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Fossil Capacities in the Work of Janet Frame

Abstract

*The Guyanese novelist and critic Wilson Harris defines the word fossil in an idiosyncratic sense, to invoke ‘a rhythmic capacity to re-sense contrasting spaces and to suggest that a curious rapport exists between ruin and origin as latent to arts of genesis’ – prior to hinting that such a ‘heterogeneous scale’ of temporality can be seen to exist within the fictional universe fashioned by Janet Frame. This, in turn, implies that any appreciation of her work’s embeddedness in local (South Pacific) realities must simultaneously take account of the depths of spatiality created by means of her particular aesthetics. This article attempts to address Frame’s strange interest in ghostly vestiges of superseded experience, which she expresses through recurring allusions to subterranean strata of landscape encrypting a sense of ‘epochs and ages gone’ – as she phrases this in *Living in the Maniototo*. Indeed her settings beg the question of a ‘native capacity’ (another Harrisian phrase) possibly underlying her approach to New Zealand contemporary culture. Intriguingly, she probes the matter through her repeated evocation of reputedly extinct animal species – dinosaur, moa, takahe – which she sees in some cases to be gesturing towards the possibility of resuscitation, as with the tuatara mentioned in *Towards Another Summer*, and quite in keeping with an aesthetics of excavation subordinated to her quest for occulted forms of being and knowing. As some of Frame’s characters conceive this, it is a matter of realising that ‘the human eye is not consistent’ and can be supplemented through a form of third-eye vision paradoxically inherited in spite of the losses of history.*

Key words

New Zealand

National identity

Janet Frame

Realism

Towards Another Summer

Introduction

In her novel entitled *Dreams of Speaking*, Gail Jones includes a scene involving two young Australians abroad who are faced with the typical enthusiasm of a café waiter in Paris upon the discovery that they are not British, but Australian citizens: ‘*Ah, le kangourou! L’Opéra! L’Aborigène!*’ (Jones 2006: 30). Interestingly this creates a duality of response among the two travellers, with one, the young woman, nodding her assent with a smile – “‘*C’est vrai,*” she said. “*Le kangourou*” (30) – whereas the other, the young man, bristles with irritation that anybody should ‘proclaim the stereotype’ in a manner so ‘crude’ and reductive. Jones thus appears to problematize the sort of exoticization of the Antipodes which is frequent among Europeans and is really born of ignorance and distance, first by indexing the young man’s resentment, but also through the representation of her female protagonist’s tolerance, perhaps even her gratitude, for an attitude felt to be innocuous: “‘*It’s innocent,*” she said. “‘*It’s an innocent aesthetic*” (30). Although the text hardly belabours the point, such condonation of a so-called harmless innocence at the heart of the European’s presuming imagination of the world works as a reminder of the insidious pervasiveness of the political, as well as of the ease with which mainstream attitudes tend to be naturalized. Moreover, most interestingly for my present purposes, it ties the presumption of innocence with the notion of aesthetics. There is a conflation here – a suggestion that aesthetics and politics are strategically enmeshed –

which deserves to be pondered. My intention is to do this in the light of a consideration of Janet Frame's ambiguous truce with realism, in her work as a whole and in the case of the recently published *Towards Another Summer*, too, more particularly.

Indeed Janet Frame's representation of New Zealand arrests the mind precisely because of the way in which she self-consciously invests in clichés about national identity so as to gesture towards an alternative that might supplement any simplistic nationalist narrative. Thus, towards the close of *Towards Another Summer*, she refers to New Zealand as 'the land of the fern', indicating that it is difficult to 'escape from ferns, bellbirds, tuis, kowhai blossoms, the bush', because they form part of 'a code which everyone understood' (Frame 2007: 227). The dilemma then seems to be that the use of this code is at once inevitable and insufficient: indeed Grace Cleave, the protagonist in the book, is a novelist who ponders that she had 'worked so much with words that her prostitution of them made her ashamed and depressed' (233). Interestingly she thus implies that words have an unexpected, inbuilt ability to resist the force of cliché, for they are 'not so *convenient* a way of saying nothing, of sounding, without inviting too much ridicule or enmity, a self-confident bleating of one's identity, which put forth at the appropriate time and place, could even be disguised to resemble a *fanfare of importance*' (233-234). It follows that, to someone like Frame, the *inconvenience* of language, which is also why it interests the author, is that it is seen to disclose its own pompous hollowness, a matter of 'fanatical innocence' (153), even in those moments when it subscribes to a simplified structure of meaning that brings with it a manifest suppression of rival perspectives.

