in his surroundings. Telling of his arrival in the Northern country he notes how the place 'reminded me of a discarded film set [...] had no solidity, it was all made of mist and nylon, with nothing behind'.<sup>6</sup> This flimsy and unconvincing backdrop is analogous to the text itself; Kavan's purposefully theatrical settings are the stage against which a brazen fiction will be acted out. Equally insubstantial, the characters are mere actors who play out a drama of pain and death against a series of differing but uniformly makeshift backdrops. Freed from the weighty clutter of realism, the reader is artfully drawn through the many fabulous episodes of *Ice* with a sense of dreamlike inevitability. The narrator's journey north reveals a pattern of sorts in the novel's seemingly random tapestry of fantasy and reality – the colder it gets, the more bizarre the world around him becomes. In the arctic air the narrative gathers momentum and the action jumps from one situation to another at dizzying pace until it becomes increasingly difficult to determine which of the narrator's experiences, if any, are real. We begin to suspect the entire novel might be an extended dream sequence and the girl no more than a white rabbit leading the narrator down a hole into the dark Wonderland of *Ice*.

At times the narrator begins to come round, to rub his eyes and almost, but never fully, reawaken to some sort of reality; like false wakings from dream or nightmare, these moments are followed by equally fantastic events. Temporarily rescued from the freezing nightmare of the approaching ice, he is struck by a 'shock, the sensation of a violent awakening, as it dawned on me that this was the reality, and those other things the dream. All of a sudden the life I had lately been living appeared unreal: it simply was not credible any longer'.<sup>7</sup> These lucid moments and the narrator's repeated observations on the unreal quality of his surroundings prevent the reader from being fully drawn into the novel's action, reminding us of our mistrust of his perception and, like a Brechtian alienation device, continually reasserting the narrative's fictionality.

Several times the narrator half proposes some physical explanation for his hallucinatory perception. He refers to his treatment for insomnia and headaches brought on by the trauma of the girl's rejection; '[t]he drugs prescribed for me produced horrible dreams, in which she always appeared as a helpless victim [...]

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<sup>6</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ice*, 72.

not confined to sleep only, and a deplorable side effect was the way I had come to enjoy them'.<sup>8</sup> Later, he realizes that he has been 'suffering from some kind of fever', implying that his previous fabulous experiences may have been the result of delirium.<sup>9</sup> In one of several brushes with the mysterious authorities, the narrator is arrested and forced to appear in court. Like Kafka's Josef K he is called before the law, but here the charges are made explicit; '[t]he case was that a girl had vanished, supposed kidnapped, possibly murdered'.<sup>10</sup> This judicial device prompts the reader to interrogate more closely the narrator's visions of the girl lying with her neck snapped or flung into the sea; if we believe these to be the waking dreams he claims they are, he is to be tried for the actions of his unconscious, for it has killed her many times. The trial formalizes the reader's dilemma; we must convict or acquit the narrator of the crimes of his desires, determine whether he is a sadist or merely a sadistic fantasist, and decide the extent to which this distinction is important. His answers to the questions put to him in the courtroom imply that much of the novel's previous action never took place. The narrator's own indecision about the truth of his perceptions generates an irresolvable uncertainty as to whether the physical and sexual violence he recounts is memory or dream. The invisible judges are more certain of the reliability of his evidence than we; faceless voices in the courtroom state that he is 'a psychopath, probably schizoid' and the trial is abandoned.<sup>11</sup> His reprieve is again representative of a pattern in the text, for throughout the novel the narrator pleads a subtle defence of diminished capacity to the reader. As with much of Kavan's work, *Ice* invites the reader's speculation about the sanity of the narrator. Our lurking suspicion of this narrator's madness is reinforced by his own 'vague feeling that something was wrong with me, though I could not decide what it was' and his consciousness that '[i]n a peculiar way, the un-reality of the outer world appeared to be an extension of my own disturbed state of mind'.<sup>12</sup> His constant confusion about the reality of his perceptions and memories challenges the reliability of his reason, for uncontrolled and unrecognized fantasy is psychosis.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ice* 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ice*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ice*, 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ice*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Ice*, 55, 60-1.

In a playing out of the Cartesian method of systematic doubt, the narrator offers reasons to mistrust the evidence of his senses – he wonders if he could be dreaming, delirious or demented, only stopping short of considering manipulation by the *deus deceptor* of Kavan. But his constant confusion over the truth of his perception is suspiciously disingenuous. Each of the narrator's proposed explanations for his 'horrible dreams', make them unconscious and involuntary, allowing him to profess horror at his own sadistic pleasure while absolving himself of responsibility for it. In subtly inviting us to question his sanity and sensory acuity, the narrator denies culpability for his fantasies, disowning and disavowing his terrible desire.

The narrator's sense of derealization extends to a 'curious feeling that I was living on several planes simultaneously', a sense that 'I belonged to another dimension' and ultimately 'the impression of having stepped out of everyday life, into a field of strangeness where no known laws operated'.<sup>13</sup> These sensations shift the eccentricity of his perception out of the subjective realm and into the world around him, and the evocation of an alternative dimension nudges the text into the province of science fiction. Brian Aldiss has championed *Ice* from its first publication in 1967, further testimony to the capacity of Kavan's writing to attract stalwart supporters. His award of 'Best Sci-Fi Novel' has been the basis for *Ice*'s doubtful status as science fiction, but he has subsequently qualified his accolade and the novel has been neither marketed nor read as mainstream science fiction, sci-fi or fantasy. There are aspects of *Ice* which gesture explicitly towards science fiction. The incredible episodes in the Northern country culminate in a post-apocalyptic scene in which the narrator's 'sense of unreality' becomes 'overwhelming', pools of corrosive white fluid dissolve the buildings around him and mutants wander amongst the ruins.<sup>14</sup> As though she has strayed too far into the realm of fancy, Kavan takes the narrator out of this situation and deposits him in another land. Later, his vision of a benign being from another world proposes a mystic escape from the looming catastrophe:

He told me about the hallucination of space-time, and the joining of past and future so that either could be the present, and all ages accessible. He said he would take me to his world if I wanted to go. He and others like him

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<sup>13</sup> *Ice*, 52, 86, 141.

<sup>14</sup> *Ice*, 58.

had seen the end of our planet [...] The life here was over. But life was continuing and expanding in a different place.<sup>15</sup>

The narrator rejects this offer of a new life, knowing that he is tied to his own world and his place is to remain there 'under sentence of death'.<sup>16</sup> These instances of futuristic fantasy evoke the atmosphere of science fiction but reveal a hazy grasp of scientific theory. Kavan's novel appears not to have been inspired by scientific developments of its time but harks back instead to her interest in the discredited ideas of J W Dunne in the 1940s.

The phenomenon of the ice itself most readily identifies the novel as science fiction. Though the exact origins of the crisis are never disclosed, it is created by man, the result of 'a secret act of aggression by some foreign power'. The narrator hears of 'a steep rise in radioactive pollution, pointing to the explosion of a nuclear device' which may have precipitated unlikely sounding climactic changes. If the 'melting antarctic ice cap' flows over the oceans, a 'vast ice-mass' would be created, 'reflecting the sun's rays and throwing them back into outer space'.<sup>17</sup> In his visions, the narrator has seen crashing icebergs hurl 'huge boulders into the sky like rockets', '[d]azzling ice stars' bombard 'the world with rays, which splintered and penetrated the earth, filling earth's core with their deadly coldness'.<sup>18</sup> These doubtful explanations fail to enhance the novel's status as serious science fiction; the causes and actualities of the catastrophe seem irrelevant to the plot, the doings of unseen and untouchable powers. In his introduction to the first US edition of *Ice* Brian Aldiss explores the novel's relation to the sci-fi genre, observing that it has 'all the virtues and very few of the vices – the pretension or the obscurity' of a 'high-SF novel'.<sup>19</sup> Aldiss is unconcerned by the novel's woolly scientific logic, for if the 'science may seem to some imprecise; the *vision* is accurate'.<sup>20</sup> His belief is that Kavan uses science 'as Blake used it, as merely a part of a whole, to point her tale; it is the science of legend, not logic, of poetry, not materialism'.<sup>21</sup> Aldiss redefines modern notions of science in his assessment of *Ice* and in doing so he allows Kavan to engage with a discipline which is concerned less with empirical proofs and

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<sup>15</sup> *Ice*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ice*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> *Ice*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ice*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Aldiss, 'Introduction' in Anna Kavan, *Ice* (London: Picador, 1973), 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> 'Introduction', *Ice*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> 'Introduction', *Ice*, 8.

rational deduction than with legend and poetry. In this way, *Ice* is science fiction of a sort, and its 'incantatory powers move it beyond the scope of materialist science-fantasy'.<sup>22</sup> Aldiss' comments on *Ice* recall J G Ballard's 1962 call for science fiction writing to develop in order to explore the realms of 'inner space fiction', a category Doris Lessing would self-apply to *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971). Believing that science fiction could be 'a complete speculative poetry and fantasy of science' and must develop 'a more oblique narrative style, understated themes, private symbols and vocabularies', it is no surprise that Ballard is a fan of Kavan's work.<sup>23</sup>

Kavan has been neglected by studies of fantastic literature, though *Ice* fits most readily into this genre than any other. But *Ice* strays only a little further down the road of unreality than some of Kavan's earlier texts, an amplification of her characteristic portraits of dream and delusion. Perhaps what most identifies the novel as fantasy is the faith we do have in the narrator's representation of the bizarre world around him, even if we mistrust his perception of certain events in it. Whether a manifestation of dream, madness or an alternative reality, the world of *Ice* is indisputably strange. Ultimately, none of the multiple explanations offered by the narrator for his peculiarity of perception prevails; the key to the text remains elusive and reader and protagonist alike are left in a state of aporia.

Kavan's manipulation of temporal linearity in *Who Are You?* intensifies in *Ice* as the narrator stumbles haphazardly through an icy fog of memory, fantasy and premonition. Told in the past tense, the whole novel is a recollection, full of memories within memories, and memory can be deceptive. The text explicitly engages with the fictional quality of remembrance in the narrator's description of scenes which he cannot have witnessed. He states boldly of the girl – 'I had not seen all the things I remembered about her' but he appears untroubled by this.<sup>24</sup> Quite literally 'the girl' of his dreams, she is carries with her an ever-present air of fantasy – 'I dreamed of her whether I was asleep or awake'.<sup>25</sup> For this voyeur, seeing is not a prerequisite of remembering and dream is not confined to the realm of sleep. The adventure closes on the girl and narrator running for their lives from imminent apocalypse and here the past tense of the narrative is perplexing. There

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<sup>22</sup> 'Introduction', 9.

