

Reclaimed Romanticism in Robin Hyde's 'Houses by the Sea'

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This essay is in memory of Francis Mossman (1988–2021), a talented New Zealand actor and a loved friend.

IN 1937, ROBIN HYDE (BORN IRIS WILKINSON) (1906–39) started preparing to leave New Zealand for a new life in England. As she readied herself and set off, Hyde recalled how her childhood in New Zealand had been spent in the combined shadows of European colonisation and the First World War. These memories became 'Houses by the Sea' (1937–8), a twenty-poem sequence written towards 'a book of much more New Zealandish poems', as Hyde put it in a 20 April 1939 letter.¹

As a title, 'Houses by the Sea', evokes life in the country's beachy suburbs. So do the three section titles that divide the sequence, 'The Beaches', 'The Houses', and 'The People'. Hyde saw these suburbs as calmly domestic and ripe with a post-colonial desire to be English, 'settled' in both senses of the word.² However, the title also recalls Hyde's description of New Zealand in a 1936 PEN Authors' Week talk as the 'new land out of the sea', a new country with no inherent connection to England.³ The sequence is concerned with seeing New Zealand as culturally independent from England, Hyde seeking 'another and older music / Islanded round these keys'.⁴ It uncovers this 'music' from under an English-style culture, to Hyde made of social restriction, male violence, and First World War trauma. For Hyde, breaking from this culture would allow New Zealand's writers to foster an independent, national voice for their country.

¹ Derek Challis and Gloria Rawlinson, *The Book of Iris: A Life of Robin Hyde* (Auckland 2002) p. 708.

² Hyde tended to use 'England' and 'Britain' interchangeably. She did not observe the division between a peaceable 'England' and an imperial 'Britain' as in some anti-imperialist writing, e.g. prose by the Anglo-Welsh poet Edward Thomas (1878–1917).

³ Robin Hyde, *Disputed Ground: Robin Hyde, Journalist*, ed. Gillian Boddy and Jacqueline Matthews (Wellington 1991) p. 323. Hereafter *DG*.

⁴ Robin Hyde, *Young Knowledge: The Poems of Robin Hyde*, ed. Michele Leggott (Auckland 2003) p. 379. Hereafter *YK*.

In her poetry and prose, Hyde presents the national voice as a metaphorical extension from writers' personalities. Writers' displays of their individual experience will promote community. If New Zealand was to break with a post-colonial desire to imitate England, its poets needed to present their own lives there. Hyde's thought is contoured by seeing New Zealand in the 1930s as a nation where everyone's speech could contribute to its existence, whether they were Māori or Pakeha, rather than by looking to the nineteenth-century past and evaluating herself (a South African immigrant) as though a coloniser. By speaking as herself, she could validate all contemporary experiences of life in New Zealand. An experience-based poetry would encourage 1930s New Zealanders to see their nation as distinct, recognise the points of its distinctiveness, and then engage with the world together. To Hyde, the country's progressive poets had retained the dependency on English culture by uncritically imitating its modern poetry. In response, 'Houses by the Sea' displaces this dependency by instead prioritising ideas of personal representation developed in Hyde's reading of Romantic-period poetry.

I

For Hyde, personal representation was central to both poetry and nationhood. A country of people who can say what they think and feel will soon make its own national identity. Her published and unpublished criticism identifies this personal utterance in poetry with a core of second-generation Romantics: Byron, Keats, and Shelley. In these poets, she found a commitment to using idiosyncratically abstract language. In a 1934 diary entry, she defined what 'abstraction' meant for her. Rooted in her reading of Romantic-period poetry, 'abstraction' referred to a personal palette ('colour-basis') of metaphors and vocabulary that would capture 'one's most inward and secret self':

I've discovered, after reading through an anthology of the verse of living writers, what abstraction in poetry should and must be, if it's ever to be at all. It's the distillation of one's most secret and inward self. This rare fluid, once released, is the correct colour-basis of poetic landscape, sky-scape, dream-scape. Most of the moderns, in a revulsion of feeling from the late Victorian verse which was simply music and anatomy, don't know this, and write their abstractions – or attempted abstractions – *outwardly* . . .

They – the moderns – concentrate too much on technique. 'Let us be abstract, let us renounce eyes and lips for the greater picturesqueness of a more delicate thing, delicately touched!' Ah, the nice gourmets!

One needs only the flamingo's feather, used in the ancient Roman style, to make the feasts complete. But Bach and Shelley went to Heaven for *their* abstractions – and the Kingdom of Heaven is within.

Hyde's Romanticism is most of all a personal language. Her diary note continues, 'I shall write from every nerve and tissue of this body: and from all its long experiences, all these distilled and cooled and an essence.'⁵ Not just an innovative, unusual language, it is a poetry that emphasises sensation and individuality to represent how the poet alone experiences direct contact with the world.

