

**MADNESS AS DISSIDENCE: ANNA KAVAN'S POLITICAL POETICS IN
*ASYLUM PIECE AND SLEEP HAS HIS HOUSE***

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*The human language is far too hard
to learn after childhood, and with other
forms of communication I've had no
success.*

—Anna Kavan¹

Anna Kavan has received little critical attention due, among other things, to her elision of genres, literary movements and her unclassifiable style. What little critical attention has been paid to her work has been in the form of biographical approaches which turned her into a cult writer of drug literature who went mad and died from an overdose. But Anna Kavan's texts are much more than that. They are a political stance. They are subversive, committed and deeply critical of her time, even if Kavan herself was not involved in any sort of political activism. Both *Asylum Piece* (1940) and *Sleep Has His House* (1948) (published in the US as *The House of Sleep* in 1947) are set in a time of profound political convulsion: the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War with the fear of the atomic bomb. In this essay I will analyse how these two texts disrupt both language and plot conventions as a means of standing against the political and literary sphere of her time.

Asylum Piece was the first book published by Anna Kavan after she changed her name from Helen Ferguson (married Edmonds) to the name of a literary character from a previously published novel of hers. She had also undergone psychiatric treatment at a clinic after a crisis, and had had to flee London in several occasions because of the Nazi air raids. Changing her name was part of a process of re-inventing and re-creating herself that she would carry out throughout her life. Some have argued that the last name "Kavan" was a homage to Kafka, an author with whom she shares many similarities, but, as Reed argues, this last name also "gives its author a peculiar anational feel, as though in reinventing herself she no longer owned to a specific nationality" (2006: 49). The same happens with her fiction, which critics have not been able to place within any current, for it is never fully symbolist, realist, or absurdist, nor belongs to the sci-fi genre in which some have tried to place her. In fact, hers is a fiction

¹ From an untitled, undated poem by Anna Kavan in the Kavan archive at the McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa, quoted in Garrity (254).

against borders and limits, condemning any kind of totalitarianism and authority, and actually any sort of society, for society is the one that imposes limits upon the individual. In fact, if any, due to this “[witnessing] the world through a lens of terror, anguish, paranoia or a perverse emotional deadness” (Wasson quoted in Nunn, 2012: 223) I would propose that we place her novels within the Gothic genre, and I will explain why.

Asylum Piece is a concatenation of stories about the narrator in which the common themes that pervade them are loneliness, social insecurity and anxiety. We follow the narrator throughout her childhood—we know from the first story that she is a woman (Kavan, 1940: 18)—in bizarre sets and Kafkaesque developments where often the narrator seems to ignore what is going on, and has to face absurd bureaucratic procedures, unjustified detentions and her own impotence at not being able to act or to speak because she finds herself in a foreign context (“The Birthmark”) or simply because the authority will not reason (“The Summons”). She often has to put up with seemingly unfair punishments that include incarceration and isolation within power relations, such as in the story “The Patron”, where the narrator has to choose between the abusive behaviour of her patrons or the “cold, foggy streets” in case she does not “make a clean break with the past and give up [her] rebellious ways” (Kavan, 1940: 27), about which we are never told. It becomes clear that the protagonist has a hard time adjusting to society and has to choose between conforming to the norm or staying out in the cold, alone and deprived of love and human contact. Later on, she is afraid of being taken away by “three men in uniform, or white jackets, and one of them will carry a hypodermic syringe” (Kavan, 1940: 34), that is, to a mental asylum. She regularly visits an “advisor”, who makes up for the authority figure of the father/doctor. She is suspicious of him, although at the same time she longs for connection: “When one’s affairs are in such a desperate state as mine, one is simply obliged to make use of any possible help; and this man D has been my last hope” (Kavan, 1940: 55), but she cannot know whether “the person to whom [she] is talking is not an enemy, or perhaps connected with [her] accusers or with those who will ultimately decide [her] fate” (Kavan, 1940: 55). His face keeps feeling familiar to her, and finally she realises that he really looks like a young assassin she has seen in the papers (Kavan, 1940: 59), and not a common one, but one who “killed not for personal gain, but for a principle, for what he considered to be the right” (Kavan, 1940: 60). The narrator then is not able to decide, ironically, whether this is an article against Doctor D or in his favour, for she trusts his

