

The Highlights - New Zealand Light

I had been warned before leaving for New Zealand that the light there was bright and white 'because it bounces off Antarctica.' The person who told me this struck me as a lunatic, because this is a patently absurd notion, and one which every single scientific instrument would dispute. But after six weeks in southern New Zealand, this crackpot idea remains for me the most plausible explanation for the peculiar light that I experienced there.

Of course white light is not like white paint. In fact, it's the opposite. It's all the colors mixed together, wavelengths from 380 nanometers to 800 nanometers, all seven million colors that our eye and brain can differentiate. So I may be pardoned, therefore, for thinking on my way from the airport that the light was yellow. It had been a warm, dry summer in New Zealand, and the hills had yellowed from the drought, so they *were* yellow, and it was the white light showing them as they are. I made the mistake of thinking that yellow light was making whitish hills appear yellow, but that would have been an illusion, and it turned out not to be the case. The light in New Zealand is many strange things, but generally it is not illusionistic.



The Maori word for New Zealand, is *Aotearoa*, which is typically translated in tourist brochures as 'Land of the Long White Cloud.' This is very poetic, but there are at least seven other translations. These include 'Long Shimmering Light,' which makes a certain amount of sense, since the Maori traveled from Polynesia, where twilight is momentary, and must have been surprised by the twilight of New Zealand, which is almost excruciatingly attenuated

across an hour or more. Still, my favorite 'alternate translation' of Aotearoa is 'Big Glaring Light,' because this is exactly what the light felt like to me. I had hoped that it would be a type of clear light that, in Auden's phrase, 'you could mend a watch by.' But watch-mending light is clear and delicate; New Zealand light is clear and brutal.

To be fair, the light is not the same everywhere, but where I was, on the east coast of the South Island, it was a vicious, clear light. One woman who had moved from the west coast, where the light is indeed softer (but also, alas, less clear) told me that she had to wear sunglasses for an entire year, rain or shine, when she came east. Let me try to explain. It's not the bright, harsh, yellow light of, say, Texas in the summer, which feels to me like Venus - massive and blunt and hot. New Zealand's light is cooler, just as bright, but sharper, a far more refined instrument for burning out your retina.



Eventually, I came to see the New Zealand illumination as a kind of tough visual love, the truth if you can take it. Even familiar colors, like the purple of a Fed Ex truck, look truer and more essential. The problem is that it is difficult to look at anything at length, and impossible to stare. You have to look away before the color sensation fully registers. Of course the light quality is dependent on the weather, and on some overcast days much of the clarity remained, and gazing was not only possible, but pleasant. But the existential quality of the light, with its concomitant sense that 'I will never see an ultramarine blue as true as the façade of that building' was gone. This true light is I suppose like any truth, fugitive, and hopelessly impossible to reconstruct once it is gone. One can remember having had a 'true blue' experience, but still not recall what about the experience was so special.

So I am now back in a sort of chromatic flatland, and although I see lots of colors and enjoy them every day, I can't help feeling that sometimes I am just looking at different shades of brown. It's a little bit like having seen the light of the Garden of Eden. The obvious question after all this is, if the amazing light of New Zealand occurs 'because it bounces off Antarctica', what is the light in Antarctica like? I intend to find out.