<sup>23</sup> J.G. Ballard, 'Which Way to Inner Space?' in *A User's Guide to the Millenium: Essays and Reviews* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 198.

<sup>24</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Aldiss, 'Introduction', *Ice*, 99.

is no pause in the action, no apparent audience to whom he can tell his story and no future in which this tale will be recounted; in this way as well as others, the narrative seems temporally perverse. The novel ends where it began, with the narrator driving through the dark and snow, but now the girl is safe by his side, rescued from the cold death of fantasy. Only at this moment does he sense an urgent awareness of living in the moment:

The past had vanished and become nothing; the future was the inconceivable nothingness of annihilation. All that was left was the ceaselessly shrinking fragment of time called 'now'.<sup>26</sup>

This 'now' is remembered from the future 'nothingness of annihilation' signifying their unlikely escape or another baffling lacuna in the seeming impossible narrative.

The narrator's brief liaison with the secret agent posing as a flower seller provides a romantic interlude utterly unlike his association with the girl. Unselfconscious, 'cheerful, and full of life', this charming ingénue does not arouse his dark desires. After spending the night with her, he wants to 'keep her with me, to anchor myself in the present through her'.<sup>27</sup> Their coupling is a somatic immersion in an untroubled existence in the moment. In contrast, the girl is out of time, a tie to an unhappy past and a portal into the apocalyptic future.

### Heroine

In *Ice*, the element of violent sexuality in Kavan's earlier works is amplified in the narrator's repeated visions of the girl's intimidation, rape and murder. In previous incarnations, Kavan's 'girl' has been naïve and sexually inexperienced, now her existence is defined by her status as sexual victim. Her role is to be acted upon – rescued and cared for, frightened, raped and killed – and these fates appear interchangeable. We have no reliable access to the girl's thoughts and feelings, only our unpredictable narrator's descriptions of her. Before the catalogue of abuse begins, he reports that she is 'over-sensitive, highly-strung, afraid of people and life; her personality had been damaged by a sadistic mother who kept her in a permanent state of frightened subjection'.<sup>28</sup> This psychological injury is manifested physically, especially in 'the look of faint bruising around the eyes like a child that

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<sup>26</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ice*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> *Ice*, 8.



has cried a long time' and her 'pitiful white face of a child-victim, terrified and betrayed'.<sup>29</sup> Painfully fragile, with arms 'like peeled wands', her child-like status and physical vulnerability are reiterated, disturbingly, time and again and she is defined by the precariousness of her body; she is 'a glass girl'.<sup>30</sup> Instantly recognizable in her various roles, there is little struggle or defiance from this girl in the face of gruellingly repetitive abuse; it is 'too easy to hurt her'.<sup>31</sup> She feels no sense of injustice at her fate, the 'death of hope' has 'tranquilized her white face'.<sup>32</sup>

Distinct from her earlier novels, in *Ice* Kavan writes not of the suffering of the victim, but the arousal brought about by her vulnerability and the pleasure taken in her fear and anguish. Her skill in rendering this portrait of the abuser lies in the narrator's effortless perception of the girl as both helpless victim and temptress. In his perverse logic, he desires her childlike innocence and vulnerability and in the same moment believes that she deliberately provokes his cruelty:

Something in her demanded victimization and terror, so she corrupted my dreams, led me into dark places I had no wish to explore. It was no longer clear to me which of us was the victim. Perhaps we were victims of one another.<sup>33</sup>

This demand for persecution presents the girl as active and her tormentor passive, placing her in a position of culpability. In his rationalization she not only masochistically desires abuse, she is a corrupting influence forcing his hand – "look what you made me do". His suggestion that it is he who is the girl's victim fits with his irrational justifications, but is complicated by his sometimes capacity to inhabit her experiences of fear and pain. In thrall to his own desires, he is as unfree as she, forced to pursue her endlessly to the world's end. Added to the air of otherworldly detachment that hangs about her, the girl is a wraith, a siren, leading him to his doom:

I saw what was in front of my eyes, and at the same time I saw the girl. [...] She was a shimmer among the ruins [...] Like a perverted child she ran past, soliciting me with big eyes, tempting me with the pleasure of watching her

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<sup>29</sup> *Ice*, 109, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Ice*, 62, 153.

<sup>31</sup> *Ice*, 154.

<sup>32</sup> *Ice*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> *Ice*, 73.

pain, elaborating the worst imaginings of my desire. The ghostly gleam of her face lured me into the shadows<sup>34</sup>

This 'perverted child' who tempts and solicits his dark desires bears little resemblance to the passive girl who is the unwilling prey of so much vicious cruelty, but her very weakness and vulnerability tease his need for brutal domination. Yet significantly, the pleasure he anticipates is in 'watching her pain' and his greatest desire is to observe her agonies, not to inflict them.

In the early scenes of the novel in which girl and warden appear as husband and wife, the banality of their purely domestic setting renders their dynamic acutely disturbing. Outside the realm of fantasy, without reason to doubt the reality of their situation, their performance of spousal abuse is less kinky, more authentic and consequently more disquieting than some of the more explicitly violent scenarios later in the novel. In the narrator's account of these scenes which he cannot have witnessed firsthand, the threat of violence is implicit in the girl's uneasy behaviour – '[s]he kept glancing nervously at him, her mouth was unsteady, her hands would not stop shaking'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the novel begins with another of Kavan's portraits of grim domestic persecution, but in *Ice* the terror and domination which prevail within the microcosm of marriage will later be seen reflected in the wider sphere of human relationships. In these early pages the narrator's flashes of fantasy are explicit, impossible images glimpsed fleetingly through the snow:

For a moment, my lights picked out like searchlights the girl's naked body, slight as a child's, ivory white against the dead white of the snow, her hair bright as spun glass. She did not look in my direction. Motionless, she kept her eyes fixed on the walls moving slowly towards her, a glassy, glittering circle of solid ice, of which she was the centre. Dazzling flashes came from the ice-cliffs far over her head; below, the outermost fringes of ice had already reached her, immobilized her, set hard as concrete over her feet and ankles. I watched the ice climb higher, covering knees and thighs, saw her mouth open, a black hole in the white face, heard her thin, agonized scream. I felt no pity for her. On the contrary, I derived an indescribable pleasure from seeing her suffer. I disapproved of my own callousness, but there it was.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ice*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> *Ice*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> *Ice*, 7-8.

This vision is one of stasis and slow-motion; an extraordinary tableaux vivant of appalling beauty. The girl is literally frozen, stunned, as though she has been bound; the ice advances to enclose her, inflicting agonies, simultaneously robbing her body of life and preserving its shell. As it claims her, she becomes nothing – a black hole in a white face, a scream. Disavowing his pleasure at the sight of her pain in this early vignette, as in many such scenes that follow, the narrator is notable only by his non-presence. The girl does not look towards him, instead she stares at the approaching ice, the cause of her pain and immobility, in the same way that she will be transfixed by her approaching assailants in the scenes of violence that follow.

The girl's rape in the warden's fortress takes place in a soundproofed room at the top of a flight of stairs and the actors remain almost completely silent throughout. On a platform facing an enormous mirror, the girl lies in bed waiting; exposed on the stage of her fear and violation, the scene is a performance for the benefit of the narrator and the entire event is an orgy of looking and watching. The encounter between girl and rapist first takes place in reflection – their eyes meet within the mirror. His first assault on her is to physically compel her to look directly at him; her submission is to meet the 'cold blue mesmeric depths' of his hypnotic 'ice-blue gaze'.<sup>37</sup> Emblematic of a broader analogy between himself and the ice, the warden's icy stare recalls the earlier scene in which the girl is consumed by ice. Spellbound once again by her approaching doom, this time she makes an attempt at resistance, 'twisting and turning wildly', but her struggles only amuse her attacker. The narrator watches on, eager to testify – 'I saw it happen', but nonetheless he remains curiously absent.<sup>38</sup> Here, as in all the scenes of the girl's rape and murder, neither victim nor her persecutors acknowledge him; he is a silent and invisible witness to these atrocities, having seemingly no effect on those he watches. The impossibility of the narrator's presence belies the accuracy of his view and we are never certain whether he is looking outwards, or in towards the figures of his own imagination.

The rape that follows is passed over with little detail, almost an afterthought to the struggle and surrender of the girl's will. The man achieves his ultimate aim of her submission and she capitulates 'even to the extent of making small compliant

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<sup>37</sup> *Ice*, 37, 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Ice*, 36.

movements fitting her body to his.’ Afterwards, when ‘his fingers passed over her naked body, lingering on thighs and breasts, she was shaken by a long, painful shudder’.<sup>39</sup> Distinct from other moments in the novel when the girl trembles with fear or shivers in the terrible cold, this shudder is ambiguous. Following her complicity in their sexual union – her ‘small compliant movements’ – this spasm implies at least the possibility of involuntary or masochistic sexual pleasure. Whether playing a consensual part in sexual role-play or responsive to the man’s caresses despite herself, we see a shadow of the girl as a sexual being. Later, when she is free from both warden and narrator, she becomes confident, gay and carefree with the appearance of sexual autonomy; the narrator will tell her “I don’t care how many different men you’ve slept with” as though he imagines that they will number many.<sup>40</sup> But this expectation of promiscuity sits uncomfortably with her role in his fantasies as virginal, unwilling victim. On the whole, the girl is literally an ice-maiden, the ultimate personification of the sexless frigidity of Kavan’s heroines, and her isolated shudder seems more likely to represent revulsion. Like the protagonists who have come before her, her passivity and physical immaturity compound the horror of her abuse with an unsettling undercurrent of paedophilia; unable to grow up, Kavan’s heroines remain in a Neverland of sexual bewilderment and anguish. There are other reverberations here with Kavan’s earlier representations of sexual assault; the warden is the inheritor of Matthew Kavan’s ‘bright blue eyes’ in *Let Me Alone* and the ‘blue, blazing, lustful eyes’ of Dog Head in *Who Are You?*.<sup>41</sup> Despite her desire to renounce Helen Ferguson’s name, the writer Anna Kavan continued to be inspired by her vision to the last. In the abusive marriage of *Let Me Alone* the fictional Anna Kavan is haunted by her husband’s seeming unreality and her own feelings of derealization, in *Ice* the unreal has bled out into the landscape. Strikingly absent from *Ice* is any description of the psychological damage done to the sexual victim; Kavan’s previous heroines are humiliated and sick at heart – here the girl is only a cipher and her pain and degradation are no more real than the incredible world in which they take place.