“responsible position . . . his serene, intelligent face” (Kavan, 1940: 60). She decides to change her advisor and, after a series of misadventures and some bureaucratic ordeal, she is told to remain with Doctor D, who now refuses to see her in the near future. The seek for acceptance versus being true to the individual is present in most of Kavan’s work, and the latter ends up winning in Kavan’s fiction even if it means the loss of the loved ones, and the anxiety this causes. One example of this is the story “The Summon”, where the narrator is detained, apparently by mistake, but her acquaintances still think she should go up to court in order not to look suspicious. In the end, not to let down the people she admires, she does go, and, although we are not told how, this causes her more trouble than anything: “I began to wonder, as I have wondered ever since, whether the good opinion of anybody in the whole world is worth all that I have had to suffer and must still go on suffering – for how long; oh, for how long?” (Kavan, 1940: 96) The world of *Asylum Piece*, set in a highly suffocating and claustrophobic WWII London, is one we cannot trust, not only for political reasons (air raid alarms happening at all times), but also where the people the narrator loves and the authority figures have become unreliable and totalitarian. The fear of a totalitarian government appears again and again throughout Kavan’s work, and finds its culmination in her dystopian novel *Ice* (1967), which deals with a borderless nation, destroyed by atomic power and under a totalitarian regime. The London depicted in *Asylum Piece* is a bleak, dangerous place where everything can go wrong for random, unexpected reasons. It becomes a denaturalized, “confining and terribly prohibitive space in which many marginalised people – refugees, immigrants and those beset with poor mental health – are confined” (Nunn, 2012: 223). What does not fit is better set apart, and indeed our narrator will end up in a sanatorium in a foreign country.

The stories we have looked at precede the long story which gives its title to the book, “Asylum Piece”, as hints for what happened to the narrator to end up in an asylum. Here the setting changes to a foreign country —Switzerland, most probably—, in a town by a lake with sunny blues skies. The setting, however, is misleading, since what we are about to find here is a horror story of abjection, punishment, abandonment and, of course, loneliness, for being outside of the norms of society means to be expelled from socialization too. The next eight parts of “Asylum Piece” depict asylum vignettes that make us question who is really sane there. As Ellen Moers argues, “[t]he insane asylum is the contemporary locale of the female Gothic novel . . . guilt-ridden accounts of institutionalization as a punishment for transgressing the codes of feminine behaviour,

docility and affection” (Moers, 1976: 131). Although we find the story of one man, Hans, most of the inpatients in the sanatorium are women abandoned by their lovers, husbands or parents. Thus, we find that those who failed at their gender role were deemed psychotic and institutionalized. Indeed the case of Hans seems to be about the loss of masculinity: he is small, slim and dresses in a dark suit, and he is also waiting to hear from his partner in business, although everything points out to be bad news about his job, and he envies the gardeners and the nurses who work at the clinic: “out of the established order of institutional life” he feels “an outsider” (Kavan, 1940: 136). He also envies the demonstration of feelings from one of his fellow female inpatients: “She’s well – not nearly as ill as I am, at any rate. And yet she can stay here as long as she likes while I shall be turned out in a day or two to face the world.” (Kavan, 1940: 139) Despite the horrors in the clinic, facing the real world and its expectations can be even worse, and at least some humanity can be seen between the fellow in-patients, such as when Mrs. Swanson tries to convince Freda’s husband to take her with him even though she is her only friend (Kavan, 1940: 189).

The narrative, though, does not follow formal expectations: while most asylum narratives end up with the patient recovering and going back into society changed by the experience, the last chapter in *Asylum Piece* is titled “There Is No End”, as if suggesting the endless madness of the narrator, or no end for the source that is provoking it. She ends up back in her room in London, watching out the window how the “people walk hurriedly, inattentive to the signing of birds” (Kavan, 1940: 212) which she herself listened to, and it seemed that no one else did, when she was beginning to go mad in the story “Birds”, as if victim of a hallucination. That is, she chooses to stay mad over going back to a “sane” society which is most insane.

