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## **Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Alan Burns' *Europe After the Rain*: Repetition with a Difference**

Leigh Wilson

### **Abstract**

While Anna Kavan's work has been largely ignored by critics, the responses of those who have noticed her have been dominated by two assertions. First, many of those wishing to assert her importance and power have seen her work as *sui generis*, the result of her isolation from the surrounding literary culture. Second, numerous feminist critics have seen her work as reproducing the worst effects of patriarchal domination. This article, through a reading of Kavan's final novel, *Ice* (1967), challenges both of these assessments of Kavan. It suggests that, if we notice and try to account for the similarities between *Ice* and a novel published two years earlier, Alan Burns' *Europe After the Rain* (1965), Kavan's novel can be read as challenging patriarchal domination through a bold and innovative reworking of the reader's 'suspension of disbelief'.

**Keywords:** Anna Kavan, *Ice*, Alan Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, mimesis, feminist criticism, sexual violence, 1960s innovative writing.

Both during her life and since her death in 1968, claims that Anna Kavan's writing is worth critical and readerly attention have been dominated by the characterization of her work as *sui generis*. As with many innovative women writers, some attempts to assess her critical standing have compared her to male writers — she is 'Kafka's sister', in Brian Aldiss's often repeated formulation (1995: 143). Despite this, assertions of her nonpareil status are more frequent and more widely dispersed. This is particularly the case with *Ice* (1967), Kavan's most written-about work. Aldiss, even while attempting to place Kavan in relation to other writers in his *Billion Year Spree* (1973) and again in his *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), claims in the end that *Ice* 'is its own self, mysterious...an enigma' (Aldiss and Wingrove 2001: 391). David Callard, in his biography of Kavan from 1992, suggests that the novel is '*sui generis*', transcending the genres — science fiction, slipstream, fantasy — with which it has often been associated (142; emphasis in original). Doris Lessing's assessment of the novel, quoted on the cover of the 2006 edition, was that '[t]here is nothing else like it'. Jeremy Reed, in his biography of Kavan, insists that *Ice* 'has no predecessors in British fiction' (137).<sup>1</sup>

Such assessments, of course, have come from critics keen to urge others to read Kavan, on the basis that her work is important and powerful. However, they are problematic because they are so often linked with the assumption that the social and psychological isolation of the last decades of her life were matched by a literary isolation, and that, indeed, her experimental achievements are those of a kind of idiot savant, the result of serendipity rather than any critical engagement with literary tradition and debate. An anonymous review from *Publishers Weekly* in 1970 chose to read Aldiss's introduction to the Doubleday edition

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Reed in his biography, *A Stranger on Earth: The Life and Work of Anna Kavan* (2006) and Francis Booth in his *Stranger Still: The Works of Anna Kavan* (2012) draw attention in their titles to Kavan's supposed strangeness and link it to a sense of alienation and isolation. The quote from JG Ballard used on the front of Reed's book calls Kavan 'one of the strangest writers of the twentieth century'. This repeated assertion of Kavan's 'strangeness' shares many of the aims and the problems of the assertion that her work is *sui generis*.

of *Ice* as implying that when he first met Kavan ‘she had to be told that she had written science fiction; she had not realized it’ (1970: 53). In *Trillion Year Spree* Aldiss repeats this claim that Kavan wrote science fiction ‘without knowing it’ (2001: 389). The impulse to assume that Kavan was cut off from literary influences or debates has continued into more recent work. David Callard argues that the writers of the nouveau roman were ‘the only group of writers to whom she ever expressed a partiality’, but implies too that this was because they ‘moved in areas she had already explored’ (1992: 141). Jeremy Reed claims, for example, that her first work published under the name Anna Kavan, *Asylum Piece* (1940), shows that she had ‘picked up unconsciously on the influence of surrealism prevalent in European art and literature of the time’ (2006: 50). Francis Booth acknowledges that *Ice* is ‘reminiscent in many ways of the crop of British and American science fiction novels of the early 1960s’, and he mentions a number of writers of apocalyptic novels contemporary with it, but prefers in the end ‘to take Kavan at her word and assume she had not read any of these books’ (2012: 126-7).