Just as the girl in *Who Are You?* experiences her sexual violation as fatal, in the aftermath of her rape the girl of *Ice* lies dead; she does ‘not move, gave no

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<sup>39</sup> *Ice*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ice*, 154.

<sup>41</sup> *Let Me Alone*, 131; *Who Are You?*, 112.

indication of life, lying exposed on the ruined bed as on a slab in a mortuary [...] the neck slightly twisted in a way that suggested violence, the bright hair twisted into a sort of rope by his hands'.<sup>42</sup> This posture is echoed later in one of two visions in which the narrator finds the girl with her neck broken:

A little blood had trickled out of her mouth. Her neck had an unnatural twist; a living girl could not have turned her head at that angle: the neck was broken. She had been dragged by the hair, hands which had twisted it into a sort of rope had dulled its silvery brightness. On her back blood was still fresh in places, wet and bright red; in other places it had caked black on the white flesh. I looked particularly at one arm, on which the circular marks of teeth stood out clearly. The bones of the forearm were broken, the sharp pointed ends of bone projected at the wrist through the torn tissue. I felt I had been defrauded: I alone should have done the breaking with tender love; I was the only person entitled to inflict wounds.<sup>43</sup>

The twisted rope of her hair and the unnatural twist of her neck cast the girl in the position she lies in after her rape. Each vivid detail of her brutally dishevelled pose tells the story of her ordeal; the vicious caresses of hands and teeth have left their marks of intimate violence on her body. Rape and death appear to be equally arousing to our narrator, but while he expresses no desire to take the place of her sexual assailant, he feels profoundly cheated of the right to deal her violence and death. He has prior claim to the torture of his beloved girl; at his hands her slaughter, like lovemaking, would have been tender. In one of many failed attempts to rescue her, the narrator hears from the warden that the girl has been killed and he experiences her death as his own:

'She's dead.' A knife went through me. All other deaths in the world were outside; this one was in my body, like a bayonet, like my own. 'Who killed her?' Only I could do that.<sup>44</sup>

The pangs of a terrible bereavement soon reveal themselves as a blow to the narrator's sense of entitlement to the girl's physical being and the right to cause her pain. His inner death and feelings of oneness with the girl are connected with his sadistic desire to possess and control her.

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<sup>42</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> *Ice*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> *Ice*, 97-8.

## Heroes and Villains

*Ice* was published in the same year as Laing's *The Politics of Experience* (1967), his radical manifesto for a politics of antipsychiatry. This timely coincidence emphasises that although the antipsychiatry movement was never a cohesive body, the politics of madness in the 1960s had caught up to the ideas Kavan had expressed in her 1940s' writing. The girl's abuse begins at the hands of her mother and her fate is fixed by her childhood experiences, not by her anatomy; Kavan's representation of sadism owes more to a Laingian than a Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm. Laing's concept of the divided self, though not influential within the practicing psychoanalytic community, had been taken up in broader intellectual circles. Taking her cue from Nin's comments on Kavan and the divided self via Brian Aldiss, Janet Byrne has observed how in *Ice* 'we see that the nameless narrator is not so much a character in his own right as the manifestation of a divided self. He is part of the girl and part of a third character'.<sup>45</sup> Though the novel's representation of a divided self is undeniable, the narrator is not a composite of the other characters, rather the girl and the warden at times appear to be fragments of himself.

Though he claims to have witnessed the warden's rape of the girl, the reader is denied the same access to the narrator's physical encounters with her. In a scene cut into his short trial, he sits watching her reflection in the mirror at some unspecified time and location. When she fearfully rejects his attempts to embrace her, he resists 'an impulse to do certain things' with his lighted cigarette but she is 'not strong enough to put up a fight' with 'no more strength in her muscles than in a child's'.<sup>46</sup> The scene jumps immediately to the girl dressing and, without the narrator's own observing commentary, the physical and sexual assault in between is only implied. The image of the girl in the mirror echoes the overture to the rape he witnessed or imagined previously, and the two incidents seem strangely connected. Immediately, another man matching the description of the warden enters the room carrying a revolver and the narrator again becomes a phantom; 'I jumped up to throw him out, but he walked past as though I was invisible or not present [...] I did nothing [...] simply stood watching [i]t was unlike me'.<sup>47</sup> This we know to be

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<sup>45</sup> Byrne, 'Moving toward Entropy: Anna Kavan's Science Fiction Mentality', 6.

<sup>46</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> *Ice*, 76.

untrue, for despite all his frenetic activity and endless chasing about, when the girl and warden appear together, the narrator looks on in silence. Though we see him interact with one or other of them, the three never quite appear together at the same time. The unreal quality to the novel's early scenes of abuse was determined in part by their overtly staged settings, but the scenes in which girl and narrator are alone together have mundane locations and an atmosphere of authenticity. A tenuous sense of interplay between these episodes is confused by the text's lack of narrative linearity; we cannot know whether 'real' events are inspired by the narrator's fantasies or if his fantasies replay and elaborate on 'real' events. *Ice* never gives up its secrets.

Once he has her in his possession, the narrator is able to act out his conflicting intentions towards the girl – '[w]ith one arm I warmed and supported her: the other arm was the executioner's'.<sup>48</sup> But she fails to enchant him as she has done; with the warden finally out of the way the narrator moves into his position:

She was still always cold [...] She refused my coat. I was obliged to watch her incessant shivering.

She grew emaciated, the flesh seemed to melt off her bones. Her hair lost its glitter, was too heavy, weighed her head down. She kept her head bent, trying not to see me. Listless, she hid in corners or, avoiding me, staggered round the ship, stumbling, her weak legs unable to balance. I no longer felt any desire, gave up talking to her, adopted the warden's silences as my own. I was well aware how sinister my wordless exits and entrances must have seemed, and derived some satisfaction from this.<sup>49</sup>

In the role of her controller, the narrator's desire for the girl is replaced by the warden's obscure and ill-defined anger towards her. Even the physical manifestations of her fear fail to arouse him as they have done, seemingly it is only watching the terror inspired by the other man that turns him on. Previously so enthralling, the allure she exuded from the distance of the spectator evaporates; close to, she is diminished. The illicit glamour of sexual domination in fantasy looks very different in reality; the signs of constant subjugation and persecution are manifest and the girl appears cowed, sick and beaten. The stark terror of a brilliantly icy death and the swift surrender to an overpowering sexual encounter are replaced by the interminable gnawing fear of the real victim.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ice*, 113.

<sup>49</sup> *Ice*, 115.

Though the narrator's remote fascination with the girl necessitates his lack of intimate knowledge of her character, driving his passion for her is his sense that she is 'a lost, essential portion of my own being' and that 'like a part of me, I could not live without her'.<sup>50</sup> In a brief moment of astute self-analysis, he recognizes his devotion to her as a vice:

When I considered that imperative need I felt for her, as for a missing part of myself, it appeared less like love than an inexplicable aberration, the sign of some character-flaw I ought to eradicate, instead of letting it dominate me.<sup>51</sup>

It is possible to interpret this 'inexplicable aberration' as the madness of the divided self, prompting us to question whether the girl is real at all, or only a projection of the narrator himself. In a narrative move characteristic of Kavan, there are moments in which the narrator's first-person account shifts without warning into the third. In this way, at times he appears to have an intimate knowledge of the girl's perspective, telling her thoughts and sensations. Spying her fleeing through the forest, in one moment she is a figure glimpsed in the distance, in the next the narrator knows that her brain is 'locked in nightmare', tells how her body is scratched and bruised, recounts her painful breathing and 'agonized heartbeats'. Dragged into the fortress by 'the waiting forces of doom', back in the soundproofed room, the girl is to be executed, but this time the narrator does not declare himself a witness, instead he tells of her own feelings of dread and fatality.<sup>52</sup> Later, when another rescue attempt fails and the girl is taken by the warden, though they escape him physically, the narrator is able to accompany them to tell of the girl's feelings and sensations during their hair-raising flight. Finally, when he rediscovers her at the end of the novel, the narrator catches sight of the girl through the blizzard and again he appears to have access to her thoughts:

Sudden terror had seized her: the thought of the man whose ice-blue eyes had a magnetic power which could deprive her of will and thrust her down into hallucination and horror. The fear she lived with, always near her, close behind the world's normal façade, had become concentrated on him. And

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<sup>50</sup> *Ice*, 25, 73.

<sup>51</sup> *Ice*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ice*, 50.



there was another connected with him, they were in league together, or perhaps they were the same person.<sup>53</sup>

When she is at some small physical distance from him, obscured and almost out of sight, the narrator gains an intimate familiarity with the girl's viewpoint. Whether telepathic or projected, his insights into her internal world always reveal her feelings of terror and persecution, her fear of the warden and himself and even her suspicion of their pact to torment her. She cannot escape him; he stalks her even inside her own mind.

The narrator's peculiar psychological access to the girl is echoed in his relation to the other man. As voyeur, he observes the warden's abusive control of the girl without expressing judgement, but when they meet in person there is animosity and deep mutual suspicion between them, and something more besides. Both united and divided by their obsessive desire for the girl, as the novel progresses the narrator becomes increasingly aware of 'an obscure sense of inner contact with him'.<sup>54</sup> As their association continues, his feelings of connection with the warden intensify to the sense that they are 'like identical twin brothers', 'as if we shared the same blood', recalling the bond between the narrator of *Asylum Piece* and her unseen enemy:<sup>55</sup>

It was clear that he regarded her as his property. I considered that she belonged to me. Between the two of us she was reduced to nothing; her only function might have been to link us together. [...] Yet I suddenly felt an indescribable affinity with him, a sort of blood-contact, generating confusion, so that I began to wonder if there *were* two of us.<sup>56</sup>

This blood-contact expresses their brotherhood, but the blood between them is also that of the girl. She connects the two in their terrible rivalry to control and abuse her; they are competitors in a sport in which she is the prey. After each has claimed their stake in her, there is nothing left of the girl, her annihilation is their bond. The girl is the nucleus of a terrible circle of devastation, a magnet for pain and death:

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<sup>53</sup> *Ice*, 148.