Criticism on Hyde has highlighted the gender significance of her references to her body.⁶ New Zealand writing in the 1930s was heavily focused on men, who were settlers, labourers, and soldiers. John Mulgan's story of an English immigrant, *Man Alone* (1939), is the period's enduring landmark. Hyde's body can counter that focus. Yet, references to her body also offer Romanticism as vibrant energy. Her poetry represents her experiences, given as an 'essence'. Her body represents an unresolved poetry in flux, not a closed, documentary account of sequential episodes. It resists definite statement, as seen in 'Houses by the Sea':

In the jettisoned boat, the child who peered at her book
 Cannot lift her glance from the running silk of the creek:
 It is time to run to her mother, to call and look . . .
 The sea-pulse beats in her wrist: she will not speak
(YK, p. 375)

Thoughts and events are indefinite and open to interpretation. Reading Hyde with twenty-first-century hindsight, anglophone 'high' modernist poetry is a striking comparator. *The Waste Land* excises narrative to emphasise 'discrete moments of intensity', as James Longenbach has written.⁷ The 'Prologue' to *Kora in Hell* holds that 'a poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance'.⁸ However, for Hyde, the word 'modernism' was reserved for subject matter, a poetry of 'loud, fat, clanging machines' that

⁵ Quoted in Challis and Rawlinson, *The Book of Iris*, pp. 235–6.

⁶ See Susannah Whaley, "'Sparks of pohutukawa tree": The Goddess in the Writing of Robin Hyde', *JNZL*, 38/1 (2020) p. 141; Mary Edmond-Paul (ed.), *Lighted Windows: Critical Essays on Robin Hyde* (Otago 2008), *passim*.

⁷ James Longenbach, 'Modern Poetry', in Michael Levinson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge 2011) p. 120.

⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (Boston 1920) p. 19.

overpower 'all the twentieth century's clash of machinery and individual' (*DG*, p. 226). For Hyde, notions of poetic form expressing ideas and motion came to her as a Romantic-style individuality. Her reference to her body fosters social concord by empowering the reader to interpret her speech. She treats herself as one voice who may join many, all exploring each other's experiences. Interpretation is a social, nation-building action. By sharing in each other's experience of the country, poets and readers could represent life in New Zealand as it happened. Then, they could do without anchoring themselves in Englishness.

Beating inside her emphasis on Romanticism as shared personal experience, Hyde sought a new, post-colonial domestic relationship for 1930s New Zealanders. Throughout her semi-autobiographical *The Godwits Fly* (1938), Hyde references *Childe Harold IV*. 78–9 as the touchstone for her becoming a poet. The 'O Rome! my country!' stanzas come to her attention 'sharp, angry and strong'.⁹ *Childe Harold* evokes ruined antique Rome as a lost starting point for civilisation. For Hyde, the 'Lone mother of dead empires' was a tacit rejection of English culture in New Zealand. 'O Rome' implicitly displaces 'O London'. It inscribes the need to uncover a new starting point for New Zealand writers. Later in her career, the return to a lost starting point became the climactic final poem of 'Houses by the Sea'. Hyde remembers exploring an abandoned house where an originating 'Wanderer' maybe lived: 'The curtains drawn for that obscure benighted / Wanderer who'd not quite lived and not quite died' (*JK*, p. 382). Hyde's Romanticism is always freighted with this need to find an extant New Zealand that could pre-date colonialism. She gestured towards a nation having no orders or castes governing expression. All could contribute equally to the interpretation of the common good. Their equality would make a general disposition that could exist only insofar as it respected the existence of interpersonal divisions.¹⁰

It was to be a unified domestic will founded on difference and equality together. Her New Zealand's character is the possibility to shape a new nation without being bound by people who do not live there. Often, she writes as an explorer, roaming a landscape and writing about what she finds. Exploration and colonisation are different to Hyde. Explorers uncover the land and write about it without an inherent need to say what it is or absorb it into English dominion. In 'Young Knowledge', the explorer

⁹ Robin Hyde, *The Godwits Fly* (Auckland 1970) p. 42.

¹⁰ Serendipitously, Hyde's Romanticism could be seen as a refined version of the French revolutionary interpretation of Rousseau's 'general will'. Pericles Lewis writes that this interpretation saw the community 'as the single overriding concern of government and the rights of private individuals as entirely subordinate': *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge 2000) p. 76.

Charles Heaphy is so struck by seeing Māori people for the first time he 'half steeled his heart / To tell the cities there was no such world' (*YK*, p. 207). For Hyde, Romanticism and exploration carried a similar impetus, expressing experience without Englishness. 'Young Knowledge's' Heaphy evokes Keats's 'stout Cortez' surveying the Pacific in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (1816). Similarly, Hyde titled chapter VII of *Check to Your King* (1936), her novelisation of Charles de Thierry's exploration of New Zealand, 'A Peak in Darien' after the sonnet. Although Hernán Cortés was a *conquistador*, Hyde had him be an explorer overwhelmed by 'a blue crystal of ocean hermetically sealed by sky, and all power of time and thought lay enclosed in this'.¹¹ Explorers were captivated by the new, colonisers were its captors.¹²

Hyde could treat exploration as a type of Romanticism because Romanticism offered the chance of writing for reasons other than emulating England. Hyde associated Romantic-period poetry with a break from imposed political and economic control:

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers cut loose from patrons, and ran about putting their tongues out at reviewers. It is true that the only poor man among the leaders, John Keats, died in his twenties as a result of the neglect and scorn with which he was treated. On the other hand, the stronger achieved their independence. For a while, English poets and the new-created English novel were saying the things that the people wanted them to say. (*DG*, p. 323)

Romanticism held literature's gift to say 'the things that the people wanted', a potential nation-building ethos based on discovering the new together.