If these critics have rooted the worth of Kavan’s writing in a supposed innocence of literary debate and of its provocation to conscious practice, the gender politics of this are not hard to spot. Christine Brooke-Rose has written that innovative women writers are infrequently shown as having a ‘knowledge of development from precedents’ and, when precedents are acknowledged they are ‘mentioned only for dismissal as imitation’ (2003: 4). The need for a feminist recovery of Kavan’s work from such readings is clear, but where interest in Kavan’s work from feminist critics has been aroused in the past, it has often focused instead on the supposed unhelpful nature of her writing for any feminist project. Kavan’s work has been linked to that of Jean Rhys by a number of critics in a way that makes

this clear.<sup>2</sup> Writing of Kavan's *Change The Name* (1941), Doris Lessing, in the *Independent* in 1993, commented that 'we are in Jean Rhys country, women doomed by their natures' (1993: n.p.). Vivian Gornick, in *The End of the Novel of Love* (1999), connected Rhys and Kavan through their being 'permanently stunned by the underlying brutishness of relations between women and men' which for both resulted in 'a remarkably interior prose' (1999: 62). It is the case that in *Ice*, the narrator's fantasies that so dominate the novel are without exception fantasies of sexual violence. In these scenes a woman is threatened, kidnapped, hurt, engulfed by ice, raped, found dead with her neck broken, and sacrificed to appease a sea monster. It is the case too that this repeated return to scenes of sexual violence is a feature of much of Kavan's work throughout her career. Again and again vulnerable women are imprisoned and assaulted by emotionally distant and cruel men and these scenarios are rarely mitigated by either narrative comment or redemptive plotting. Kavan's novel which preceded *Ice*, *Who Are You?* (1963), reworks the scenario of the end of Helen Ferguson's *Let Me Alone* (1930) where a young, isolated and physically fragile woman (named Anna Kavan) is bullied and raped by her much older, sadistic husband. Where an escape is suggested in Kavan's work, it is always — as in the double ending of *Who Are You?* — deeply ambiguous. Given this accumulation of unredeemed sexual violence, the linking of Kavan to Rhys and the sense that her work is symptomatic of patriarchal power relations at their most deathly and destructive appears credible. This article will suggest, however, that the relation between *Ice* and Alan Burns' novel from two years before, *Europe After the Rain* (1965), presents a challenge to the claim that Kavan's work, and her last novel in particular, is sui generis and the result of an innocence of any tradition of literary innovation. It will suggest that a

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<sup>2</sup> For a very useful survey of feminist work on Kavan and in particular a strong critique of biographical readings of her fiction, see Victoria Walker, 'The Fiction of Anna Kavan (1901-1968)', unpublished PhD thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2012. More recent work (including Walker's thesis) has begun to draw attention to her writing *as* writing, and to notice its place in the histories and traditions of form (see Timmel-Duchamp 2004; Magot 2016).

consideration of the relation between the two novels challenges too the claim that the repeated scenes of sexual violence in *Ice* are symptomatic repetitions of patriarchal destruction, the result of what Gornick calls Kavan's inability to rise above obsession (1999: 63). It will show instead that the scenes of sexual violence in *Ice* challenge the problematic representation of sexual violence in Burns' novel and challenge too the place of such violence in the world.

### ***Ice and Europe After the Rain***

Far from being an isolated idiot savant, there is much evidence that Kavan was an active and knowledgeable reader of her contemporaries. In an undated letter to her friend Raymond Marriott she remarks that John Calder, Burns' publisher during the 1960s, 'sent me Alan Burns' new novel – a pleasant surprise'.<sup>3</sup> It is the case that there is no direct evidence that she read *Europe After the Rain* specifically, and that no reviewer or critic has so far commented on any relation between it and *Ice*, but the internal evidence for a relation between the novels is very strong. Their similarities are such that, whatever the actual nature of Kavan's relation to the earlier novel, both these and their differences must be seen as significant. Set in a future world on the brink of extinction through political skulduggery and environmental disaster, the unnamed first person narrator of *Ice* moves through unspecified countries and regions in pursuit of a young woman — who is only ever referred to as 'the girl' — whom he wishes simultaneously to dominate and to save. The girl is sometimes trapped by, sometimes fleeing from, the third main character, the 'warden', who is powerful and cruel. The narrator searches for the girl amidst increasing panic caused by the creeping of ice over the planet. By the end, a 'terrible cold world of ice and death had replaced the living world we had always known' (Kavan 2006: 158). Like *Ice*, *Europe After the Rain* has been unjustly ignored, and has never

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<sup>3</sup> Undated letter to Raymond Marriott, Anna Kavan Papers, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Series II, Box 2, Folder 17. My thanks to Hannah Van Hove for pointing me in the direction of this letter.