As David Cooper pointed out, “all delusion is political statement” (1978: 23). In both novels we find a so-called “enemy”, which the narrator describes at the end of *Asylum Piece* as, possibly, “a sort of projection of myself, an identification of myself with the cruelty and the destructiveness of the world” (Kavan, 1940: 210). According to Claire Kahane, one of the main features of the Gothic structure is an ongoing battle with an image that is both self and other (1985: 337). In the case of Kavan’s both novels, it is a splitting between the true self and the self that society wants her characters to be what leads to madness. The external world she portrays is one where reason and sanity have failed 20th century civilization, and thus Kavan turns to insanity, imagination and the language of dreams in search of something more human, less destructive than her

current society and far away from pain and death. In *Sleep Has His House*, the enemy is described as an external source of power that wants to subdue the narrator, but also one to which she originally wanted to belong to, but was rejected by it: “The daylight world was my enemy, and to the authorities of that world who had rejected me I would not submit” (Kavan, 1948: 117).

Sleep Has His House was a commercial failure, and it also meant that the work of Anna Kavan almost disappeared from the literary scene until the publication of her last novel, *Ice*, which won the Brian Aldiss Science Fiction Book of the Year award, despite most critics familiar with Kavan’s work not considering it a sci-fi novel. If in *Asylum Piece* Kavan had rebelled against psychiatric and political conventions through an unexpected plot structure, *Sleep Has His House* was even more shocking due to its lack of plot, its poetical, highly metaphorical language and formal complexity. In a time where the so-called “New Victorians” were emerging in Britain, a country that was looking for stability in all fields after WWII, and when literature was becoming more of a business and less of an art, Anna Kavan made a political and literary stance with her subversive novel exploring language to the limit. As she argued: “[a]s so-called literature becomes more and more commercialised, ‘real’ writing is bound to take more and more obscure and personal forms until it’s finally intelligible to a small number of sensitive people” (Kavan quoted in Reed, 2006: 104).

Sleep Has His House departs from a loss: the loss of the love object—the mother (Kavan, 1948: 7), which provokes the splitting of the child’s world in two worlds: the day world and the night world. This split could be read as a sign of depression: “[t]raditionally, depression has been conceived of as the response to –or the expression of– loss, either of an ambivalently loved other, of the ‘ideal’ self, or of ‘meaning’ in one’s life” (Chesler, 2005: 102). The main character finds herself faced with two different options to try and recover her loved one: to be who she is, and be rejected, or to follow the norms and lose herself completely. These options take place in the two different worlds, which convey a different space with different rules and languages. The world of daylight is the outside world, the world of the rules of society which are imposed upon the child, who does not understand them: “[p]erhaps B is nervous, perhaps she doesn’t understand the rules, perhaps she just means to introduce an innovation” (Kavan, 1948: 32). But after she has lost the love of the mother—which in fact she never had—she fails again and again at trying to find it during her process of socialization as a child. Thus, in the subversive language of the night, she searches for

the love she does not find in the daylight world, and she hints at how to read the night sections: “[t]he whole quality of apperception is emotional rather than visual from now on” (Kavan, 1948: 64). Dead or displaced mothers are another feature of Gothic fiction (Kahane, 1985: 335), as well as the feeling of entrapment that the protagonist feels, ironically, in the day world, versus the freedom that she finds in the dark world of the shadows. Kavan’s text subverts the day/night dichotomy, as well as the light/darkness, rational/irrational, sane/insane, good/bad ones, but she never gives us a definite answer.

The day world is one threatened by atomic power and a ruthlessly capitalist society that barely sees humans as a means of production: “AGE; QUALIFICATIONS; CLASS; DESTINATION; ATTITUDE TOWARDS; RESULT” (Kavan, 1948: 122). Life is not really worth much more than this, and humanity could disappear in a whole second destroyed by itself. The narrator does not find solace in faith or God either, for they have proved to be another human construction which has failed them after the horrors of the war, and now humanity is alone to face its failures:

[L]eading with more distant and now unequivocal view to the disintegration of a city after atomic bomb hit and to the presentation of the ultimate vaporizing preceded by its up-flinging a strange and fancy mushroom in the sky. Also establishing, beyond human destructiveness, the appalling blankness and the intense oppositional indifference of the cosmos. (Kavan, 1948: 127)

Such a menacing world provokes a wish in the narrator to “escape culture”, which is Phyllis Chesler’s definition for madness (2005: 87). Again, Kavan seems to be opting for madness as the way out of a civilization that has become corrupt and frayed. However, it is not easy to do so, for, as Garrity affirms, “Kavan’s text, which is never static, is always cognizant of both the benefits and the cost associated with a repudiation of the ‘day world’” (Garrity, 1994: 265). Leaving the day world means loneliness:

You don’t get the variety or the excitement or the social or cultural life. If those were the things you were after, you should have been much more prudent, you should have hung on to your original identity disk . . . Then you could have been trooped along to paradise with the rest and been one of the crowd, for-ever-and-a-day . . . It’s lonely? Sure, it’s lonely. That’s what you asked for, didn’t you? (Kavan, 1948: 53-4)

Choosing the night world means the others regard her as mad, and try to get her back to normal through psychiatry. Again, Kavan questions what psychic normalcy really means in such an alienating society: “a doctor wanted me to tell him what went on inside my head, but I didn’t trust him either. I wouldn’t talk to him in case he was on the

enemy side” (Kavan, 1948: 117). After all, to be mad in a context of atomic destruction and human deterioration mostly refers to act out on one’s own and not following the others, for as Chesler argues: “a person is considered mad both by herself and by others when she *acts out* her thoughts and feelings with her body. When a person does this *alone*, without any group support or consensus, she is considered ‘mad’” (2005: 149-150). Madness is difference, “since madness is *the lack of resemblance*” (Felman, 1975: 8; her emphasis). The narrator slowly undergoes an inner journey in which she encounters her mother in the night world—“B’s *doppelganger* . . . in fact, of course, A” (Kavan, 1948: 99; her emphasis)—and comes to be reconciled with her, since she now understands her and her sadness, and she eventually gives up the day world which is full of rigid norms and authorities for the night world as well.

To transgress these boundaries, she uses language. In renaming the protagonist as B and her mother as A, as Garrity points out, “Kavan recovers women as the inaugurators of a new alphabet” (Garrity, 1994: 273). She does this by speaking the language of madness. Shoshana Felman explains in *Writing and Madness*: “If madness and literature are both ruled by the very thing that represses them, by the very thing that censors them in language, if they both—each in its own way—proceed from a ‘failure of translation’, the attempt to read them will necessitate a crossing of the border between languages” (Felman, 2003: 19). This is aptly represented in the contrast between the languages of the day world and the night world, which apparently derive from the same situations in each chapter, but end up reflecting very different portrayals. The language of day world is direct, imperative, transparent, whereas the language of the night world is poetic, chaotic, imaginative, and, perhaps, more honest to B’s true self. This “failure of translation” Felman speaks of is here represented in the gap between a dishonest and an honest language, that can express B’s self almost without limit, even if it may be incomprehensible for most and therefore make her lonely. B’s transgression also carries itself out in the way of the heroine’s transgression in female Gothic narrative, that is, by resisting, for, according to Kahane, “she insists on the power inherent in the conventional feminine mode of passive resistance, the power of mere but absolute being” (Kahane, 1985: 337). We indeed see a return to elements traditionally associated to a female role—nature, domesticity, irrationality, the night—, but now these elements are not imposed upon the female character, but chosen as a means of asserting herself, as a place to dwell on and be at home: “How does a girl like B feel, you may wonder, alone in this great dark place? The question can be answered in four simple words: B is at

home. And she's not lonely either. Her companions are the many mirrors which hang all over the house in the various rooms" (Kavan, 1948: 187). Kavan reinterprets the roles assigned to women and seizes them from a position of resistance and self-determination by means of construction a new language that will lead to a new order of things.

Kavan seems to have both done drugs and written in order to evade herself from a reality that was utterly damaging to her. Drugs destroyed her life at a very prolific point in her career, but her legacy stayed with us and is being rediscovered little by little. As Garrity notes, there is still much analysis of Kavan's work to do from an approach that is neither biographical nor essentialist (1994: 254), since Kavan's work proves to be richly complex already in its ideological and political meaning. She may have felt powerless during her lifetime, but writing, unlike drugs, allowed Kavan to assert control over reality, and give way to her inner world. She aspired to a place where she could feel at home without restrictions or punishment, where she could be herself, and that place was literary imagination. Literature was her site of resistance to the dominating ideologies, and in both texts she challenges the patriarchal authorities through unconventional representations of madness and madwomen, who in actual fact challenge a tyrannical authority and question the basis of society. As she wrote in her novel *Let Me Alone* (1930): "How easy to face life from the single basis of her own undeniable individuality. She was what she was: herself. No need for compromise or apology or modification or defence." (Kavan quoted in Reed, 2006: 158)

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