'Savage Antecedents'

My aim in this essay is therefore to rehearse the potential decentrings to which Frame's discourse of national identity can be subjected, and which it intriguingly invites by positively advertising its own limitations. I wish in this undertaking to take my cue from the critical work of Wilson Harris, whose commentary on Janet Frame, characterized (indeed like his fiction) by an idiosyncratic writing style that privileges intuition over rational analysis, seems essential. Harris has produced two essays on Janet Frame, both of which focus on what remains her most baffling novel, *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963). The first of these articles was issued in a European publication in 1978, to be reissued with the same publisher as part of a collection of critical pieces by the author; while the second article appeared in *Landfall* in 1985 and is curiously entitled 'On the Beach'. The beach metaphor in fact pervades Harris's thinking about Frame's work, which he sees to be preoccupied with a certain intermediary or in-between condition. Thus he begins his critical meditation on Frame's work with the following quotation from the opening pages of *Scented Gardens for the Blind*:

If blind moles, silk-eared bats, dragons had inhabited my country I would have searched for them north, south, east, west on plains and mountains and deep beneath moss, stone and sea-bed. I would have made potions from dragons' blood, glitter-dust from the bodies of bats, in my ritual standing not upon heaths or more, but upon this antipodean beach by a Pacific sea sprayed with light from the ripe, squeezed, bitter sun. (Frame 1963: 11; Harris 1981: 107)

Those who have read the novel will remember that this search for magic ingredients is part of the protagonist's seeking for a remedy that might cure the curse of muteness afflicting her daughter. But Harris suggests that 'a question remains unanswered' in a passage like this one, about the juxtaposition of sensibility which is hinted at through the genealogy of the quaint language strategically mobilized, which jars with the spirit of place, so that he can ask: 'What is the complex impact of landscapes old and new, so to speak, upon the mind?' (107-108).

On one level the idiom utilised here is that of cliché, gesturing as it does towards the Shakespearean trope of the witch brewing her devilish broth on some Scottish heath – but this ritualized language is simultaneously displaced through the *unheimlich* confrontation with an ‘antipodean’ landscape which must be probed, penetrated and explored, no matter how inadequate the code may prove to be. Thus the instrument may be dismissed as unsuited to an understanding of the place, but the urge to explore is enhanced, not defeated, in consequence. In this context, Harris risks the notion that ‘one’s “ritual standing” upon the complex landscapes of the earth’ may allow ‘a dialogue, half-conscious, half-unconscious, with spatial gulfs of subjectivity through and beyond oneself’ (108). What is involved in this invocation of ritual is then apparently the prospect of a cross-cultural connection between protagonist and antagonist, made possible through recovering some awareness of ‘lost initiations into nature, lost potions’ formerly consumed by the European’s ‘savage antecedents’ (Harris 1985: 338). Harris makes no explicit reference to the Māori people here, nor does he subscribe, despite the ambiguous rhetoric, to any primitivist conception of the Polynesian natives – but he is suggesting that a bridge of psyche can be fashioned by dint of a move beyond rationality, through accretions of culture accumulated over time. However, this perception of common ‘antecedents of spirit’ (338) shared by discrete cultures or civilizations can only come to pass if one agrees to bypass ‘a dead-end beach of the imagination’ – a reminder that the beach metaphor, by virtue of the liminality which it signifies, also betokens ambivalence: if it suggests openness to the new and the strange, at the same time it recognizes the possibility that one may remain stranded in one’s cultural personality, thus becoming subject to what Harris calls ‘abortions of sensibility within achieved sculptures and institutions of mankind beached in space and time’ (Harris 1981: 110).