been republished since the first edition in 1965. Like *Ice*, the novel is set in an indeterminate place at an indeterminate time, but again like *Ice* its mise-en-scène is suggestive of both the chaos in Europe after the Second World War and of a future apocalypse. Its title, borrowed from the second work by Max Ernst to bear the name, *Europe After the Rain II* (1940-2), points back to postwar chaos and hints at its borrowing of aspects of surrealist method.<sup>4</sup> Burns' novel opens with the danger of ice, as the 'we' of its first sentence have to cross an unstable wooden bridge while 'ice pressed against the log piles supporting it': 'Slowly the ice-pack oscillated and a large piece broke away to be carried by the current fast beneath the bridge' (1965: 7). Burns' novel too is narrated in the first person by an unnamed man caught up in the chaos of war, revolution and destruction in a country that is not his. He too is, from the beginning, obsessed with a young woman, known throughout as 'the girl', and much of the novel describes his attempts to find her. When he does, she is seemingly trapped by the powerful 'commander', a fascistic figure, responsible for many deaths, who appears to keep her as his sexual slave. This central three-way relation — between the narrator, the victimised 'girl' and the sadistic commander — and the apocalyptic setting are all clearly present too in Kavan's novel. In each novel the narrator strongly identifies with his rival for the girl, the commander/warden, yet at the same time sees him as cruel and sadistic (Burns 1965: 62; Kavan 2006: 98, 132-4). Like Kavan's narrator, Burns' is ambiguous in his response to the young woman, both obsessively tracking her, desiring her, but also detached from her, appearing to be without affect: 'It was not that I was indifferent, I was not but I was calm [...] I felt that I did not care for the means by which this woman's mind had been broken [...] this was deplorable, but the fact remained' (1965: 27). Kavan's narrator admits such doubling too: 'With one arm I warmed and supported her: the other arm was the executioner's' (2006: 113).

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst's work was also important to another British writer in the 1960s influenced by Surrealism, J.G. Ballard. *Europe After the Rain II* is referred to in both *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969).

More than this, specific incidents in Burns' novel appear to be repeated in Kavan's. At one point, early in the novel, Burns' narrator describes a dangerous car journey through the ruined land: 'The driver was ready to take the risk. The car had a hood, and planks on each side, we were wrapped in blankets. The hooded interior was a small room' (1965: 18). The final scene of Kavan's novel sees the narrator driving the 'girl' in a 'big car' through the frozen and dying world: 'The car had become our world; a small, bright, heated room; our home in a vast, indifferent, freezing universe' (2006: 157-8). Later, looking for the girl, Burns' narrator despairs of finding her in the chaos: 'The bridges were down, nothing would be done, it was impossible, there was no point in looking for the girl, the town was erased, nothing remained, she had been killed, people lived in holes, nothing lived above the ground' (1965: 41). Later, at a party at the commander's, an explosion appears to kill the girl: 'I could see her feet in the rubble and dust, the two legs blazed white, the heavy head hung on the long neck inconceivably slender' (1965: 87). Kavan's narrator too is torn between the need to search and his despair at ever finding the girl, and at several point he appears to find the woman he is searching for only after she appears to have been killed: 'I had not much hope of finding her; I knew the fate of girls in sacked towns.... I came upon her by chance, not far away, lying face down on the stones. A little blood had trickled out of her mouth. Her neck had an unnatural twist' (2006: 53, 54). He too is obsessed with what he calls the girl's 'extreme slenderness' (2006: 56). Both narrators force their way into the commander's/warden's office. Burns' narrator sees that '[t]he commander was alone in his office, with books, a man with a history, his head square and large in bone, his coat black or brown, his well-made boots climbing a steep slope of work' (1965: 63); Kavan's narrator enters 'the rich room. Persian rugs on the parquet floor, period furniture, on the wall a full length portrait of him by a well-known painter. My worn, shabby, unpressed uniform emphasized, by contrast, the elegant grandeur of his' (2006: 129). Both narrators steal a uniform in order to carry out their plans (Burns

1965: 65; Kavan 2006: 139), and both are involved in violence in the street, as a consequence of which Burns' narrator is injured in the arm and Kavan's in the leg (1965: 66; 2006: 106-7).

What all this suggests however is not that Kavan has copied Burns' novel as a woman writer dependent on the stronger male model, but rather that *Ice* can be read as Kavan's riposte, perhaps directly to Burns' novel, but certainly more generally to the implications of particular experimental practices and their relation to a deathly and destructive patriarchal violence. This can be seen through comparing two passages, one from each novel, depicting strikingly similar scenes. Around the middle of Burns' novel, his narrator, having found the girl he has been searching for, is told by her about her relations with the commander, implying that she is willing to endure his sexual domination as a way to eventually carry out her plans of violence against him. She shows the narrator the commander's room, where she stays, and says the narrator could stay there too: 'I would not have to hide, I could sleep in their room' (1965: 68), he says. The next chapter begins with a long, extraordinary and disturbing vision of the girl's sexual relations with the commander, witnessed by the narrator in the room which he has been invited to share with them. This passage from the beginning of the chapter gives a sense of the whole:

Holding himself above her, moving neither forwards nor backwards, the commander allowed her to survive, he turned with ease, mounted, just as he reached her she shifted away, he pursued her, she shielded herself with her arms, facing him and crouching, she tried to escape, suddenly she turned towards him, hopeless, it was over. Failed, beaten, he continued in hope, really tired, not persevering, he did not share her panic, his exhaustion made it easy. As he woke she prepared for a long fight, she was persistent, she stuck to her hate until it happened, but she was thrown off by his remaining motionless, by his motionless power. She endeavoured to close with him while she was

strong, an amazing exhibition, she furiously hunted, grasped him, he flicked aside, he saved himself, she shifted to avoid the agony, it was driven home, there was no agony, he seized her neck and gave her a sharp hit at the base of the skull, it was over, swinging, no sound, she was overwhelmed, silence followed, clapping, whiplike, in the dense atmosphere.

With his height and weight he knelt on her spine, they fell with violence, her shocked face and flapping hands, her wrists against the wood, discoloured eyes, stains of earth and tears, bruised lips, cheeks splashed with tears, his dog between her feet, her feet in its belly, streaks of black across his face, his fingers. The short whip with a pellet of lead at the end of its lash, the hairs in his nostrils, the gaze of pleasure. (1965: 69-70)

While much of the scene appears to be a detached third person narration, we are every so often reminded of the watching presence of the narrator of *Europe After the Rain*. He is both deeply implicated in the violence against the young woman and characterized as protection and salvation:

I saw her struggling. I touched her skirt. His fingers held her head, reached her elbows. I watched the pointed bones move, leaned forward and picked up her hand. I saw her teeth grinning, dim squared shapes with a side still grey. I touched her mouth, he moved her arms and hands. I tried to help her. I saw her in the centre of the room, her throat, hair. 'Her arm is broken,' I said. 'Very well, strap it to her side.' He lifted her on to the bed, I watched the touching of the two of them, the specks on her fingernails, her white skin, freckled, reddened. They had both been hurt. (1965: 70-1)

There is much here beyond the voyeurism that also resonates with *Ice*. In a scene where Kavan's narrator apparently finds the girl dead, she too has a broken arm through the skin of which 'the sharp pointed ends of bone' protrude (2006: 54). Despite the similarities, though, in this profoundly disquieting passage from Burns' novel the young woman seems in many ways more active than Kavan's. In *Ice* the equivalent scene is focused on the girl's extreme passivity and so its sexual politics would seem to be more problematic. After the girl has fled her husband near the beginning of *Ice*, the narrator follows her by boat to another country amidst general migration and upheaval caused by the slow spread of ice around the world. At a port, the girl is met and taken away by 'the warden'. The narrator stays in the town dominated by the warden's castle, and arranges an invitation to visit him. As he enters the castle, he is escorted through corridors by the warden's guards. He glances along a corridor, sees the girl and chases her up some stairs. He follows her into a room, her bedroom, sees her lying in bed and then sees the warden enter the room and rape her:

She was in bed, not asleep, waiting. A faint pinkish glow came from a lamp beside her. The wide bed stood on a platform, bed and platform alike covered in sheepskin, facing a great mirror nearly as long as the wall. Alone here, where nobody could hear her, where nobody was *meant* to hear her, she was cut off from all contact, totally vulnerable, at the mercy of the man who came in without knocking, without a word, his cold, very bright blue eyes pouncing on hers in the glass. She crouched motionless, staring silently into the mirror, as if mesmerized. ....

He approached the bed with unhurried steps. She did not move until he bent over her, when she twisted away abruptly, as if trying to escape, buried her face in the pillow. His hand reached out, slid over her shoulder, strong fingers feeling along her jawbone,

gripping, tilting, forcing her head up. She resisted violently, in sudden terror, twisting and turning wildly, struggling against his strength. He did nothing at all, let her go on fighting. Her feeble struggles amused him, he knew they would not last long. He looked on in silence, in half-smiling amusement, always tilting her face with slight but inescapable pressure, while she exhausted herself.

Suddenly she gave in, worn out, beaten; she was panting, her face was wet. His tightened grip slid slightly, compelled her to look straight at him. To bring the thing to a finish, he stared into her dilated eyes, implacably forced into them his own arrogant, ice-blue gaze. This was the moment of her surrender; opposition collapsed at this point, when she seemed to fall and drown in those cold blue mesmeric depths. Now she had no more will. He could do what he liked with her....