The reviewers who scorned Keats and the Cockney school run parallel to the New Zealand little magazine writers who wanted to preserve an English culture in the country. Hyde saw her views as clashing with a self-declared avant-garde of progressive poetry in New Zealand. This clash shaped her view of New Zealand's modern poetry, which she saw as the country's student writers recreating the 'Spender-Auden-Lewis school' in dogmatic lyrics (*DG*, p. 212). Although her views opposed this poetry, she was on familiar terms with its poets. She published in the same little magazines as the country's leading moderns. To her, however, these poets had rejected abstract writing and, especially, metaphor as too personal. They

¹¹ Robin Hyde, *Check to Your King: The Life History of Charles, Baron de Thierry, King of Nakuhiwa, Sovereign Chief of New Zealand* (Wellington 1960) p. 57.

¹² For Keats's potential mistake in writing that Cortés climbed on Darien, see Erica McAlpine, *The Poet's Mistake* (Princeton 2020) pp. 11–19.

had sought to use vocabulary and technique absorbed from England's post-war poetry to speak on behalf of New Zealanders. This outlook led Hyde to see modern poetry in New Zealand as a colonial hangover that prioritised copying the English.

In magazines including *Phoenix* (Auckland University Literary Club, four issues, 1932–3), *Oriflamme* (Caxton Press Club, one issue, 1933), *Scirocco* (Caxton Press Club, one issue, 1933), and the seminal *Tomorrow* (Caxton Press, 1934–40), New Zealand poets undoubtedly used ideas current in English modern poetry. Their number included James Bertram, Charles Brasch, W. D'Arcy Cresswell, Allen Curnow, Denis Glover, A. R. D. Fairburn, Robert Lowry, R. A. K. Mason, and Ian Milner. Principally, they sought to treat conventional lyric forms as the vehicle for a public political expression. C. K. Stead has described 'that separation of form and content – "verse-form" on the one hand, "ideas on the other"' as 'characteristic of the 1930s' in New Zealand poetry.¹³ Taking heed from reading Auden, Spender, MacNeice, and Day Lewis, poets frequently used the lyric to have a coherent voice, often gruff, present the reader an idea about harsh or outdoor life in New Zealand.

Where the modern 'Pylon Poets' in England looked for new technology and industry in English landscapes, New Zealand's modern poets looked to repurpose their sunlit country as industrial. Poems were lyrics constructed around phrases. They stressed their realism by offering apposite phrases that represented an agricultural landscape under settlement, giving the lyric a regional flavour from the country. The poem would work through a sequence of these phrases towards an edifying twist, often an ending verse, sentence, or line that provides a claim or moral. This conclusive didacticism would render the poem as an objective case study in a feeling. In the programme essay that closes *Scirocco's* sole issue, the New Zealand poet is to be 'a man living the life of his fellow men . . . and as an artist he is able to analyse objectively his experience and synthesize it into the pattern which is its just aesthetic expression'.¹⁴

Seeking to transcribe the 'life of his fellow men' led the poets to write lyrics expressing and often valorising a blue-collar male culture in New Zealand. Kai Jensen describes the move as a specific rejection of English country idylls seen in *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, 'a fantasy world of English literature'. New Zealand's modern poets rejected visions of a comfortable English south in favour of 'work that might be relevant to ordinary New

¹³ C. K. Stead, 'From Wistan to Carlos – Modern and Modernism in Recent New Zealand Poetry', in *In the Glass Case: Essays on New Zealand Literature* (Auckland 1981) p. 151.

¹⁴ G. J. C. McArthur, 'Art & Common Sense', *Scirocco*, 1/1 (1933) p. 21.

Zealanders – by whom they often meant the hardbitten Kiwi bloke'.¹⁵ Yet Hyde rejected this goal as imposture and self-sabotage. She saw the 'strictly modern verse of the Spender-Auden-Lewis school at present written in this country' as a poetry where 'everyone is in duty bound to be miserable, because as yet the necessary economic uprising has not yet occurred, and therefore the entire generation is stranded like pink and blue jellyfish on a beach' (*DG*, p. 212). Moreover, it was not democratic enough to be a national voice. It was a stylisation of people who would never speak that way themselves. Her review of the Caxton Press anthology *Verses Alive* (1937) sniped at Glover, 'it is nice to find somebody who still believes in a proletariat composed exclusively of manual workers (who unfortunately don't like this kind of poetry)' (*DG*, p. 230). The contrast to Keats, who said 'the things that people wanted', is apparent. Although New Zealand's modern poets rejected copying the English in one way, for Hyde, their poetry yet retained a dependent, imitative relationship to England as a cultural authority.