<sup>54</sup> *Ice*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ice*, 132.

<sup>56</sup> *Ice*, 76-7.

I thought of her at the centre, not knowing she was encircled, while we advanced towards her from different sides, I from one point, he from another, and then the ice.<sup>57</sup>

Men and ice are indistinguishable in their intentions towards her. Eventually, the narrator becomes so caught up in their contest that he loses sight of the girl completely and the other man becomes more vital to him than she – '[j]ust then she was nothing to me by comparison, not even real. We could have shared her between us'.<sup>58</sup> The girl is only a phantom, a prize that can be divided; the other man is his kin, his double. Only the warden's explicit rejection of the narrator breaks the spell that binds them, but not before a flash of momentary disorientation unites them completely:

In an indescribable way our looks tangled together. I seemed to be looking at my own reflexion. Suddenly I was entangled in utmost confusion, not sure which of us was which. We were like halves of one being, joined in some mysterious symbiosis. I fought to retain my identity, but all my efforts failed to keep us apart. I continually found I was not myself, but him. [...] I fled from the room in utter confusion: afterwards did not know what had happened, or if anything had.<sup>59</sup>

This tangling of looks recalls both men's reflected encounters with the girl, but here there is no mirror and no clear distinction between which of the parties is victim. After all the narrator's anonymous spying, the warden looks back and this compulsive spectator finds himself undone by the glare of his own gaze. Behind his utter bewilderment, the scene brings a lurking suspicion that the two men are one and the same person fully into the open. This revelation would transform the narrator's struggle to contain himself from a crisis of identity into a moment of truth, providing the explanation for his persistently invisible presence. If he and the warden are one, the narrator has been recounting his own deeds in the third person; in observing the other man terrorize and assault the girl in these 'horrible dreams', he has been watching himself at a distance. The mirror on the wall reflects both the girl and her assailant, only he fails to recognize his own reflection. Ultimately, the complicated dance of the novel's three central characters never resolves the uncertainty of whether either the girl or warden are real at all. As with

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<sup>57</sup> *Ice*, 137.

<sup>58</sup> *Ice*, 133.

<sup>59</sup> *Ice*, 98.

each of the multiple explanations proposed by the text for the peculiar events that go on in it, we must weigh up the possibility of the narrator's divided self against equally (in)credible indications against it.

The trio's dynamic is painted over the backdrop of conventional narrative roles – hero, heroine and villain. In his last encounter with the warden, the narrator is impressed by his status and lavish lifestyle, even in the face of apocalypse:

Drinks were brought, I was handed a tinkling glass. 'Ice! What luxury!' He glanced at my dilapidated uniform, made a grimace. 'You can't expect luxury if you insist on being a hero.'<sup>60</sup>

For the villain ice can be contained, controllable, a trivial thing, and though the narrator likes to play the role of hero, he is repeatedly beguiled and enchanted by its opposite. The warden looks upon his attempts at heroism with distaste; when he discovers that the narrator has willingly parted from the girl, he discards his pretence of friendship and turns on him:

"You don't know how to handle her," he stated coldly. "I'd have licked her into shape. She only needs training. She has to be taught toughness, in life and in bed."<sup>61</sup>

Convinced of his superior skills at domination, the warden is enraged that his opponent has abandoned the game by letting their quarry loose, trying to play the hero.

At the end of the novel the narrator is surprised by the girl's accusations of mistreatment at his hands, as though the scenes in which he has bullied and intimidated her were no more real than his prolific fantasies of her terrible abuse. The revelation presents 'a view of myself I much preferred not to see' but he readily accepts the charges against him:<sup>62</sup>

I felt myself justly accused. After the way I had treated her, suspicion was all I deserved. She could not know that I had just discovered a new pleasure in tenderness [...] I wondered why I had waited so long to be kind to her, until it was almost too late.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Ice*, 130.

<sup>61</sup> *Ice*, 133.

<sup>62</sup> *Ice*, 154.

<sup>63</sup> *Ice*, 157.

The narrator discovers a conscience, deciding once and for all to play the hero, and the girl finally accepts the role of gratefully rescued heroine. After the complex interplay of the characters in the preceding pages, this makes for a dull and unconvincing ending. Yet as *Ice* closes the chase goes on and tender or not, in this darkly twisted quest tale, the maiden's rescue is highly ambiguous. This final car ride looks suspiciously like the girl's earlier journey with the warden; hero and villain are interchangeable, rescuer and persecutor indistinguishable. The narrator magnanimously proposes that '[h]owever the end came, we should be together, I could at least make it quick and easy for her'.<sup>64</sup> His intent to kill her is with kindness now, a renewal of the 'tender love' with which he would have broken her bones.

### **Politics and Pornography**

In this thesis, I have argued for a feminist reading of Kavan and the complex sexuality of *Ice* is both vital and troubling for this project. As Kavan's last nameless, friendless heroine, the girl epitomises the vulnerable women of her earlier works and her subjugation by men, sexual and otherwise, demands scrutiny in the light of gender politics. The novel's fantastic universe and sexual violence invoke that icon of late-twentieth-century women's literature, Angela Carter. As Kavan's writing career revived for its last, quiet triumph with *Ice*, the success of Carter's first two novels had already laid the foundation stones for her monumental reputation. Although Kavan never engaged directly with gender politics and Carter's writing is feminist both in intention and by interpretation, Carter's anti-realist style and unsettling portraits of male/female relations make her a valuable reference point for an analysis of *Ice*. Kavan's own description of *Ice* as fable recalls Carter's evocation of folklore and traditional mythologies in her novels and her reworkings of fairytale in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

If the fantastic nature of *Ice* invites comparison with Carter's fiction, its sadistic sexuality is ripe for reading alongside her feminist polemic *The Sadeian Woman* (1979). Carter's interpretation of the writings of the Marquis de Sade would become implicated in the drastically divisive second wave feminist debate on pornography, but her manifesto for a feminist reclamation of pornography offers an analysis of male/female relationships that goes far beyond issues of censorship and sexual violence. Her argument is premised on a strong conviction of the social

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<sup>64</sup> *Ice*, 157.

determination of gender and sexuality. Femininity for Carter, in both its positive and negative incarnations, is only a series of outlandish fictions that we live within our daily lives:

All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway.<sup>65</sup>

As a graphic illustration of culturally-determined, historically-contingent myths of gender, Carter sees pornography as a province populated only by sexual archetypes, necessarily an abstraction from the world, unconnected to our individual selves and real lives. Yet, she maintains, its explicit portrayal of these fictions illuminates them:

sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer.<sup>66</sup>

Its inherent potential to critique gender relations suggests to Carter that pornography's support of dominant social fictions could be deflected to the opposite, and it is the figure of 'the pornographer as terrorist' that she holds in mind as she goes on to analyse Sade's writing in detail.<sup>67</sup> If 'our flesh arrives to us out of history', the very artifice on which gender inequality is premised holds the possibility of change, and pornography, as an 'instrument of repression' can be recast to reveal and redress sexual inequality.<sup>68</sup>

Carter's polemic is illuminating to a reading of her own fiction; just as she requisitions Sade's pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*, she occupies the previously androcentric realm of fairytale, subverting and rewriting its 'consolatory nonsenses'. Yet her fictional writing of female sexuality is not unambiguous and has been unsettling and problematic for feminist readers. Criticised for her unapologetic portrayal of women who appear complicit in their own subjugation, Carter's subversion of gender stereotypes fails to replace them with a utopian

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<sup>65</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979), 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> *The Sadeian Woman*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> *The Sadeian Woman*, 9, 20.

feminist vision; she does not replace old myth with new. The real political change Carter envisages precludes the easy portrayal of fictional empowerment. *The Sadeian Woman* also came under censure from feminists on both sides of the pornography debate, but Carter does not forgive Sade's writing its misogyny and her analysis of his work cannot be easily applied to most late-twentieth-century pornography contemporary to her study. As protagonists of 1960s' counterculture, it is no surprise that Carter's socialist, feminist politics intersect with those of R D Laing in their radical rejection of normative social behaviours. In *Several Perceptions* (1968) she writes a schizophrenic character inspired by Laing's *Divided Self*, and though British antipsychiatry failed to learn much from feminism, Carter clearly recognized parallels between Laing's refutation of the norms of sanity and madness, and a feminist refusal of the social fictions of femininity.<sup>69</sup> Finding fairytale an appropriate medium through which to represent what she calls 'the shifting structures of reality and sexuality' Carter utilizes fantasy for much the same purpose as Kavan – to question the social constructions which regulate our real lives.<sup>70</sup> Carter and Kavan both seek to undermine assumptions of normativity in their fiction and journalism; for Carter these are primarily the behaviours of gender, for Kavan the behaviours of sanity and madness.

Carter's 'Exercise in Cultural History' emphasizes that Sade's textual pornography was a product of its time; as a creature of the Enlightenment, his perversions reflect the legitimized brutality of this world of reason and she reads his writing as 'a critique in the guise of a pornographic vision'.<sup>71</sup> Sade's *Justine* (1791), in which his heroine remains the constant, unwilling victim of multiply restaged torments, compares productively with *Ice*.<sup>72</sup> Kavan's girl is most like Justine in the gruelling repetition of her abuse and her absolute lack of physical desire or pleasure; both characters are sexual objects rather than sexual beings – one side of the myth of female sexuality captured so well by the pornographer. Carter describes how the ordeals of *Justine* play out the class and gender inequalities of eighteenth century France, and she uses her analysis to cast light on sexual politics two centuries later. Re-evaluating Justine's status as victim with a critical eye,

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<sup>69</sup> Angela Carter, *Several Perceptions* (London: Virago Press, 1995).

<sup>70</sup> 'Notes from the Front Line' in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 38.

<sup>71</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 40.

<sup>72</sup> Marquis de Sade, *The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver & Austryn Wainhouse (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1965).