Later she did not move, gave no indication of life, lying exposed on the ruined bed as on a slab in a mortuary.... Her head hung over the edge of the bed in a slightly unnatural position, the neck slightly twisted in a way that suggested violence, the bright hair twisted into a sort of rope by his hands. (2006: 36-7; emphasis in original)

As is clear from the above, Kavan's style is very different from Burns. In many ways it is more conventional — the narrative façade is unbroken and it has none of the syntactical unusualness of Burns' prose. However, the crucial element of this scene in Kavan's novel is that when the reader gets to its end, it becomes clear that it is a fantasy, and this changes the significance of the girl's passivity and the novel's ethical relation to the events represented.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Two novels by Ann Quin from the late 1960s, *Three* (1966) and *Passages* (1969), both also published by Calder & Boyars in the UK, share with *Ice* and *Europe After the Rain* triangular relations, experimental narrative practices and the sense of a world broken and disorientated

On re-reading the reader begins to notice markers of its impossibility. The narrator insists on his presence during the assault — ‘I saw it happen’ (2006: 36) — but at the same time recounts it at times from the girl’s point of view. The warden does not speak throughout his violent assault, and the narrator tells us that ‘[t]o her, this silence was one of the most terrifying things about him’ (2006: 37). From watching the scene, he moves to a knowledge of the girl’s feelings about it. Immediately after this the narrator is back in the corridor, being escorted by the warden’s guards: ‘I wondered where I was being taken’ (2006: 37), indicating the fantasized status of the scene in the bedroom. Victoria Walker has referred to these fantasies of sexual violence as ‘proleptic visions’ (Walker 2012: 193), but as the narrator continually tells us, and as the ending of the novel implies, the world is on the brink of destruction; in fact ‘[t]he world seemed to have come to an end already’ (2006: 157). There is no future to be proleptically inserted into the present of the world of the novel. Walker is right to point out that this lack of a future at the end of the novel is made ambiguous by the retrospective narration of the novel, but the function of the scenes is not primarily to suggest what will happen in the future. Their existential status is more complex even than that; they force the reader to mistake a kind of psychosis for diegesis. It is only when each fantasized scene ends, and the narrative returns to the place in which we left the real world, that we realize what has happened, and we then we are forced to return ourselves, flicking back to find the moment where the narrative silently moved from one to the other, from the ‘real’ world to fantasy.<sup>6</sup> The scenes then highlight the fictional representational act as such, the relation between the scene and the world to which it appears to refer.

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by some kind of cataclysm. *Passages* in particular shares many elements with both *Ice* and *Europe After the Rain*. It tells the story, through a disorientating narrative technique, of a man and a woman travelling in a ravaged foreign country (probably a Greece coming to terms with the effects of its wartime occupation), searching for the latter’s brother. An episode concerning a sexual encounter with sadomasochistic overtones, involving the woman as voyeur and perhaps participant, and whose existential status in terms of the ‘real world’ of the novel is ambiguous, is particularly resonant in relation to the scenes from Kavan’s and Burns’ novels quoted above (Quin 2003: 24-6, 57-60).

While on the surface Kavan's style appears to follow straightforward realist conventions, Burns' style in *Europe After the Rain* has been linked with the surrealism of Ernst's painting from which the novel's title is taken. Jeanette Baxter has argued that Burns' unusual sentence construction — his extreme parataxis — manifests on the page the central surrealist aim of making *relation* visible and making the work of constructing relations the reader's rather than the text's. For her, Burns is fundamentally interested in 'relations between things' and this is what 'properly aligns' his work with Surrealism (2015: 160). However, while disorientating, this does not challenge fundamental assumptions about mimetic representation. As is clear from Eric Auerbach's seminal investigation of the 'representation of reality', parataxis — the 'power of juxtaposed and independent verbal blocks' (Auerbach 1968: 110) — is a key form in the development of European realism. It is crucial in the slow movement of prose fiction toward the representation of the 'creatural' (1968: 246 and passim) which includes both interior reality and what Auerbach calls 'the sensory reality of passing life' (1968: 217). What this suggests is that the extreme parataxis of *Europe After the Rain*, while making the syntax unusual, in the end has the effect of making Burns' writing not less realistic than more conventional writing, but more. Its mode of representation is as a faithful copy of a world that cannot be ordered or understood in its totality.