Hyde's key word for this copycat relationship was 'loneliness'. She used the phrase 'The Singers of Loneliness' to title a 1938 essay on New Zealand poetry and a section of her long poem *The Book of Nadath* (1937). The country's poets were 'lonely' when they wrote to reduce the distance from England instead of to share their life in New Zealand. In the two decades following the First World War, 'the New Zealander was no longer an Englishman: he did not know quite what he was, in what ideograph, or which situations he wanted to write. He was terribly lonely, terribly self-conscious' (*DG*, p. 353). The essay goes on to suggest that, although the country's modern poets were 'imitative', they were making a national voice. It was written for a Chinese readership and, in contrast to *Nadath*, evokes Hyde wanting to promote New Zealand abroad. *Nadath* is more confrontational. The prophet-like Nadath empathises with Māori, who 'steered from a distant country, long ago' and now 'know how the birds cry . . . we know the silence that falls thereafter'.¹⁶ Their home in New Zealand contrasts to the 'liar[s] of loneliness . . . seek only praise', who are 'cruel', and 'have learned neither the tongue of man nor the tongue of machines, but sing to deafen one another'.¹⁷

When she wrote of 'loneliness' Hyde's issue was imitation far more than modernity. She saw flashes of personality in English modern poetry. She described 'the Spender-Auden-Lewis gang' as credited by Lewis's 'The

¹⁵ Kai Jensen, *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature* (Auckland 1996) p. 43.

¹⁶ Robin Hyde, *The Book of Nadath*, ed. Michele Leggott (Auckland 1997) p. 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–22.

Ecstatic': 'much better than Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark". Also Auden once or twice, but nothing to write home about.' Yet it was Shelley's abstraction and metaphor that rose triumphant, 'you go to Shelley for real inspiration – that thing they can't get and so despise, like most impotents . . . I like his quality of moss and verdure tempered by thorns'. If poetry rejected abstraction and personality, it stayed declamatory, 'it's a racket as done in the Auden-Spender-Lewis way. Poetry is the rainbow as well as the engine-room.'¹⁸ The 'racket' she saw was poets' self-promoting trade in such declamatory lyrics. Writing to Glover, she said his poems had ideas 'too sharp, they stick out at the wrong angles . . . the poem takes the idea instead of the idea cavorting about alone'.¹⁹

For Hyde, then, Romanticism would exceed the lyric poetry around her. Romanticism was a poetry that would show the author's coherent selfhood by rejecting the formal coherence – what she called 'tricks' – of lyrics that offer a single idea or episode. It was a 'vile modern trick' to craft phrases for 'giving an exact *surface* sentiment of everything, including the surfaces and surface-contents of the brain cells'.²⁰ She would go to complexity, abstraction, and unresolvedness. If it was to represent her, a poem would be open-ended, resisting any claim on a singular meaning. This poetry would let the reader join her in making personal interpretations of words' connotations and orders, the 'mesh and naked flesh of words: / Thither march we all', as she wrote in a poem titled 'Words' (c.1937) (*YK*, p. 283). Phillip Steer has described 1930s 'modern critical realism' in New Zealand, notably *Man Alone*, as offering 'typical protagonists of its nationalist discourse [that] were working-class male settlers characterised by isolation and inarticulacy'.²¹ *Man Alone* profiles social atomisation and economic conditions as too challenging for working men to confront in speech. Hyde's inarticulacy in *Houses by the Sea* is an alternative. She contrasts restrictive Englishness against her open-ended and ambiguous personal experience.

II

'Houses by the Sea' permutates Englishness in New Zealand between social restriction, violence committed by men, and unhealed trauma from the First World War. The sequence shows the three cultural conditions influencing each other, as though their variety perpetuates their existence. They

¹⁸ Robin Hyde, *A Home in This World* (Auckland 1984) pp. 11–12.

¹⁹ Quoted in Challis and Rawlinson, *The Book of Iris*, p. 481.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

²¹ Philip Steer, 'Modernism and Māoritanga: Reading the Cultural Politics of Modernist Appropriation in *the bone people*', in Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (eds.), *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present* (Oxford 2019) p. 281.

are represented through memories of Hyde's father returning from fighting in the war. He is described as 'herded "after the war"', having returned as a violent presence who slams doors and shouts at his family. With him back home, 'door was spring and slam – not any more / The wooden friend that watched us in and out' (*JK*, p. 380). Throughout, the sequence represents her father as changed and corrupted by his experience fighting for England. Hyde's abstract descriptions of his presence suggest he corrupts the New Zealand landscape around him, evoking European violence and colonial power as corrupting influences on life in New Zealand.

Hyde relates her father's threatening behaviour to the wider social relationships that inhibit her ability to experience and speak about the landscape. His violence happens in the same beach scenes and domestic places as her sudden teenage awareness that New Zealand men threaten her with violent sexuality. Hyde does not draw a moral from this parallel. She gestures at what she has been unable to say by addressing her younger self throughout 'Houses by the Sea', speaking as if disconnected from that self. This air of disconnection makes her personal expression necessarily incomplete, with her then unable to say how or why her memories are important. At the same stroke, the disconnection becomes central to how Hyde represents and speaks to those memories. The gulfs between past and present Hyde register her becoming aware that her father's homecoming changed the family and that she and her mother were then unable to talk about what was happening to them.