Carter interrogates the value this character places on her own virtue as the source of her sense of self-importance and suggests that rape holds less terror for Justine than her own desire. In *Ice*, Kavan's characters are unconcerned with maintaining or transgressing sexual morality, the girl has no sense of self-worth. Rape is to be feared most in that it robs the girl of her will and thus threatens her very being. Like Kavan's earlier protagonists, her greatest fear is of extinction – as though aware of their own fictionality, these characters are profoundly worried about their actuality. The girl longs for kindness, consistency, rescue to safety; she is aware that her purpose is to be destroyed and there is no respite from her fear of execution – she is resurrected time and again only in order to be terrorized and put to death once more.

With none of the climactic pleasure of Sade's portraits of sadism, the sexual exploits of *Ice* are modest in comparison. For Kavan's narrator, the enjoyment is all in watching and not in doing, his desire is aroused but never assuaged. The novel is a succession of missed and deferred gratification; orgasm always takes place off-screen. Kavan's sadistic characters indulge in none of the scatological muck or bawdy delight of Sade's libertines; there is nothing earthy about the abuse done to the girl and she is never defiled, when she is tortured, raped and killed she is at her most remote and sacred. She is a martyr to sexual violence and the narrator worships the image of her undergoing agonies. Her pain and indignities make her not so much a virginal Madonna as a Christ-figure, her wounds are the stigmata of her sacrifice to a ferocious lust and though she meekly endures her Stations of the Cross, her suffering will not redeem mankind. Justine tells her story within a story in the first person, and the reader becomes the viewer of the pornographic action. In *Ice* the narrator has already taken this role and as he watches the girl being terrorized, we in turn watch his titillation. Kavan's sadistic first-person voice usurps the reader from the comfortably arousing position of the pornographic spectator, we see the novel's erotic violence through his eyes but at a remove, observing rather than experiencing his pleasure and his shame. The narrator of *Ice* is not a libertine but a sadistic fantasist and a storyteller – a Marquis de Sade recounting his perverted fictions. Telling his own story, not that of his fictional victim, he is not

quite, as Carter represents Sade, a 'moral pornographer' or 'an honest pervert' for he still disavows his pleasure at the sight of pain.<sup>73</sup>

In the impossible 'once upon a time' of *Ice*, the castle and forests of the faraway land in which the girl's abuse takes place are the familiar backdrop of fairytale. This fabulous scenery intensifies the aura of fantasy around these scenarios, giving them the character of sexual role-play. But despite the novel's flashes of dark sexual fantasy, by Carter's criteria, *Ice* is not pornography in its intention or accomplishment. Though Kavan's one-dimensional characters at times appear to operate as sexual archetypes in much the same way that the figures of pornography do, the novel is not ultimately designed to arouse the reader's desire. In *Ice* Kavan most definitely portrays false universals and gender stereotypes, but these are not of a consoling nature. Even when she is free of physical domination, the girl conforms to the most superficial of gender stereotypes – the kept woman. When she is not being terrorized, she is petty, vacant, and happy to exchange her independence for a regular supply of baubles and pretty clothes. Though she desires freedom from her torments, she does not attempt seek autonomy or break free of the narrator's control. Her persecution in childhood has infantilized her, locking her into a state of perpetual childhood, and she requires a protector of sorts. The 'small compliant movements' she makes during her rape are echoed in her acquiescence to economic dependency and psychological control. Carter's fiction also portrays women who appear to accept, and even enjoy, sexual subjugation and violence.<sup>74</sup> Toppling the female victim from her moral high ground, both Kavan and Carter portray heroines who are complicit in their plight.

Kavan's ambiguously named heroines – 'Anna Kavan' in *Let Me Alone*, the suggestively initialized 'Kay' in *My Soul in China*, the 'girl' of both *Ice* and *Who Are You?* and the many unnamed protagonists of her short stories – are almost indistinguishable in their physical likeness and negligible personalities. But though 'the girl' may appear to relive her wretched existence in the pages of one novel after another, it behoves asking whether we can, or should, read Kavan's various heroines as the same character. The girl's lack of signifier, as much as Kavan's own name change, has encouraged critics towards biographical readings of her fiction.

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<sup>73</sup> Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 37.

<sup>74</sup> See, particularly, Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (London: Penguin, 2011) and *Love* (London: Vintage, 1997).



Her definite article could equally be interpreted not as a marker of specificity – as a fictional representative of her author, but as the embodiment of a universal symbol – an icon of womanhood. If read alongside Carter’s subversive analysis of myth, this interpretation might bear fruit for a feminist reading of Kavan’s heroines. Carter’s explicit rejection of essentialist, universal representations of women’s experience allows her to play with these traditional symbols in her fiction in much the same way as she subverts and uses them to illustrate her feminist theory in *The Sadeian Woman*. But though Kavan’s heroines may look like figures of the conventional female victim at first glance, her texts are always a little too peculiar to operate as myths of social normativity and neither do they embody the ironic joy of Carter’s subversion of them. Borrowed from the clichés of popular fiction, the characters of *Ice* are the pulp protagonists of romance, porn, spy drama, action-adventure and sci-fi; a peculiar mash up of archetypal heroes, heroines and villains. At times they themselves seem unsure which genre they are operating in; the narrator struggles to decide if he is the protagonist of a Mills and Boon style romance or an S&M porno, and as his heroine, the girl is the incarnation of feminine fictions both consolatory and otherwise. By presenting her mythic archetypes ever so slightly out of place, like the moral pornographer, Kavan uses them to reflect the starker truths of real life. Though her characters incarnate the empty figures of pulp fiction, the novel’s subtle misalignment of genres disturbs their simplistic moral certainties to show a happy ending indistinguishable from a murderous abduction, a heroine who gets eaten by the dragon and a hero who longs to break her bones.

Carter emphasises how Sade’s work was shaped by the socio-political upheaval of the French Revolution, but even living through the ascendancy of Marxist political ideology in the twentieth century, Kavan has little interest in class. Similarly, the consciousness raising of the women’s movement failed to touch her as she was writing *Ice*. For a writer profoundly preoccupied by identity, Kavan appears oblivious to identity politics. Without the hope of change in Carter’s worldview, Kavan’s writing offers an extraordinarily bleak message for women; doomed victims, we have no hope for escape except, in the last act, on the arm of a sadist from whom we can only ask a gentle execution. Yet, her sadistic vision has a political message less didactic than Sade’s and less hopeful than Carter’s, but just as sincere. Misogyny is only one form of the many hatreds and evils humankind perpetrates upon each other, none of which can be cured. Kavan’s heroines are not

always her fictional envoys and likewise they do not stand for the experience of woman, ironic or not. In fact, their life situations and emotional responses differ considerably from text to text, their greatest resemblance is in their circumstance of being ultimately and utterly alone. Rather than proposing social change, Kavan's egoist anarchism conceives of society as utterly rotten, and will only be satisfied by its absolute destruction. Remaining resolutely unallied to organized politics of any kind, Kavan wrote the voice of the individual, the misfit, the dispossessed loner. Kavan's humanist philosophy is also anti-utilitarian, the individual is all; that the happiness of the few, or the one, should be sacrificed for the benefit of the majority seems outrageously unjust to her. Her fiction portrays the one in a futile battle against the many, the individual against society, the girl against the relentless onslaught of the ice. While *Ice* is most certainly not 'pornography in the service of women', Kavan's novel can be read in the light of Carter's own fiction as a 'present day fable', a parable for its time.

### **Ice Visions**

In the freezing atmosphere of *Ice*, the girl wears a 'thick grey loden coat' that occasionally reveals its 'red and blue check lining' and likewise, the novel's palette is a spectrum of greys broken by flashes of red and blue – dirt and rubble, bruises on pallid skin, the flash of intensely cold blue eyes, blood on snow.<sup>75</sup> Against this, the visions of ice are luminescent bursts of prismatic colour, terrifying and beautiful, accompanied by deafening noise. The narrator is surrounded by '[h]uge ice-battlements, rainbow turrets and pinnacles [...] lit from within by frigid mineral fires'.<sup>76</sup> The ice's semi-reflective nature allows it to mirror the 'stupendous sky-conflagration' of the aurora borealis, 'a blazing, vibrating roof of intense cold and colour' and '[c]old coruscations of rainbow fire'. Mountains of solid ice throw out 'shafts of pure incandescence', trees 'sheathed in ice, dripped and sparkled with weird prismatic jewels, reflecting the vivid changing cascades above'.<sup>77</sup> Devastation provides the soundtrack to these waking dreams – 'indescribable explosions thundered and boomed, icebergs crashed, hurled huge boulders into the sky like rockets. Dazzling ice stars bombarded the world'.<sup>78</sup> Kavan draws her descriptive

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<sup>75</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> *Ice*, 147.

<sup>77</sup> *Ice*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> *Ice*, 99.

vocabulary from cold's opposite – the language of intense heat. The fjord is 'an impossible icy volcano erupting the baleful fire of the swallowed sun' and snow heaps up in 'white hills that fumed like volcanoes, blinding me again with white smoke'.<sup>79</sup> Air 'seared the lungs', stinging 'like acid' and the narrator's hands are 'scalded' by cold.<sup>80</sup> The girl takes centre stage in these dreamlike visions of the approaching ice and in them she shares the aura of unearthly, cosmic fantasy:

Her albino hair illuminated my dreams, shining brighter than moonlight. I saw the dead moon dance over the icebergs, as it would at the end of our world, which she watched from the tent of her glittering hair.<sup>81</sup>

Naked in these apparitions, the girl's remoteness, beauty, and fated doom are distilled and her suffering becomes exquisite. The ice is her tormentor as much as her earthly persecutors. Yet, with her 'silvery blaze of hair' and 'pale, almost transparent skin', there is a physical affinity between girl and ice, a sense that she is somehow intimately involved with it:<sup>82</sup>

She was so thin that, when we danced, I was afraid of hurting her if I held her tightly. Her prominent bones seemed brittle, the protruding wrist-bones had a particular fascination for me. Her hair was astonishing, silver-white, an albino's, sparkling like moonlight, like moonlit Venetian glass. I treated her like a glass girl; at times she hardly seemed real.<sup>83</sup>

Brittle, delicate and transparent; the girl's physical qualities suggest that she is formed of the very stuff that will destroy her. The narrative emphasizes the contradictory substance of ice; the advancing ice cliffs are impervious vehicles of devastation while the girl embodies ice-like frailty, liable to break or melt away. The warden's 'ice-eyes, mesmeric and menacing' also identify him as a creature of the ice and when the narrator experiences his sensations of anger towards the girl he too feels the relentless burn of cold; '[e]verything had turned to iron, to ice, to hard, cold, burning impatience'.<sup>84</sup> Riven with paradox, the ice signifies both pitiless

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<sup>79</sup> *Ice*, 49, 147.