Thus, even irrespective of questions of form, Harris’s reading has the merit of pointing to a correspondence between Frame’s typical dividedness regarding what she calls ‘the chimera of personality’ and an equivalent mutuality felt to exist at the level of collective identity. The point is, again, that by outlining the contours of one’s identity – whether private or public – one ironically draws attention to those outlying dimensions which fall into eclipse through that very gesture of self-definition. This is why Frame’s work is seen to be imbued with a quality of ‘deadening lucidity’ (111), indeed with a form of intransigence, which should not blind us to the remedial counterpart concurrently intuited, as we shall see. For example, in *Towards Another Summer* she represents her fellow New Zealanders as ‘Life-Guard angels marching from tiny Waipapa beach in the south [...] to the Northland coast burning with pohutukawas’, indeed as if all of the nation’s activity could be subsumed under this ‘fanfare of importance’; while the narrator makes it clear that, as the massed bands play on, ‘the sun shone, the day surged with light, while offshore the tidal wave, restrained for the moment or day or year, bided its drowning time, played its blue patience of wave overlapping numbered wave’ (Frame 2007: 153). The novel here partially subscribes to a view of temporal history characterized by a dangerous kind of stasis, since the clockwork succession of the waves crashing on the beach, together with the countable number of such occurrences, point like a time-bomb to the inevitability and perhaps the imminence of disaster. The ‘threat of a tidal wave’ (172) and a sense of doom thus attend cultural trajectories which seem too intensely preoccupied with a ‘self-important celebration’ (150) not sufficiently attuned to the centrifugal spirit of self-questioning. Frame accordingly expresses her diffidence with ‘the smooth golden people with their clear sight, perfect limbs, brains bouncing with sanity and conformity’, whose pursuits are shown to be futile in view of their propensity for ‘trampling sand’ (153), as well as grotesque if one can judge by their frantic gesticulation, a ‘spasmodic threshing of their arms in the air’ (153-154) destined to get rid of the sandflies. There is a consensus among Frame’s New Zealanders that ‘sandflies are a nuisance’ as they literally poison the dream of ‘the bronzed beautiful’ bodies, their continuous biting and stinging

‘raising red lumps on the skin’ (154) and justifying their elimination by pesticide. This, perhaps predictably, triggers the author’s uncomfortable question: ‘What do you expect, then, when the mad, the crippled, the unconforming, try to get a place on the beach?’ (154).

Arguably this sort of development testifies to a genocidal conception of the national culture, which is quite typical of the Framean imagination up to a point, though it is also unusual in view of the text’s intent focalization upon the New Zealand temperament taken specifically. Earlier and later approaches to the theme of wholesale extermination in Frame’s work tend to be characterized by a more universalist outlook, as in *Intensive Care* obviously, or would be deployed against the backdrop of a European setting – one thinks of the suppression of Botti Julio in *The Adaptable Man*, which bears the mark of ‘the concentration camp’ (Frame 1965: 21). By contrast, *Towards Another Summer* takes the form of a more frontal consideration of the home culture, one that succumbs to the seductions of nostalgia, perhaps, but in ways which circumscribe the national features in fairly stereotypical fashion, indeed to the point of cultivating embarrassment. We know of course that the novel, originally penned in 1965 as Frame was living in London and decided to take a creative holiday from the drudgery of writing the much longer *The Adaptable Man*, was thought by the author to contain material unfit for publication within her lifetime, which is why it was only released posthumously in 2007. It may not be immediately apparent, however, what may have been uppermost on Frame’s scale of embarrassment – whether she balked at the thought of exposing various dimensions of private experience, or if she feared even more the impact in her home country of what she had to say about the ‘muddled insular thinking’ (Frame 2007: 157) of her compatriots.

Scales of embarrassment

So far the critics have speculated that Frame’s reticence to have the book published in her lifetime was in fact likely to be motivated by its rehearsing of some longstanding memories of family scenes attesting to the dangerous fascination exerted by her relatives, especially her parents, over the child’s impressionable imagination. Indeed *Towards Another Summer* qualifies as Frame’s first sustained life-writing enterprise, one which predates by nearly two decades the autobiographical trilogy known as *An Angel at My Table*, as it contains a number of rankling, swelling wounds of memory still in great need of being lanced or otherwise tended to by an application of time – or through a heavier dose of fictionalization. Another possible source of embarrassment for the author may have lain in the portrait of social incompetence provided with the character of Grace Cleave, a talented writer who proves unable to discuss her own work in radio interviews, and whose conversational ineptitude continues to plague her in her more personal attempts to communicate with select individuals – to the point of making any kind of intimacy (outside of an ambiguous solitude) cruelly unavailable. Thus *Towards Another Summer* comes across as the rather nightmarish story of a weekend in the country, one in which the guest systematically dodges confrontations with her hosts, only to shed ‘tears of rage’ (Frame 2007: 165) afterwards on her pillow, in frustration over the discrepancy between her monosyllabic evasions and the secret fantasies of social brilliance and romantic success cultivated in her daydreams. The sense of alienation from her fellow human beings which proceeds from this strange condition, this crippling feeling of ‘not being practised in the art of verbal communication’, translates in the book as an impression of ‘not being a human being’ (144) at all, and is finally encoded into the metaphor of metamorphosis flourished by Grace as a token of newfound identity: ‘For so long she had felt not-human, yet had been unable to move towards an alternative species; now the solution had been found for her; she was a migratory bird; warbler, wagtail, yellowhammer? cuckoo-shrike, bobolink, skua? albatross, orange bishop, godwit?’ (8).