Of course, Kavan's work too has often been linked to Surrealism, as Jeremy Reed's assertion quoted above makes clear. Natalie Ferris notes in her article in this *Special Issue* that the reissues of *Ice* and *Sleep Has His House* by Picador in the early 1970s both use paintings by the Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux on their covers. More recently, Kavan's writing has

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<sup>6</sup> *Mercury*, an earlier version of *Ice* that Kavan did not intend for publication, was published posthumously in 1994. The novel is in the third person, and while most of the 'real' action of the novel is narrated in the past tense, the hallucinated scenes are always in the present tense, and so are more clearly marked as different textually. At points, the narrative moves within what ostensibly appears to be the same scene from one to the other (Kavan 1994: 116-7). In other ways too in *Mercury* the hallucinated scenes are more clearly flagged as such (Kavan 1994: 23).

been linked with Surrealism in less ‘unconscious’ ways than those suggested by Reed. In particular the influence of Surrealism on her work from the 1940s is gaining increasing critical attention, as in Hannah Van Hove’s article on *Sleep Has His House* (1948) also in this *Special Issue*. However, the relation between Surrealism, women artists and the feminist critical reception of both is a complex one. The place of both sex and violence at the centre of Surrealist challenges to bourgeois orthodoxies led to problematic treatment of female subjects and bodies from the beginning. As Natalya Lusty has argued, as early as Walter Benjamin’s influential essay, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ (1929), the ‘central paradox of *woman* within the movement’ was clear (3). As Lusty claims too, however, in relation to Leonora Carrington, women artists linked to Surrealism continually expanded the terms of its reference both ‘within and against the grain of a Surrealist construction and representation of the female subject’ (4). The relation between *Ice* and Burns’ novel can be seen as such a challenge. Burns’ extreme parataxis is evidence of his Surrealist influences but in the end asserts a model of the relation between representation and the world that cannot provide a critical frame for the sexual violence represented. What is crucial in *Ice* is not that two things are forced into relation in the novel, but that Kavan’s narrative technique, which appears to be a smooth coherent narration, in fact forces the reader again and again to reassess not the relation between elements of the novelistic world but the ontological nature of what is being narrated. The key relation, then, is not between two elements represented in the work, as in Burns, but between the representational act and the world to which it, in however a complex way, refers.

The danger of such a repetition of the world in the Surrealist practices taken up by Burns can be seen too in other features of his composition. *Europe After the Rain*, as Baxter describes, is an unfocused and worked-on repetition of a factual account of Poland

immediately after the war written by an English journalist. Burns wrote the novel with a copy of this work by his typewriter:

Then I 'looked' at the page. I looked yet didn't look. I did that thing painters often do, which is to screw up their eyes so only bits and pieces percolate through. I typed, forgetting what I was about, that I was writing a novel, blocking out... as much as of the rational mind as I could. I picked out images, not always the most startling, not worrying about connections, just batting away for a week or two. (Burns and Sugnet 1982: 166)

Burns' methods of composition included also the transposition of material from pages torn from second-hand books, and from historical documents including the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials (Baxter 2015: 171). Indeed, Burns' 'fold in' method — in which he folded pages from other works so that he could read sequentially two half pages — leads, according to Baxter, to the 'clash of registers' in the novel: 'fragments of post-war history, politics, sex and death jostle alongside one another, provoking the reader to forge alternative and often disturbing connections' (2015: 172). In Burns' novel the real inserts itself into the fictional narrative as, what he called in a letter, 'razor sharp details, splinters of fact' (quoted in Madden 1997a: 111), but this, like the use of parataxis, does not so much challenge the realist contract made between most fiction and the reader but rather it makes it more extreme. The usual contract made with the reader of fiction — the willing suspension of disbelief within which the reader, for the time of the novel, acts as if she believes that the world of the novel is real — remains in Burns. The world is 'folded in' to the space of fiction in a way that locks the novel into what is considered 'real' in the world. For all its defamiliarising effects, in Burns' novel the resistance to conventional syntactic order and hierarchy and the 'folding in'

of ‘splinters of fact’ mimics the chaos of the world, and the mimetic gap — between both the real world and the writing, and between the ‘real world’ of the novel and the narrator’s and therefore reader’s experience of it — remains constant. The sexual violence depicted in the long passage quoted above, for all the disorientation of the depiction, is there because it is of both the real world and the real world of the novel. It happens and it happened. The estranging effect of the writing certainly inhibits the reader’s attempt to ‘see’ the scene clearly, but it does not suggest another way of thinking about that sexual violence and its existence in either world. The sexual violence is used to focus and condense the general violence of the world of the novel, in which the commander coolly describes the murder of hundreds of children in a hall, and where the narrator tells us, as he travels with soldiers who stop a car, rob the passengers and shoot the driver, ‘And I had discovered the fun in such business’ (Burns 1965: 28).