The sequence begins by addressing Hyde's younger self and the reader together, containing both in plural 'our' and 'you' pronouns. It addresses both with the opening negative, 'Not here our sands, those salt-and-pepper sands / Mounding us to the chins: (don't you remember? / Won't the lost shake for any cry at all?)'. Especially in the first section, 'The Beaches', the sequence's use of ambiguous pronouns broadens the address out to include a national community of readers who might recognise the beachy landscapes. Instead of overhearing a conversation between Hyde and her younger self, the reader is made part of that conversation. They are invited to interpret Hyde's speech considering their own experience of New Zealand. Hyde directs that experience towards violence and war. Poem I of 'The Beaches' has the 'salt-and-pepper sands' memory give way to a scene of destruction:

Here it's so different. Flesh looks hurt; asprawl
 These crayfish people; legs like fungoid trees
 Lopped off.

You're playing safe, to stay a ghost
 (*JK*, p. 371)

In an earlier version of the scene, a stanza in a draft of 'The Beaches' Poem IV, fishermen 'Cut up the writhing octopus' (*IK*, p. 271). Hyde revised the idea to evoke war through people being hurt. It then recalls the country's heavy losses in the 1915 Gallipoli landings, when over 11,000 ANZACs died within a larger Allied force. The indeterminate deixis, 'Here', is formally exact and spatially ambiguous. It builds on the apostrophic 'Not here our sands' appeal to a collective memory. Yet it retains ambiguity to encompass a range of interpretations, invoking wars rather than just one battle. The addressee being 'lost', a 'ghost', suggests Hyde is disconnected from her younger self. It also evokes her imagined reader being unwilling to join her conversation about New Zealand's national identity, preferring 'playing safe' instead. In both instances, the condition of Hyde's present-day New Zealand limits speaking about life there.

The present-day New Zealand is characterised by violence that inhibits Hyde from speaking about her life, especially to her mother. The sequence puts wartime violence on beaches as a parallel to Hyde experiencing men as violently sexual. Hyde encounters male sexuality on beaches, where she describes it as warlike. The wars she references are exclusively European, as though war were imported into New Zealand from the settlers' countries. The colonialising violence Hyde had narrated in *Check to Your King* is conspicuous in its absence from the perspective expressed in 'Houses by the Sea'. The book describes the violent settlement of New Zealand, including tribal conflicts and the arrival of English gunboats. In a poem titled 'The Pacifist' (c.1936), she had recalled 'the dead men and their war, / I tread in silence down their smitten coast' (*IK*, p. 198). In relief against these historical sources, the sequence's European focus treats war as an event that interrupts rather than affirms New Zealanders' capacity to speak together.

The pattern of war as an interrupting, distorting presence includes the violence that forces Hyde into sexual awareness, 'a child and a woman' together, in Poem V of 'The Beaches'. She describes a current overwhelming her as if a rape, 'the sparkling Sabine love three moments over / Ran I and laughed'. The Roman rape of the Sabine women was a mass kidnapping to increase the population. Hyde's 'Sabine love' phrase evokes a culture that values women for sex and motherhood alone. It cuts her out of being able to experience New Zealand as a social collective or a place to feel connected to. Subsequently, she lies 'alone' despite 'the yellow steeps of a hill that held me kindly' (*IK*, p. 374). The poem echoes an earlier draft for the sequence, an untitled manuscript beginning 'If you have linen women. . .', which treats New Zealand men as Roman soldiers, 'Young Bronzey Plumage, what will you do with women?' (*IK*, p. 273). When she sees a man forcing himself on a woman in Poem VI, she describes the beach as a 'hollow place where they had been'. She shows herself returning to feel the

sand, 'Trickling bed through fingers' (*YK*, p. 375). Describing how she returned there 'Not all the time' to feel the sand, Hyde suggests the bodies left an emotional imprint, both herself and the space left hollow, both being marked by aggressive male sexuality.

This aggression extends beyond the beaches that reflect foreign battle-grounds. Hyde relates it to a received culture throughout New Zealand homes, towns, and industry. Hyde's mother is 'a cracked jug clinging to its shelf', at home, 'A fear, staring down at a half-crossed Rubicon' (*YK*, p. 382). Only 'half-crossed', her father is stuck in the middle of a military action. In Poem IV of 'The Beaches', the form of the verse suggests men singing together. The song's address to 'the Mother Sea' of 'my father's town' echoes Swinburne's 'The Triumph of Time' (1859) and 'Ex-Voto' (1876), where the mother sea descends from Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' sureness. In Hyde's New Zealand, the echoes become men's judgements of women's sexuality. The women are represented as only 'her' in leering questions:

What says the Mother Sea?
 On a glittering day, go free, go free.
 What do fishermen keep in their pot?
 Cod, garlic and crab they've got.
 What makes the wanton's bed?
 Sand while she's living, deep sea dead.
 How about her that's nice?
 Granite shone smooth as ice.
 (*YK*, p. 373)

The trimeter undercurrent recalls Hyde's description of Swinburne's musical poetry as analgesic.²² It carries the reader into asking these questions with her. Reading the lines is like repeating a common song based on English poetry, a misogynistic mix of Swinburne and 'Full fathom five'. Hyde offers a subversive contrast by speaking to 'my mother's secret sea', which guides her. This 'secret sea' (subdued women's 'secrecy') acknowledges the 'houses' are not 'homes'. It stutters in stunted lines that disrupt the sing-along: 'White bed, / but not / a home' (*YK*, p. 373).