It has been suggested that, at the time of writing *Towards Another Summer*, Frame was influenced by an earlier New Zealand novelist, Robin Hyde, who in *The Godwits Fly* (1938)

used the metaphor of the migration to the north as an attempt to articulate the colonial sensibility of New Zealanders longing to travel back to their place of cultural origin on the other side of the earth (see Jones 2007: 14–15). Yet, strictly speaking, the book's title is derived not from a work of fiction but from a poem by Charles Brasch, 'The Islands', which indeed explores the restlessness lying at the heart of New Zealand experience. The relevant passage, on which Frame extrapolates, reads as follows: '...and from their haunted bay / The godwits vanish towards another summer. / Everywhere in light and calm the murmuring / Shadow of departure; distance looks our way; / And none knows where he will lie down at night' (Brasch 1984: 17). The persistence of this 'shadow of departure', which unsettles even the 'light and calm' moments of nestling, explains why the trope of the migratory bird has been read as a token of 'ambivalence' and 'resistance to closure, completeness, or arrival', as if it were the fate of flying New Zealanders to 'assume a nomadic existence' (Golafshani 2008: 112) in their search for an infinitely receding home. Thus the posthumous book was read as a reversal of the time-honoured colonial pattern, since the protagonist is now a New Zealand writer living in London and experiencing bouts of nostalgia for the skies of her native country: 'I live in London. The Southern Cross cuts through my heart instead of through the sky', she says (Frame 2007: 10). The book has then been interpreted as a post-colonial exploration of the themes of displacement and homesickness, one which 'dismisses the validity of London as the origin of creativity and culture for New Zealand' (Golafshani 2008: 111; see also McLeod 2004: 81–92) and recognizes instead the cultural importance of an antipodean matrix of experience. Grace Cleave (alias Janet Frame) was then seen to be following in the steps of Charles Brasch himself, whose experience of Britain during the Second World War also served to enhance his realisation that New Zealand lived on within himself 'as no other country could live' (Brasch 1980: 360), so that, by virtue of a post-colonial dissociation of sensibility rather new at the time, his discovery of foreign territories triggered an inward recognition of what constituted the bedrock of his national identity. In the novel, this is identified as a process of 'completing the act of finding by losing' (Frame 2007: 176). It is relevant that, according to Frame's biographer, she went through a 'roots crisis' after taking a trip to Lancashire in February 1963 to spend a weekend with the writer Geoffrey Moorhouse and his family, whose mode of life was sufficiently reminiscent of New Zealand for her to be thrown slightly off balance (King 2000: 243). *Towards Another Summer* emerges as the fictional and somewhat mischievous rendering of this episode, in which the hosts – the book-loving Philip Thirkettle and his kindly wife Anne and children – are gently satirized for their lack of penetration since they fail to perceive that their prickly guest has given up the habit of being human.