In Kavan, in contrast, because at the end of each fantasized scene the reader is forced to return to seek out the moment when reality turned into unreality, to reorient their relation to what they are reading, to consider and re-align their contract with the novel and the precise nature of their suspension of disbelief, fiction’s relation to the real is not increased but decreased, and decreased in a way that is critical rather than escapist. In the next section I will demonstrate this through a close reading of two chapters in *Ice* where the relation between the real world of the novel and the fantasized scenes is particularly complex.

### **Kavan and the ‘Unreality’ of Sexual Violence**

An acute awareness of what is at stake in consideration of the mimetic gap in relation to violence, and specifically sexual violence, can be seen in a review by Kavan for *Horizon* from 1944. In it, Kavan discusses the question of sexual violence, representation and the dangers of repetition in relation to Alex Comfort’s novel, *The Powerhouse* (1944), which is set in

occupied France and, like both *Ice* and *Europe After the Rain*, draws on the confusion and chaos of Europe in the mid-1940s. The review makes clear Kavan's resistance to all forms of collectivism, which she sees as linked inevitably at the time to 'fascist conditions in general' (360), but her response is not one of withdrawal to an interior world of fantasy where the ethical and political urgencies of the world are abandoned. Kavan argues that there are two responses to the current conditions of violent domination — collusion with 'crude sado-masochistic elements' or the development of the 'heightened perceptiveness of analytical power and non-egoistic social awareness' (Kavan 1944: 361). She worries, as feminist critics have done about her own work, that Comfort's novel is symptom rather than resistance, that it follows the first response as it repeats the world in its realist depiction of sexual perversion (1944: 361). Her sense of the novel's importance is due not to the 'obvious fluency and realism of the writing', but to the possibility (if not the achievement) it demonstrates of an imaginative shaping against the dangers of repetition. While Kavan worries that Comfort's novel is 'disquieting' in its 'preoccupation with the detail of sadistic scenes' (1944: 361), her positive sense of the novel is based on what it suggests about what Comfort *thinks* rather than on what these scenes repeat of the world of patriarchal violence. What she values is not a faithful repetition of the world – however critical of the truth of the world – but the possibility that things could be otherwise. Comfort's 'pacifism, his under-dog sympathies, his advocacy of a league for the weak...encourages the belief that he and his contemporaries may avoid the soulless mechanism of disaster and follow the way of individual inner development' (1944: 362).

In *Ice* the fruition of Kavan's earlier sense that imagination rather than repetition constitutes a critical relation to the world is clear and in it the fantasies of sexual violence show that 'heightened perceptiveness' can make problematic the content of 'crude sado-masochistic' elements. In the novel the scenes of fantasy force the reader again and again to

be aware of her imaginative engagement with the not real and to consider the ethical effects of this. The complex interweaving of events which are real in the world of the novel and those whose status is ambiguous, or which are clearly hallucinations, reaches a peak in chapters 5 and 6, and in these chapters can be seen the full effect of the novel's refusal to stabilize the mimetic gap. These chapters too are a glut of images and scenes in which the girl is hurt, threatened, killed or already dead. At the beginning of chapter 5, the narrator has taken lodgings in the suspicious and morose town surrounding the warden's castle. He is looking out of the window of his chilly room at the lake beyond the town and the forest skirting the lake when he suddenly sees a running figure which he believes to be that of the girl. So as not to attract the attention of his landlady, he opens the window, climbs out and makes chase. Almost immediately, from viewing the figure, the narrating position becomes one that has knowledge of the girl's experience:

She was nervous in the forest, which always seemed full of menace.... She was afraid to look, tried not to see the spectral shapes rising from the water, but felt them come gliding towards her and fled in panic. (2006: 49-50)

The narrative shifts again, then, to a third person narration focalized through the girl. This omniscient narrator follows her back from the forest to her room in the castle, where a woman, 'forbidding, dressed all in black' (2006: 51), enters and, along with other unseen figures, grabs the girl and ties her up. At this point we return to the first-person narrator's apparent present, in the forest, losing his way and ending up back at the castle wall where he tells us that he had 'a curious feeling that I was living on several planes simultaneously' (2006: 52). He comes across a cottage with a number of people inside, and immediately sees and hears a fierce battle from a variety of observing positions around the town as invaders