The culture Hyde depicts suppresses her disquiet and recontours – hollows – the landscapes to suit its expression. Hyde compounds the suggestion by describing her father's post-war presence with metaphors of an inexpressible and corrupted seaside landscape. He is an 'Absent face, remote and sharp, as far / As fisher's boats that bob across the bay / ... in the

²² Challis and Rawlinson, *The Book of Iris*, pp. 204–5.

island's shadow' (*YK*, p. 372). He seems to haunt the beaches and is repeatedly called a 'shadow'. His body appears in darkness. Like her awareness of conflict, his silhouette body serves as a memory that spreads its incompleteness to her wider thoughts. His presence links present-day and young Hyde together:

Coming past the sand-dune couples, strung out far,
Purple on brown, his shadow grows between:
Bleached logs stare up: he's bringing us both ice-creams.
(*YK*, pp. 371–2)

In an early version of 'The People', Poem I, Hyde empathised with her father, writing 'All that you had, you gave. And what to give? / Oh, only your life, my dear: you couldn't live, / Having come back (*YK*, p. 273). The final sequence excises much of this empathy. He represents an alien violence that has overtaken him: 'he can't talk of what he's done. / Sometimes he hits his skull against a star, / Rages, frizzles red at everyone' (*YK*, p. 372). In *Passport to Hell* (1936), her memoir of the First World War Private Douglas 'Starkie' Stark, Hyde presents the war as 'that outrageous libel on the normality of the human mind'.²³ Her father's behaviour distorts the landscapes he appears in, making him a vortex that corrupts and denies a non-violent New Zealand: 'I could see / In your face (and vanished before the cat could blink) / Black riverbeds; a strange new waterfall' (*YK*, p. 381).

This violent New Zealand is a world of social restriction, a place where 'I never meant / To tell the rest, or you, what I had seen' (*YK*, p. 373). She wishes for her mother to ask about the sand on her coat after she sees the beach as a sexual 'hollow'. She catches her father's clipped apologies after domestic abuse and his 'dreams' of a happy family, 'A penny for a curl' (*YK*, p. 372). She holds that, to her mother, 'Honour meant most' (*YK*, p. 382). The sequence frames Hyde's speaking perspective as physically present and socially restricted. Throughout it, her plural first- and second-person pronouns bristle with this tension. She speaks to memories of her younger self, detached and ghostly; to her father, with accusations; to her mother, who is unwilling to speak about her experiences; and to the reader, who is an intimate invited to interpret what she says and to whom she might say it. When the word 'you' suggests a parent, Hyde puts the reader in the stressed position of being party to secrets and being the person telling her to stop sharing.

²³ Robin Hyde, *Passport to Hell: The Story of James Douglas Stark, Bomber, Fifth Reinforcement, New Zealand Expeditionary Forces* (Auckland 2015) p. 85.

This tactic manipulates the reading position to make reading poetry seem opposed to receiving instruction. Hyde's plural, shifting pronouns are freighted with this rejection of modern poetry's didacticism. They make the reader aware that interpreting poetry could be a transgressive act. The reverse of this awareness is Hyde building an analogic relationship between poetry and war. In both, a New Zealand culture could identify and promote Englishness to avoid the 'loneliness' Hyde saw as the country's post-colonial condition. A short story titled 'The Cage with the Open Door' (c.1935–6) has Aucklanders responding to news of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Their belligerence betrays their loneliness:

The usual commentary. However, they hope Britain will be involved, they hope there will be a war, a big war. I don't think they would even be frightened if an aeroplane appeared like a roc above the roof-tops and started laying bombs. Nature abhors a vacuum. And they haven't love. They guess they would be drawn together in peril. That would be better than nothing at all.²⁴

Hyde writes 'Britain' instead of her customary 'England'. But the point stands. Without a tie back to the mother country, the people have 'nothing at all'. In 'Houses by the Sea', the opportunity to read Hyde's interrogation of her memories dramatises the New Zealanders' inability to speak to each other about how their social relationships have become based on European politics. The reader who interprets Hyde's abstract language is also the disappearing memory of a fair past and a parent incapable of speaking to her about the restrictive society. When Hyde goes beyond offering herself as a totem for the reader to interpret, she gestures at how the separating distance from England might offer a new social connection. The connection, a New Zealand-only culture, comes from Hyde inviting the reader to join her in experiencing the country as exceeding her capacity for description. Any voice for New Zealand would come from the to-and-fro of its people living there together.

III

Within 'Houses by the Sea' Englishness is a restriction on speaking. It gives way to New Zealand, which is a presence that must be expressed but that exceeds speech. The second section of poems, 'The Houses', emphasises this movement through its structure. Hyde employs a large formal caesura between four poems that seek to pin New Zealand down in poetry and

²⁴ Robin Hyde, 'The Cage with the Open Door', in *Your Unselfish Kindness: Robin Hyde's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Mary Edmond-Paul (Dunedin 2001) p. 275.

then four poems that present the country as a wordless chorus. The wordless country is Hyde's nationhood. It is a sense of connection made from seeing the country's unique landscape as utterly free from instructions and direct statements.