My point is of course that this sort of 'take' on the image of the migratory bird is at once justified and insufficient, as the post-colonial cliché about exile and nostalgia in the far-away metropolis fails to take account of Frame's lampooning of New Zealand parochialism and anti-intellectualism – which must have further contributed to making the book initially unpublishable, no matter how much the author may have included herself in the invective. For example, it is significant that the ritual childish incantation of the Frames' address in Oamaru – 'Fifty-six Eden street Oamaru South Island New Zealand Southern Hemisphere the World' (156) – with which readers are familiar from the autobiography and where the critics so readily perceived an affirmation of antipodean belonging, is here invoked only to deplore that 'the world comes so far at the end of this statement; it is so easy to forget it' (156-157). Grace indeed suggests that a lack of care for what happens out there testifies to the New Zealanders' unusual degree of self-absorption. Accordingly 'Eden street' is presented as 'the street of innocence and experience' (156), in recognition that these apparently antithetical notions are always necessarily imbricated in one another. The point that New Zealand's cultural coming of age may not be quite complete is further tested against the majority attitude to one of the

country's outstanding Prime Ministers, Peter Fraser, who 'moulded the San Francisco Conference' and therefore made the nation 'look beyond herself for a change' (156). When this is casually mentioned by Philip in the context of a round-the-fire conversation, Grace finds that she resents being told something she did not know about her own country, her first reaction one of 'bristling [...] defence against "foreigners" (especially "Pommies")' (156). Then she realises with shame that she, like everyone else in her family, had always unthinkingly dismissed Peter Fraser simply because he wore spectacles: 'She was appalled to realise that in a "young" country of "young" people, sun, beaches, sport, physical health as the ideal perfection, the fact that their Prime Minister had been cross-eyed [...] had seemed unforgivable' (152). Moreover, in the face of the challenge implicit in a rehearsal and overhauling of her own prejudices, Grace interestingly experiences a sudden energy deficit, an imaginative laziness which makes seductive and confirms all over again the idea that 'Foreigners were dangerous, especially in a "young" country. Queers too, outsiders, intellectuals, any doubtful group who might spoil the pleasure of the golden Life-Guards parading the golden beach' (156).

'A More Faithful Memory'

This is typical of a novel which points tentatively towards a revision of value that generally fails to materialize on account of its own addiction to realism and to a prose of conservative description investing in what Wilson Harris (again) calls an 'order of subjective casualty' seen to confirm 'the inevitability of the status quo' (Harris 1981: 110). Against this overall endorsement of formal and spiritual premises, however, it is significant that *Towards Another Summer*, indeed like most of Frame's other novels, includes snatches of poetry, in this case in the form of quotations, which crucially interrupt the flow of prose and point to a 'function of creativity' normally suppressed by a more normative idiom. Next to the already-mentioned poem by Charles Brasch, the centrality of which is underlined by the book's title and epigraph so that the reader is invited to intuit the necessity of an alternative spatial reality (since 'distance looks our way'), one cannot overestimate the importance of another poem quoted in the novel, Allen Curnow's 'Landfall in Unknown Seas', which similarly refutes the finalities of history. Here is the relevant passage: 'O not the self-important celebration / Or most painstaking history, can release / The current of a discoverer's elation / And silence the voices saying, / 'Here is the world's end where wonders cease'. / Only by a more faithful memory, laying / On him the half-light of a diffident glory, / The Sailor lives, and stands beside us, paying / Out into our time's wave / The stain of blood that writes an island story' (Curnow 1974: 132; Frame 2007: 150–151). This difficult passage, the last stanza of Curnow's three-page poem, is hardly elucidated in the lines that follow the quotation, as Grace fleetingly recognizes that it was 'written to commemorate the sailor-explorer Abel Tasman', only to digress into considerations about the role played by those American Marines who 'came during the War to Wellington' and became the sailors 'who helped most to put a stain of blood into our island story'. This shift in temporality, from 'sixteen forty-two' to a Second World War seen to qualify as the country's 'time of lust and blood and history' (151), ostensibly directs the reader's gaze away from a sense of native experience, in what amounts to a gesture of evasion apparently seeking to pin responsibility elsewhere. Yet this renewed instance of her faltering spirit should not blind us to the persistence of the poem's hold on Grace's imagination, as she will keep on wavering, as we are going to see, between the comfort of easy national identification and her own aspiration for 'a more faithful memory'.