burn and kill. He eventually comes across the body of the girl, her neck broken (2006: 54), but then he is again outside the cottage, listening, as it soon becomes clear, to the townspeople discussing their aim of sacrificing the girl to a dragon who lives in the depths of the fjord on which the town is situated (2006: 55). The narrator walks away in disgust, but then immediately sees, on rocks projecting out into the fjord, the townspeople dragging the girl to the edge. The narrator is then on the rocky platform with them, and attempts to save her. The girl is thrown to the dragon, though, and the next paragraph begins with the narrator returning to his room to write, during which he remembers the scene of conspiracy in the cottage, and wonders whether he should inform the warden of it. The memory seems to have a 'curious unreality' (2006: 57-8) to it for him, however, and though he suspects the girl might be in danger, he decides to postpone ringing the castle. The narrator's reflection on the substance of the chapter is curious here. The seamless narration up to this point suggests that the girl has been sacrificed to the dragon, but this evaporates once the narrator is back in his room — he worries that she might be in danger in the future — whereas the overheard conversation in the cottage, despite its air of unreality, prompts him to consider alerting the warden. He leaves his room and begins to walk to the café in the town to ring the warden from there. The town is devastated, but he is surprised that it is no longer burning. It is full of bodies, however, and he searches for the girl among them. As he does so he is aware of sounds and movement. He catches sight of: 'living objects which moved with a gliding motion, made warbling noises. Their shapes were queer, only partially human, reminding me of mutants in science fiction stories. They took no notice of me...' (2006: 59). Here again, while the narrator clearly senses the scene's unreality, and the presence of these creatures of science fiction loudly signals this to the reader, the relation between this hallucinated scene and the previous is unclear. He remembers or believes in the existence of the scene in the cottage — he is on his way to alert the warden to the townspeople's plans — but he has forgotten or disbelieves in the existence

of the scene on the rock and his previous discovery of the girl's body – he searches once more for her body in the ruined town.

At the beginning of chapter 6, the narrator is back in his lodgings, about to leave the house, so at the point in chapter 5 where he changes his mind about leaving through the front door and exits through his bedroom window instead (2006: 48). The town, now unsacked, is covered in snow. He decides to go straight to the warden to tell him that the girl is in danger. While we can conclude that the scene of sacrifice did not happen, has no existence in the world of the novel, and neither did the sacking of the town nor his first foray into it to ring the warden, the townspeople's plan was, it seems, actually overheard by the narrator and forces him to act. Their plan, however, is based on the need to placate a sea dragon — assuming an existence in the novel incongruous with the other elements of its setting. As the narrator has said earlier with amusement of the café owner in the town: 'I had never before met anyone who owned a telephone and believed in dragons' (2006: 34). While the scene on the rock can be rationalized as the narrator's continuation in daydream of the plans overheard as he stands outside the cottage, the cottage scene is itself entwined with the images of the sacking of the town which his walk through the streets in chapter 6 proves not to have happened.

Reading the fantasized scenes as if they are conventional representation, as if they are happening in the world of the novel which is itself repeating some aspect of our own world, only subsequently and repeatedly to have this sense of their existence undone, provokes us to ask about the nature of narrative representation. In chapters 5 and 6 there is no 'real' of the world of the novel to which we can easily return. All is mental construction. But rather than negating the political and historical import of those things the novel is representing and withdrawing instead to a purely interior world, what is suggested is the way that violence in

the world is the result of imaginative choice.<sup>7</sup> These acts of violence done to the girl throughout chapters 5 and 6, and throughout the novel – murder, sacrifice, rape, abduction – are not directly critiqued, but their status as real is challenged. Clearly Kavan is not questioning whether such things happen in the world, but whether they are inevitable, what the nature of their existence is and what the possibilities for change are. While clearly Burns' novel too is horrified by the world it portrays, its representational form in the end repeats it. All representation is in some way repetition, of course, but the important thing about the repetition of patriarchal violence in Kavan's novel is that it shows the extent to which such violence is the result of patriarchal thinking rather than just being 'splinters of fact'.

Far from being *sui generis*, then, *Ice* repeats many of the characters, themes and events of Burns' novel. However, the similarities between *Ice* and *Europe After the Rain* are necessary in order to throw into relief the differences. The fantasized status of the scenes of sexual violence in *Ice*, unlike the heightened mimetic force of those in Burns' novel, challenge the inevitability of sexual violence in the world.

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<sup>7</sup> Such a withdrawal to the interior is implied by Anaïs Nin's reading of Kavan's work. In her *The Novel of the Future* (1968) she praises Kavan for pouring her 'nightmares into literature' (2014: 13). She claimed that, after *Asylum Piece*, Kavan's 'waking dreamers' gave up their attempt to connect with the outside world, and 'simply tell of their adventures. They live in solitude with their shadows, hallucinations, prophecies' (2014: 171).

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