<sup>80</sup> *Ice*, 101, 102.

<sup>81</sup> *Ice*, 99.

<sup>82</sup> *Ice*, 12.

<sup>83</sup> *Ice*, 8.

<sup>84</sup> *Ice*, 68, 151.

destruction and precarious fragility, and in all its forms it is accompanied by a frosty mist of unreality.

Though *Ice* departs in some ways from Kavan's previous writing, echoes of its glacial imagery can be seen even in the earliest Helen Ferguson novels. In *The Dark Sisters* the younger of the eponymous sisters, Karen, walks through the snow-covered English countryside. Like the girl in *Ice*, she shares a peculiar affinity with the cold, but the ice in this earlier text is magical and enchanting, inspiring feelings of rapture and liberation in her as she wanders through 'a fairyland carved in ice'.<sup>85</sup> Ferguson's 'country romance' contains imagery pre-emptive of that Kavan would use decades later in *Ice*; an 'unreal' landscape in which the wind scalds 'with an ice-cold electric flame' and 'boughs burned bright as javelins, tipped in pure white fire'.<sup>86</sup> In *Goose Cross*, during the harsh winter following the armistice of the First World War it 'seemed as though the great polar seas of ice were sweeping again over the living world. Blizzards raged on the hills, shrivelling the leaves of the cringing evergreens as if they had been scorched in a fire'.<sup>87</sup> Again, in *Rich, Get Rich*, the protagonist Swithin is 'as if ensorcerized' while watching his pupil Sybil dancing in the snow as she 'whirled, swayed, and gestured with the spinning snowflakes'.<sup>88</sup> The extreme cold was clearly an enduring preoccupation for Kavan; her story 'Ice Storm' (1942), later collected in *A Bright Green Field*, tells of a trip to Connecticut during unusually bad weather. Waking into a world 'loaded with ice', the narrator finds it 'difficult to believe' it is 'the weirdest and most awful thing I had ever seen'. The frozen landscape manifests her internal despair – '[t]his loneliness, I thought, is my loneliness. I was the only person out in the glacial world'.<sup>89</sup> In these realist narratives, the world under the effects of severe cold is as incredible and ethereal as the frostbitten phantasmagoria of *Ice*. Extreme weather conditions accompany dramatic denouements in almost all of Helen Ferguson's novels; human and natural disaster are tied together, climate and emotional state are interdependent or conflated, providing further evidence that Kavan, even at the end of her writing life, was drawn back to her early work.

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<sup>85</sup> Ferguson, *The Dark Sisters*, 168.

<sup>86</sup> *The Dark Sisters*, 166, 159, 168.

<sup>87</sup> Helen Ferguson, *Goose Cross* (London: John Lane, 1936), 20.

<sup>88</sup> Ferguson, *Rich Get Rich*, 266.

<sup>89</sup> Kavan, 'Ice Storm' in *A Bright Green Field* (London: Peter Owen, 1958), 68.

Victoria Nelson draws critical attention to *Ice* in 'Symmes Hole, Or the South Polar Romance' (1997), a cross-disciplinary study of 'a long-standing human tendency to project inner psychological contents [...] onto the physical contours of our planet'. Nelson's intellectual excursion charts the influence of the pre-Enlightenment concept of sympathetic correspondence on early natural philosophy and draws together representations of the 'Earth as a topos of the human psyche' from Classical Greek cosmology through to twentieth-century literature.<sup>90</sup> Her study works towards examining narratives of an 'intertwined apocalyptic destiny of self and globe' and the latter half of her analysis concentrates attention on literary representations of the polar expedition, taking the pole, and particularly the South Pole, to represent the soul or unconscious.<sup>91</sup> Nelson describes the way in which 'the inner wastes of Antarctica have provided a beautifully blank projective screen for post-Enlightenment writers and poets'.<sup>92</sup> Considering in detail Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), she goes on to examine what she terms "psychotopographic literature" of the twentieth century, expressionist fiction in which, naively or deliberately, inner psychic processes are projected sympathetically onto an exterior landscape'.<sup>93</sup> Nelson's study of the South Polar quest also embraces narratives which represent a polar invasion of the central regions; in her terms the unconscious invading the centre of consciousness, and takes *Ice* along with Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* (1977) as her examples. This analysis is valuable, especially in its success in situating the often marginalized *Ice* in a long history of familial narratives. Yet, while Nelson recognizes the novel as 'a phantasmagoric narrative in which points of view and lines of narrative are constantly shifting', she identifies the girl as the novel's main protagonist, dismissing the narrator as the 'symbiotic alter ego of the brutal men to whom this woman is in thrall'.<sup>94</sup> In her reading of *Ice* as a psychotopographic narrative, the girl and the planet are both destroyed by men and ice:

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<sup>90</sup> Nelson, 'Symmes Hole', 136.

<sup>91</sup> 'Symmes Hole', 42.

<sup>92</sup> 'Symmes Hole', 64.

<sup>93</sup> 'Symmes Hole', 45.

<sup>94</sup> 'Symmes Hole', 61.

The world and the woman are the same entity; the body of the planet is her body; man's sadistic misuse of both has resulted in their deaths. Perversely, this is also an erotic fulfilment.<sup>95</sup>

Although her focus on gender is appealing, Nelson's interpretation oversimplifies the complexity of these characters and their relationships. The narrator will not be dismissed so easily, if *Ice* is a 'soul quest' then the journey undertaken is not the girl's but his own.<sup>96</sup> World and woman are not one, the girl is more closely allied to the ice than the planet which it destroys; she is a creature of the ice as well as its victim. The paradox of the narrator's mission to pursue the girl and flee the ice is that they are both elements of the same mysterious phenomenon. Following Nelson's reckoning that the polar invasion projects the protagonist's soul or unconscious, the girl too stands for some elusive self-knowledge, that 'lost, essential portion' of his 'own being'; as he attempts to capture one small fragment of selfhood, the full force of his subconscious threatens to catch up and overwhelm him.<sup>97</sup> Nelson's analysis is absorbing but favours an unambiguous reading of the characters and a subjective interpretation of the ice which comes at the expense of the novel's multiple significations; *Ice* is political as much as psychological and girl and narrator are tied together by more than physical bonds.

### **Cold Dread**

Though they published contemporaneously for nearly two decades, Doris Lessing's interest in Anna Kavan has developed only in recent years. Lessing has taken pains to draw attention to Kavan's work, praising her 'original voice' and 'the cool lucid light' of her 'unique mind'.<sup>98</sup> Though they appear not to have influenced each other's writing, there is a notable sympathy between the two writers' world view and unorthodox, sometimes unpopular, politics. Of particular interest to this study are Lessing's own fictional representations of madness and her connection with the anti-psychiatry movement in London during the late 1950s and 1960s. Lessing has been portrayed as a disciple of R D Laing, particularly in Lesley Hazelton's 1982 *New York Times* article which claimed that at one time 'Laing, Doris Lessing and the

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<sup>95</sup> 'Symmes Hole', 62.

<sup>96</sup> 'Symmes Hole', 144.

<sup>97</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 25.

<sup>98</sup> Lessing, 'Ice in an Outlaw's Heart'. Review of *A Stranger on Earth*. *The Independent*, 7 July 2006, 25.

American radical writer Clancy Sigal formed a circle of almost incestuous mutual influence'.<sup>99</sup> Minor scrutiny identifies this as a serious overstatement; Lessing's relationship with Clancy Sigal had ended by the time he and Laing began their association and Laing, in a direct response to this statement, claimed to have met Lessing only once.<sup>100</sup> Lessing too has been reluctant to discuss any association with Laing, playing down any influence of his theories on her work, and Sigal's relationships with both Lessing and Laing were undoubtedly more complex than Hazelton represents.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, her claim was taken up by Elaine Showalter in her excoriating critique of Laing and David Cooper in *The Female Malady* and shapes Showalter's reading of Lessing's work.<sup>102</sup> Showalter has valid criticisms of gender-blindness and male domination in the theory and practice of antipsychiatry. However, her analysis came only four years after her insightful and broadly positive overview of Laing's career and was undoubtedly influenced by Lessing's problematic status for political feminism.<sup>103</sup> Readers have found Lessing's criticisms of the women's movement as reported in Hazelton's interview and elsewhere baffling and incommensurate with her portrayal of women's experiences in her fiction, especially *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Showalter resolves this difficulty by citing the patriarchal influence of antipsychiatry on Lessing's portrayal of madness, and Laing's theories become a convenient scapegoat for what she perceives as Lessing's waning feminism. However, the relationship between Lessing's fiction and the ideas of antipsychiatry is subtle and complicated. Marion Vlastos has observed how Lessing portrays a split psyche in *The Grass is Singing* (1950), predating Laing's publication of *The Divided Self* by ten years and Showalter too emphasizes Lessing's 'lifelong interest' in madness and the unconscious.<sup>104</sup> Like Kavan's intellectual association with existential psychiatry in the 1940s, it would appear that Lessing's literary writing anticipated elements of Laing's theories and that she was later drawn to his work because of this. Though Showalter's analysis draws upon a journalistic overstatement, the correspondence between Lessing's writing and

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<sup>99</sup> Lesley Hazelton, 'Doris Lessing on Feminism, Communism and 'Space Fiction'', *The New York Times*, July 25 1982.

<sup>100</sup> Mullan, *Mad to Be Normal*, 303.

<sup>101</sup> See Carole Klein, *Doris Lessing: A Biography* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000).

<sup>102</sup> Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 238.

<sup>103</sup> 'R. D. Laing and the Sixties'.

<sup>104</sup> Marion Vlastos, 'Doris Lessing and R D Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy' *PMLA* 91, no. 2 (March 1976); Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 238.

Laing's theories is startling, and although their sympathy was a fellowship of ideas rather than persons, Lessing's writing of madness identifies her as a proponent of the antipsychiatry movement.