In this sense, Curnow's poem operates in the text as an index of its concern with a dimension of skewed time, just as Brasch's encodes a sense of spatial destabilization registered by the protagonist. That this should involve a bypassing of cliché in one's approach to national identity, is made apparent in Grace's determination to omit, in her 'more faithful' application of 'memory', her country's conventional titles to fame, identified once again as

‘the spellbinding outward landscape, the tourist glaciers, mountains, rivers, plains, bush, so often referred to as if they had been planned glories of a human workshop’ (153). As an aspect of her wish to transcend a view of identity conceived as a mere mirror presented to nature, and to assess what may really constitute a human achievement inherent in New Zealand history, Grace feels the need for a revised historiography that may be sufficiently emancipated from the imperatives of ‘self-important celebration’ and make room for ‘the half-light of a diffident glory’. This is in keeping with Curnow’s wish to offer his own ‘contribution to the anti-myth about New Zealand’ through some of his poems of the mid-twentieth century (Curnow 1974: xiii). He clearly urges recognition of the comparative brevity of ‘our time’s wave’ on the beach of history, as well as a circumscription of the ‘stain of blood’ which is felt to have left a blemish on the European record in the region ever since exploration and settlement. Again, however, it is typical of the Framean text that its own call for an inspection of the true temperament of the ‘Sailor’ who lives on and ‘stands beside us’, should be allowed to resonate hollowly, at least in the sense that *Towards Another Summer* ostensibly desists from exploring the colonial past in the way that is apparently recommended. Instead, the narrator contents herself with an obsessive rehearsal of the disheartening extensions of the original stain, which has ramified in the present and remains active as a ‘free-floating stain of public opinion’ (152), or as a tarnish affecting all human language, including that of the creative writer. Indeed the pervasiveness of the stain metaphor in the novel indicates the degree of corruption tainting present-day epistemologies in the absence of the desired descent into the past. It is again typical of Grace’s capitulation to the force of establishment that she literally exhausts her energies looking for the best way to remove sooty spots from her clothes – whether this may be ‘water, turpentine, methylated spirits’, or even air – while inexorably ‘the stain spreads’ (13).

In spite of Grace’s pusillanimity in *Towards Another Summer*, it can be shown that Frame’s interest in black holes of history pervades the work and goes back at least as far as *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962) where it is encoded in the image of the ‘lost tribe’ which is an obsession for one of the characters. Indeed Toby, the epileptic boy in *Owls Do Cry* (1957), reappears here in the guise of a crypto-artist who dreams of turning his school-boy homework (entitled ‘The Lost Tribe’) into a book-length monograph on the same topic. In the context of the novel’s concern with victims of history, or with those who were ‘pushed off the bandwagon of Survival’ (Frame 1962: 16), the Lost Tribe becomes emblematic not only of New Zealand’s indigenous populations (see Jennings 2000: 80–93) but also of various further categories of eclipsed humanity. In this sense it acquires universal dimensions, in keeping with the insight, expressed in the first verse section of the novel, that ‘uncovered between mantle and mantle of history / we glimpse our own lives’ (Frame 1962: 17). Once again it seems as if Frame is above all concerned here with the delineation of an all-purpose metaphor meant to encode her sense of otherness; and we may doubt whether she aims to excavate those fossils of a forgotten past to which she has been alluding (see Cronin 2003–2004: 45–64). What is clear enough is that she links a perception of oppressive history to the narrative of European imperial expansion. This is clearest in *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) where the setting is configured so as to reveal unobtrusive proximities between the north and south hemispheres. Thus Blenheim, Frame’s fictional Auckland suburb in this novel, is ‘named after a “famous victory”’ celebrated in European history, indeed like its street-names which similarly gesture towards an imported historical narrative. The point is in part that violence is displaced as an effect of this ‘historic confusion’ and insinuation (Frame 1979: 23), so that it becomes possible for New Zealanders to ignore the more proximate violence contained in their own national history. But this erasure is countered by Frame’s archaeological gaze, which sees through beyond surfaces to the ‘human skulls’ buried in innocent ‘flower gardens’. In the last analysis the violence of Blenheim has nothing to do with the victory of

the English over the French in 1704, but rather with the manner in which the local place was settled:

If the creation of Blenheim out of forest land had been a natural event in geological time using the slow force of wind, wave, and sun, it would have taken 250 million years, and the lives of the earliest inhabitants would burn today as coal burns to light the memory of the earliest trees in a primeval forest, lighting and warming with the dreams of the past. But the life of Blenheim has not happened that way. It's a violent suburb. (21)

While there is of course no certainty that the 'human skulls' scattered in the subsoil of New Zealand's suburbs necessarily belong to Māori people, the suggestion seems to be that they form part of the lost dimension subtending a present moment seen to be cut off from its anchoring in the past. Naturally this reminder possibly held more political urgency at the time of writing, when New Zealand was yet to articulate its national identity in bicultural terms – a development Frame would begin to address in the latest of her novels to be published in her lifetime, *The Carpathians* (1988). Even then, however, she refused to single out any particular historical casualty over and above all other potential contenders, favouring a differential approach to history seen as a repressed manifold object.