In the first four poems, Hyde presents her failed attempt to use poetry to make her memories seem true. In these poems, she packages writing poetry as using as a tool to control her memories. She describes her separation from her younger self, writing the memories of 'houses that are not, / Playmates she loves, or loved: but then forgot'. She returns to these memories as though her father returning from war, a 'Slow, creaking shadow; somebody unawoken. / Trumpet: don't touch it, soldier, it won't blow' (*YK*, p. 376). As her father's post-war temperament represents a put-on Englishness that separates New Zealanders from their country, her evocation of militarism reflects the artifice of her attempts to recover memories in precise detail. She cannot inspire these memories into song, but only hold them 'captive':

Hares on their forms at dusk were not so still
Nor those soft stones, their eyes, so warily bright
As yours, held captive by my story's will

Hyde can hold the wary memories, but she cannot make them 'answer back'. The return to her past is a parallel to the colonial control of New Zealand's land. She can claim 'the litter left behind: / Flame pieces out your hair, / Your hands' but not 'that quiet coast, your mind' (*YK*, p. 377). The four poems recall her riposte to the craftsman-like qualities she saw in modern poetry, 'Poetry is the rainbow as well as the engine-room'. In treating a poet's remembering as though colonial imposition, Hyde indicates assigning definite meanings and endings will rob her written New Zealand of reality.

Poem V supplies the pivot between writing as imposition and writing as recovery. Hyde rebukes herself:

None of it true; for Christ's sake, spill the ink,
Tear out this charnel's darnel-root, that lingers
Sprouting words, words, words! Give me cool bluegum leaves
To rub brittle between my fingers.

The jangling, deathly phrase 'charnel's darnel-root' and the triple 'words, words, words!' performatively show Hyde's facility in 'Sprouting' words that do not revive her memories. Her pivot is into a contrasting

representation: her body is the basis of her experience. She takes an explorer's perspective and represents physical sensation as a conduit between poets and New Zealand: 'I had the touch of hillside once: the ever- / So slender cold of buttercup stems in brink'. Physical experience would give poetry the immediacy and necessary rootedness to represent New Zealand without falling into a received style. When Hyde describes her mode of truth, it is tied to the experience of the landscape: 'bring me / Some mountain honesty to drink!' (*YK*, p. 377).

'[M]ountain honesty' is a representative phrase for Hyde's Romanticism in 'Houses by the Sea'. She blends allusions to major Romantic-period poets with her physicality and language that accelerates abstract adjective and noun pairings into wordlessness. In criticism, Hyde's concern was didacticism. Breaking away from 'words, words, words', she develops landscape scenes that invite interpretation but resist being resolved to unambiguous statements. The landscape is a font of wordlessness, Hyde framing it as a national impulse that poets could tap into then show their experience of the country as unmediated by England.

Her wordless geography expresses her reading of Romanticism and, accordingly, is imbued with a rejection of canon-focused appeals to Romantic-period poetry in New Zealand. It performatively eschews attempts to copy Romantic style. Modern poetry in New Zealand had taken that route. R. A. K. Mason's 'Song of Allegiance' (1925) named and followed Romantic-period poets, 'They are gone and I am here / stoutly bringing up the rear'.²⁵ In *The Godwits Fly*, booksellers refuse to put Eliza's (Hyde's) 'local production' on the same shelf as Wordsworth and Tennyson, 'the misfortune is, there's no sale for a book of the type'.²⁶ Echoing Romantic poets to absorb prestige would count as Hyde's post-colonial 'loneliness'. In Poem IV of 'The Houses', Hyde evokes the Romantic 'wind as inspiration' metaphor to show her inability to recover her memory: 'Perhaps the wind / Was I; you the deep earth, that wouldn't care' (*YK*, p. 377). Hyde's 'I' in the present is briefly a parody of the metaphor found in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and, perhaps most well-known of all, Shelley's consecration to liberty in the 'Ode to the West Wind' (1819). Her memory is the 'deep earth', a place at a far remove from the wind. It is a reversal of the wind's usual function in celebrated Romantic lyrics, where, as M. H. Abrams said famously, it is 'a metaphor for a change in the poet's mind'.²⁷ For Hyde, the change is that this metaphor cannot access or

²⁵ R. A. K. Mason, *Collected Poems*, ed. Allen Curnow (Christchurch 1971) p. 45.

²⁶ Hyde, *The Godwits Fly*, p. 224.

²⁷ M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York 1984) p. 26.

represent the parts of her mind she represents as being in tune with the New Zealand landscape.

Adapting metaphors from Romantic-period poetry could disclose a need to find new materials to represent New Zealand. Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark, and Wordsworth's cuckoo had endured in England's early twentieth-century poetry, as Hyde observed in Day-Lewis's 'Ecstatic'. In 'Houses by the Sea', however, overheard mysterious birds resemble a poetry unable to align itself to New Zealand. Inviting the reader's interpretation through the combination of a here/hear pun and an indefinite deixis, Hyde opens Poem VII of 'The Houses' with a combination of scene-setting and command, 'Here the caged voice in the wood'. Rather than the mysterious, vanishing birds of the major Romantics, Hyde has another parody, a bird 'Flown tame to hand'. Tameness suggests the Romantics' poems have been robbed of vitality, reduced to archetypes for imitation. The birdsong cannot complete the necessary work, being 'Slave to the stubborn-fingered / [and] Melted down to lullaby'. However, it calls attention to what Hyde must seek, a 'prophecy' in the land:

The advice, would not die.
 Something had these to say –
 Wood, string, ivory:
 A prophecy out of the soul
 Or out of the tree.