Referring to an affinity between *Ice* and her own representation of a world overcome by ice in *The Story of General Dann*, Lessing has wondered:

Is this half-conscious terror of another Ice Age deep in all of us? [...] But this *Ice* is not psychological ice, or metaphysical ice, here the loneliness of childhood has been magicked into a physical reality as hallucinatory as the Ancient Mariner's.<sup>105</sup>

Despite a heavy reliance on Kavan's biography in this reading, Lessing's analysis seems astute here. Rejecting interpretations of the ice as metaphor or allegory, Lessing honours the truth of Kavan's created universe as 'a hallucinatory physical reality'. Like Nelson, she invokes Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as the progenitor of *Ice* and the mariner's tall tale appears to cast a chilly shadow over Kavan's. The poem's 'snowy cliffs' of ice, 'green as Emerald' 'split with a Thunder-fit' foreshadow the experiences of Kavan's narrator who feels 'the fatal chill of the ice [...] heard its thunder, saw it split by dazzling emerald fissures'.<sup>106</sup> The recurring patterns of Kavan's narrative also invoke the lyric repetition of Coleridge's text; like the ancient mariner, the narrator of *Ice* survives death to recount his fantastic tale over and again. Ultimately the moral of the *Mariner* is echoed in *Ice*; love well your fellow creatures or be doomed to an otherworldly curse. Coleridge's mariner is an independently recurring motif in discussions of Kavan's writing, reinforcing the Romantic inflections of her work. John Betjeman's review of *I Am Lazarus* praises the stories' 'narrative power' and describes the readers' sensation of being 'caught as in the spell of a mad Ancient Mariner'.<sup>107</sup>

Elsewhere, Lessing draws on her lived experience of the early twentieth century to offer an alternative interpretation of *Ice*:

I think the war's effect on us all is generally overlooked. Everyone was changed by it, essentially changed [...] How could this woman, wired for calamity, not have suffered? *Ice*, her best-known novel, is supposed to be

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<sup>105</sup> Lessing, 'Anna Kavan' in *Time Bites*, 143-4.

<sup>106</sup> Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Oxford: OUP, 1969), 9, lines 52-67; Kavan, *Ice*, 147.

<sup>107</sup> John Betjeman, 'Books: From Realities to a World of Dreams.' *Daily Herald*, 21 March 1945, 2.



about drug-taking, or an Ice Age, but ice is a pretty good description of the cold dread we felt, watching the war engulf everything. I think *Ice* is her Second World War novel.<sup>108</sup>

Even before the cold hits, the world of *Ice* is beset by lawlessness and militarism; its landscapes are damaged by conflict and its inhabitants profoundly unsettled by 'rumours of a mysterious impending emergency'.<sup>109</sup> Excessive regulation, fuel shortages and black market trading reinforce Lessing's suggestion that the novel drew on Kavan's wartime experiences. The *I Am Lazarus* stories alone are testament to the profound affect of the Second World War on Kavan and its persistent legacy can be seen even in her very late writing. The novel's references to nuclear disaster also invoke the influence of the Cold War and the ice works neatly as a metaphor for this. Kavan's letters to Ian Hamilton in the immediate aftermath of the war reveal that she felt the shadow of the nuclear threat deeply:

How crazy the human race has become with its passion for death. The atomic bomb certainly seems the consummation of the global death wish, bringing dissolution most literally into our daily lives. Our generation has a genius for debasing things – reducing even death to its lowest level. We've taken away all death's ancient dignity and made it into something sordid and commonplace - "a used thing", touching the fallen meanly. We don't leave ourselves even a symbol.<sup>110</sup>

Kavan's language here strongly presages the rhetoric of *Ice* – her observations on mankind's passion for death and the global death wish are echoed in the narrator's account of 'the collective death-wish' and 'the fatal impulse to self-destruction' in her doomed fantasy world.<sup>111</sup> Kavan's disillusionment with humankind, made ignoble in its practices of modern warfare, is voiced by the narrator:

An insane impatience for death was driving mankind to a second suicide, even before the full effect of the first had been felt. I was profoundly depressed, left with a sense of waiting for something frightful to happen, a sort of mass execution.

I looked at the natural world, and it seemed to share my feelings to be trying in vain to escape its approaching doom.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Lessing, 'Ice in an Outlaw's Heart'.

<sup>109</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton, September 1, 1945.

<sup>111</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 123.

<sup>112</sup> *Ice*, 122.

In early 1946, the danger of nuclear attack was still a preoccupation in Kavan's letters. She writes of 'the queerest feeling of suspended animation' in London as its inhabitants wait for the first bomb to fall. For Kavan, mankind's end by nuclear holocaust will be 'a Wagnerian melodramatic climax of idiocy' and her fictional rendering of the event is as bizarre and sensational as *Götterdämmerung*. Her reflections on the war in its aftermath are infinitely cynical:

Talking of war guilt, the Nuremburg trials are something of a farce even apart from Hiroshima – I suppose there's almost no crime on the sheet (except possibly the Belsen range) which hasn't been duplicated by the accusers. From the printed accounts of the proceedings arises a smell of death ... of boredom. Often one reads of the accused "he dozed ... seemed half asleep" ... perhaps they are really dead men already.<sup>113</sup>

Kavan's letters express none of the triumph or righteousness of the victor; excepting horrors of the magnitude of the death camps, to her all are equally guilty. Again, the narrator of *Ice* articulates Kavan's post-war sentiments in his observation of the 'weight of collective guilt' mankind bears in their destruction of the world by ice.<sup>114</sup> Lessing's suggestion that *Ice* was inspired by the Second World War is insightful; its atrocities clearly stayed with Kavan, moving her to write not a political allegory of totalitarianism, but one of the entire human condition.

The perverted narrator is an everyman, torn between his lust for dominance and cruelty and a desire to do good, to be a hero. His dilemma is the moral legacy of the Second World War, embodying Kavan's disillusionment with humanity – all are guilty, all can be tempted by cruelty and dominance, or silent in the face of it. The girl is the eternal victim and the warden her perpetual dominator, together they are the dark pull towards the reality of the human situation, reminders of the horrors of the past (world war) and the inevitable destruction of the future (nuclear holocaust). The three are facets of each and all of us; Kavan's divided self is a portrait of both an individual psyche and the whole of mankind. She punctures the inflated fiction of hero and villain – Carter's consolatory nonsense of myth – to show that villainy is endemic and heroes are a rare breed.

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<sup>113</sup> Hamilton Papers, Kavan to Hamilton January 24, 1946.

<sup>114</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 142.

Lessing's intuition of the half-conscious terror of another Ice Age within us is borne out in a prevalent strain of apocalyptic fiction in which the world is consumed by water or ice. J G Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) is one example and Maggie Gee, another writer who cites Kavan as a 'literary model' continues this trend in her near-futuristic novels of climate change *The Ice People* (1998) and *The Flood* (2004).<sup>115</sup> The quiet but constant presence of Christian iconography in Kavan's earlier texts is augmented in the biblical apocalypse of *Ice* – the great flood is frozen, solidified into a relentless onslaught of ice that will leave no survivors. The disaster represented in *Ice* may be an excursion into fantasy, but as the threat of climate change casts its shadow over the approaching century, the menace of a man-made Ice Age becomes strangely pertinent. Although considering Kavan's novel in light of later scientific research into ecological crises may appear anachronistic, her politics can be seen to actively encompass ideas of environmentalism and sustainability. Her concern with our actions towards others extends equally to the world we live in. During her time living with Ian Hamilton in New Zealand the couple were self-sufficient, not simply as a necessity during the spartan war years, but as part of an ethos of individualism and independent living. Hamilton's pacifism was interwoven with his ecological philosophy and love of nature, and he explicitly associates mankind's destruction of one another to their destruction of the natural world in *Till Human Voices Wake Us*:

The bush isn't a part of nature, it is nature. And, though it might have seemed otherwise to past generations, when man really comes up against nature, you can bet your last shirt-button on nature [...] because nature is slow. She's pacifist. Not like the British, who can take it for a while and then have to start lashing round, worse than their opponents. Nature simply allows the destroyer to destroy himself.<sup>116</sup>

Hamilton's reverence for the natural world is bound up with his ferocious pacifism and his politics elucidates the world Kavan describes in *Ice*. Despite its fantastic aura and metaphorical significance, the ice of Kavan's novel is also a real consequence of warmongering:

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<sup>115</sup> Maggie Gee and Lisa Appignanesi, 'The Contemporary Writer: Gender and Genre' in *Writing: A Woman's Business: Women, Writing and the Marketplace*, ed. Judy and Kate Fullbrook Simons (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 172.

<sup>116</sup> Hamilton, *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, 5.

Instead of my world, there would soon be only ice, snow, stillness, death; no more violence, no war, no victims: nothing but frozen silence, absence of life. The ultimate achievement of mankind would be, not just self-destruction, but the destruction of all life; the transformation of the living world into a dead planet.

[...] A frightful crime had been committed, against nature, against the universe, against life.<sup>117</sup>

As civilization breaks down in the onslaught of the cold and ice, mobs loot and murder and refugees savagely kill in their panic and desperation to survive. We see the intimate violence done to the girl within the novel's triptych reverberating throughout wider society in gory and explicit scenes of brutality; warfare is sadism played out on a grand scale. Though mankind, collectively suicidal, has called it into being, the ice itself is otherworldly, sterile and non-organic. A conquering force intent on destroying humanity, it is neither good nor evil, dealing death without moral imperative. 'Pale cliffs looming, radiating dead cold, ghostly avengers coming to end mankind' and 'icy giant battalions, marching in relentless order across the world, crushing, obliterating, destroying everything in their path' – this is Lessing's recollection of cold dread incarnated.<sup>118</sup> In *Ice* mankind's fate is a justified punishment for the evil we have perpetrated upon one another but there is no justice for the victims; the meek shall not inherit the earth. Instead, the snow spreads 'a sheet of sterile whiteness over the face of the dying world, burying the violent and their victims together in a mass-grave'.<sup>119</sup> These repeated bouts of heavy snowfall make place indistinguishable, obliterating detail; the individual character of cities and countries is wiped out, the achievements of humanity and the diversity of nature are eradicated. As the girl and narrator chase through these wastelands in continual flight and pursuit, she is brutally assaulted, threatened and killed time and again along the way. This disturbing monotony of place and deed accumulate to a sense of perpetual repetition. The narrator is not unaware of the interminable pattern of replay he and the girl are locked into; realising at one point that he will 'have to start searching for her all over again' he feels the 'repetition was like a curse'.<sup>120</sup> But the wearying recurrence in the imagery and structure of Kavan's narrative is key to its meaning; the falling snow itself provides a model for

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<sup>117</sup> Kavan, *Ice*, 142.