(*IK*, p. 378)

The enjambed 'Or' treats 'the soul' and 'the tree' as equivalent, indicating that any national poetry needs to represent to represent the two together. This need is at odds with how people live in the country's anglophone culture. 'Wood, string, and ivory' stand in contrast to the 'bitter', 'tedious' domesticity of the preceding Poem VI, given in the triples 'Section and brick and grass' and 'Oven, gas-light and sink' (*IK*, p. 378). ('Section' is a New Zealand term for a building plot.) Yet they go unheard by the nation. 'String, wood, and ivory / Plead on, plead on', ignored behind the tame birdsong (*IK*, p. 379).

Hyde seeks to reinscribe New Zealand as untameable. Poem VIII of 'The Houses' swells with a national music, 'But another and older music / Islanded round these keys'. The music is ancient, nameless, and personal. It affects impartial people, with no restriction on their ancestry, and implants them with a sense of attachment. By sounding in Hyde's 'wooden heart', its 'low slow messenger strings, / Gave her an art, where dwelt no art'. This music fulfils the 'advice' of the dulled Romantic birds, then taking their place:

Till with eyes forgetful of name,
 With mind forsaken of words,
 She played: and brushing her eyes as they came
 The green and silver birds
 Shrilled from the birds of flame
 With the instruments' red birds.

These vibrant birds characterise a true national poetry as driven by personal responses mixed with New Zealand's land and history. Birds 'feed' on the memories of a time before Hyde's awareness of a violent and sexual culture in New Zealand:

This the child knew,
 But would not turn her head.
 Slowly, solemnly, stately, she thrummed them into view –
 The flocks that would feed on the dead

(*IK*, pp. 379–80)

A 'thrum' is a wordless music. As a figure for communal singing, it is even more inclusive than choral song. Its wordlessness invites different interpretations from its singers. By using sung wordlessness as a climactic expression of New Zealand's nationhood, Hyde emphasises community. Given the sequence's heavy focus on pronouns, it is notable that she refers to herself in the third person, 'the child'. The reference makes an inclusive, representative anonymity. When she recasts Romanticism's mysterious birds, Hyde wants to explore the country. She prepares for a wordless harmony of personal experiences rather than attempting to find value in exclusive definition.

However, rather than climb to a utopian climax, the sequence stays as an invitation for the reader to go past colonisation and return to an explorer's mode. In Poem V of 'The People', the final poem of the sequence, Hyde's vision returns to a childhood time, seemingly before the sequence, when she explored an abandoned house without a care. Her adventure to the house evokes the individual Europeans who explored New Zealand before full-scale colonial activity occurred, recalling her interest in de Thierry and Heaphy. Hyde is not intending to become indigenous herself so much as to divest exploration of colonialisation. The abandoned home preserves the potential for new arrivals to be outside colonisation. It was a home for an 'obscure benighted / Wanderer who'd not quite lived and not quite died; / Who was at home there'. The memory stages Hyde's wish to relate

to New Zealand by what she finds rather than through the restrictions of a pre-made lens:

This was my Far, my point of vision, the single
 Enchanter's loadstone, drawing up my heart
 To dwell its serf, where crack-joint pine trees mingle
 Needles and shade on wild turf sprung apart;
 Spider-egg pebbles, panes too bright for pity –
 I played alone, till hands quaffed down the sun:
 Then, hand torn free, three miles through breathless city
 Home – run and run!

(*JK*, p. 383)

In this memory, Hyde's concept of home is not yet contaminated by her awareness of violence. Evoking her fondness for Byron's 'O Rome', the home is a root for her conception of New Zealand nationhood. It pulls her in, 'drawing up my heart / To dwell its serf', rather than her controlling it. It is a somewhere 'wild' to be alone and form her own understanding of New Zealand. Like Byron's Rome, this place has been jeopardised by later empires. However, it persists. Unlike crumbled masonry, the land remains. So does the 'Faraway', which persists as an exploration memory Hyde recovers and shares with her reader. Not only can the reader explore New Zealand, but they can explore her memories. The combination brings Hyde's reader into a web of interpretation, a transgressive and liberating reading style entirely opposed to what she saw as New Zealand's post-colonial condition. Instead of wanting to be told what to say, or abandoning the need for a national voice, Hyde treats the shared interpretation of life in New Zealand as the basis for New Zealanders to discover their country without Englishness.

By virtue of her Romanticism, Hyde's project in 'Houses by the Sea' is necessarily incomplete. She does not tell the reader what the 'home' is, nor does she reconcile 'houses' and 'homes' as categories. Yet by abstracting personal experience before the reader and making their position ambiguous throughout, Hyde requires they consider their own relationship to New Zealand. Notably, Hyde does not take direct aim at England itself. European war is a spectre, but Hyde's depictions of restrictive behaviour foreground the 'lonely' New Zealanders who want to be English. By framing the assumed Englishness as a violent presence in New Zealand that unsettles families and stops people from talking to each other, Hyde calibrates national identity as the lived experience that necessarily disrupts any standing or buried desire to be colonial subjects