<sup>118</sup> *Ice*, 153, 92.

<sup>119</sup> *Ice*, 46.

<sup>120</sup> *Ice*, 99.

the plot of both narrator and human life as a whole. Ultimately, we see that the novel's characters and their actions are of no more consequence than 'an infinity of snowflakes like ghostly birds, incessantly swooping past from nowhere to nowhere'.<sup>121</sup> Kavan's final message is pure nihilism – the narrator's adventurous exploits are meaningless, cruelty and suffering are meaningless, all human life is meaningless:

the snowflakes whirled madly in all directions, filled the night with their spectral chaos. I seemed to feel the same feverish disorder in myself, in all my pointless rushing from place to place. The crazily dancing snowflakes represented the whole of life. [...] In the delirium of the dance, it was impossible to distinguish between the violent and the victims. Anyway, distinctions no longer mattered in a dance of death, where all the dancers spun on the edge of nothing.<sup>122</sup>

Kavan's previous protagonists have been trapped in inescapable institutions or life situations, in *Ice* there is no outside utopia from which the characters are excluded and not the slightest hope of reprieve. We see the ice swallow up the world of the novel just as Lessing describes watching the war 'engulf everything'; despite his attempts to escape it, the narrator's universe continually contracts as the doom encompasses the whole world.

As both an intimate study of the psyche and a work with wider moral and political concerns, *Ice* is concerned not so much with concepts of good and evil as Humankind's desire and capacity to dominate and inflict pain on others, and to feel its effects. Criticism of the novel which seeks to fathom what the ice represents presupposes that its frozen universe is a trope through which Kavan explores either a subjective psychic process or an abstract universal. Such readings attempt to interpret and consequently contain the ice but Kavan's politics of individualism allow for neither analysis to win out – the subjective is always deeply political and vice versa. For Lessing the ice is loneliness or cold dread, a hallucinatory physical reality, and this seems closest to capturing the sense of Kavan's vision. For the ice consistently resists interpretation, embodying multiple, contradictory meanings and ultimately transpires to mean nothing at all. More than a simple device to drive the apocalyptic plot, more than the external manifestation of something deep within

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<sup>121</sup> *Ice*, 157.

<sup>122</sup> *Ice*, 152-3.

the psyche, the approaching ice is all of this and simultaneously bleak nothingness; a white shroud to cover the corpse of mankind. To attempt to extract the significance of the ice from the novel's structure and aesthetic is to unbalance its intricate construction; in the glare of too much analysis the entire form melts. A fable of everything and nothing, Kavan's final novel is as complex and unique as a single snowflake.

## Conclusion

I was first attracted to Kavan by the stark beauty and power of *Asylum Piece* and, like many, by her intriguing association with her own fictional character. I was surprised by the remarkable lack of familiarity with her work in academic circles; those in the publishing industry were more likely to know of her, a phenomenon explained by the steady proliferation of articles and book reviews on Kavan in the trade press. Four years later, there has been a limited increase in serious biographical and critical work on this writer.<sup>1</sup> I established The Kavan Society in 2009, which slowly continues to attract members; some have an academic interest in her but most are simply fans of her writing.<sup>2</sup> Certainly Kavan's work deserves more critical attention, and there are encouraging signs that comparative work on her will continue to increase. But irrespective of limited critical scrutiny, Peter Owen has continued to reissue editions of Kavan's novels and stories, her work has been a source of inspiration for contemporary artists, and new readers are persistently drawn to her writing.<sup>3</sup> Kavan's current readers have a perceptible presence on the internet, where she is presented as a cult and esoteric writer and, for many battling with alienation, mental distress and psychiatric care, she captures the 'truth' of despair.<sup>4</sup>

At the outset of researching this thesis, I found the limited serious critical work on Kavan's writing both freeing and daunting for the scope of my project. Despite my decision to move away from her biography in reading her work, I have spent considerable time researching and correcting errors in the story of Kavan's life, and found her emotional and intellectual world to be infinitely more rich and complex than has generally been known. Relying on the imprecise and erroneous details of Kavan's biography for insights into her fiction has been misleading for

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<sup>1</sup> See Sturm, ed., *Anna Kavan's New Zealand: A Pacific Interlude in a Turbulent Life*; Wasson, 'Carceral City, Cryptic Signs: Wartime Fiction by Anna Kavan and Graham Greene'.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.annakavan.org.uk](http://www.annakavan.org.uk).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of visual and performing artworks inspired by Kavan include Kristina Marie Hofmann's illustrations inspired by *Ice* 'The Muffled Uproar of Screams', 'Insane Impatience For Death' and 'Alone Where Nobody Could See Her' (2009), images available at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-illustration-awards-2009-student-category/> and Matthew Weinstein's current project on Kavan, see [http://www.matthewweinstein.com/index.php?mode=text&section\\_id=51](http://www.matthewweinstein.com/index.php?mode=text&section_id=51) for more details.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example 'Community Reviews' at <http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/119148.Annakavan>

previous critics, obscuring other aspects of her work; just as looking to her fiction in constructing the narrative of her life has skewed the facts of her biographies. But the accumulated mythography served as a constant reminder to me of the complex play between truth and fiction, real and imaginative experience, which I found so important to Kavan's work.

In *Asylum Piece* Kavan found the distinctive voice that brought her to contemporary critical acclaim; but reading *Who Are You?* against *Let Me Alone* clearly illustrates continuities as well as renaissance in her writing after 1940. The fractured self represented in these stories reappears in many guises throughout her writing, manifesting the experience of mental breakdown, internal conflict brought about by societal expectation, and the fragmentary nature of modern existence. Biographically inflected interpretations of Kavan have previously neglected the philosophical and political elements of her work, and Anaïs Nin's more instinctive reading of an affinity with R D Laing brought her closer to Kavan's intellectual influences. Kavan's portrait of the asylum experience showed the institution internalized, conveying a critique and condemnation of psychiatric confinement which would develop politically in her later work. Her writing of breakdown and her pared-down style gave her representations of difference and dispossession a new intensity, sharpening her account of the social alienation and stigmatization of the misfit and the mad person within the asylum and without.

Kavan's radical stance in 'The Case of Bill Williams' articulates a striking affinity with the psychopolitics of antipsychiatry. My research into her work with soldiers suffering from effort syndrome emphasized the complex interrelation of mind and body in her writing of psychiatric treatment and the traumatic ordeals of war in *I Am Lazarus*. Her ironic invocation of the biblical Lazarus embodies her fictional representation of individuals who are both dead and alive in a world without hope, forsaken by God. Kavan's characters – soldiers, civilians and patients – live out metaphors of suffering in a manner that resonates deeply with Binswanger's thoughts on the correlation between poetic language and existence. The hallucinatory experiences of her civilians match the psychosis of her combat-fatigued patients, powerfully rendering her lasting response to the terrors of the Second World War and the suffering of those around her.

Jean Rhys' admiration of *Who Are You?* was the catalyst for my foci on concerns of gender and existentialism in Kavan's novel. The women writers who



have most admired Kavan – Anaïs Nin, Jean Rhys and Doris Lessing – all have ambiguous relations with feminism; although their works have become textbooks for feminist criticism, they have perplexed and distressed their admirers with their overt rejection of the feminist politics of the women’s movement. This common ambiguity towards sexual politics influenced my reading of gender in Kavan’s work, and I have avoided attempting to reclaim her as an intentionally or unambiguously feminist writer, while reading her work as open to new feminist interpretations.

Kavan’s concern with the ambiguous relation of reality and unreality, her portrayal of internal conflict, and her pacifist politics persist to the end in *Ice*. I found Doris Lessing’s complicated personal politics to be in close affinity with Kavan’s, and further work could be done in reading these two writers comparatively. Any overview of Kavan’s oeuvre is necessarily complicated by her lack of devotion to one particular style. In a late, self-defensive and self-reflective letter to Peter Owen, she explained:

I can’t keep on all my life writing in the same way. [...] The world now is quite different and so is my life in it. One reacts to the environment and atmosphere one lives in, one absorbs outside influences, and my writing changes with the conditions outside.<sup>5</sup>

My reading of Kavan was guided by some of the broader intellectual currents of her times and the work of contemporary writers and thinkers, many of whom she came into contact with. In an attempt to situate her writing in the turbulent ‘environment and atmosphere’ of the mid-twentieth century I found resonance between her work and a range of seemingly diverse sources; especially the pacifist and anarchist politics of Herbert Read, the existential psychology of Ludwig Binswanger, the feminist existentialism of Simone de Beauvoir and the antipsychiatry of R D Laing. The thoughts of other contemporary writers of fiction on her work – particularly Nin, Rhys, Aldiss and Lessing – were also crucial to my interpretations of her texts. Literature played its own vital but distinctive role in my reading of Kavan, haunting her texts with metafictional allusions to its emotional and existential significance. In the turning of the ‘first bright infantile page’ of ‘Anna Kavan’s’ life, in the confusion between reality and unreality experienced by this character and many others (from the girl in *Who Are You?* to the narrator of *Ice*), in

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<sup>5</sup> Austin, Anna Kavan to Peter Owen, 29 March [1966].

the 'honourable and precious' books of the narrator of 'Our City', in the figure of B in *Sleep Has His House* reading in order to retreat into a private world, and in the metaphorical psychoses of her psychiatric patients, Kavan emphasises an intricate and critical relation between life and fiction.<sup>6</sup> The solace and salvation of fiction, and its part in our most significant experiences and understanding of ourselves, persist in Kavan's writing, an intimate counterpart to her political and existential concern with being human and living in the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Kavan, 'Our City', 140; *Let Me Alone*, 23.

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Kavan's fiction has been translated into and published in many languages. Since her death many of her works have been reissued by Peter Owen and other imprints in Britain and the US (including Pan, Picador, Panther and Micheal Kessend). Her stories were extensively anthologized during her lifetime and after. This list comprises first publications of her novels and stories in the English language, and alternative publications in English which include relevant new introductory material, or differ in name or content.

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