In *Towards Another Summer*, this sense of historical reduction, of a present no longer lit or warmed by the fires of yesterday, is expressed through a number of metaphors emphasizing the felt partiality of the country's contemporary physical features. Two such correlated metaphors are those of the Flood and of the land's erosion. Grace is mindful of the fact that there is more to New Zealand than strikes the eye, so to speak, in view of the reminiscence, frequently voiced by her father, that when he was a kid 'there was a football ground where the sea is now' (Frame 2007: 172). She reflects that 'the loss of a football field was serious' (173) and probably a more efficient reminder of 'the threat of a tidal wave' (172) than countless academic lectures entitled '*Erosion, The Sea's Threat to the Land*' and 'showing lantern slides of ordinary land scarred, undermined, swallowed by waves' (173). This theme of geological erosion would be pursued in a later novel, *The Rainbirds* (1969), the setting of which includes a strip of coastland reclaimed from the sea, seen to counter any feeling that the place may be 'historically stagnant' (Frame 1969: 187). A similar recuperative drive is apparent in *Towards Another Summer* where Grace cherishes fond memories of the time when the Leith river overflowed its banks and flooded the family house, in spite of the fact that she was not yet born when this happened. It is interesting that she confuses this piece of family lore with another occasion, when 'it rained forty days and nights, an ark was built, and the animals were rescued two by two' (72). By virtue of this unhistorical conflation, Grace evinces an imaginative ability to enter into a transgenerational residue of experience and to move beyond stases of the past. In similar fashion, the 'last day of Pompeii' will be presented as 'another catastrophe experienced and real in the confusion of remembering, knowing, dreaming' (160).

Living Fossil

All of this yields a vision of New Zealand as unshackled from by the usual bonds of space and time, so that the place is made amenable to a transformative scrutiny of archaeological proportions. This is equivalent to viewing the *hic et nunc* of present-day phenomena as an insufficient index of reality, and as a key to concealed dimensions of experience which survive unobtrusively, like a sophisticated ruin. I want to suggest, as a way of concluding these admittedly outlandish comments upon national identity, that the same creative stance towards the past is made manifest in *Towards Another Summer* by means of the book's rehearsal of Frame's ubiquitous evolutionary theme. The latter takes the form of multiple references to species of extinct animals apparently encoding the author's sense of history as a

process predicated on gradual diminishment rather than progress. Besides, the strategic importance of extinct species of animals relates to the question of survival, since they have fallen victims to a danger seen to be threatening us today. One remembers an early novel such as *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), where Toby Withers, the vexed visionary, is overtaken by a ‘strange terror’ whilst visiting the National History Museum in London, so that he complains: ‘These old mammoths, why do they bother to put them together if they’ve nothing to say to us, why don’t they speak and warn us before it is too late?’ (Frame 1962: 258). Interestingly in this context, Frame in *Towards Another Summer* refuses the ultimacies of history by imagining the Taieri Plain as ‘a waste of grey mud heaving with buried mammoths which kept moving, surging with life-currents over hundreds and millions of years, as easily as small insects and animals flicker with seconds of life after their heart has stopped beating’ (Frame 2007: 201). This view of the landscape as living fossil, a far cry from the tourist clichés evoked earlier, further a reference to the wild West Coast of New Zealand where ‘they have discovered the flightless bird, the takahe, long thought to be extinct’ (125). The point is that extinction may not be final, if one finds means of entering into imaginative dialogue with superseded forms of experience, of the kind fantasised by Grace when she addressed the tuatara during a visit at the zoo: ‘We’re alive, you *may* become *extinct*. Most of the animals and birds known by you are *extinct*. [...] What was it like, tuatara? Why don’t you speak to us, why don’t you *tell, explain?*’ (126). The tuatara, the rarest of New Zealand’s reptiles, has been described as ‘literally a ghost of the past’, belonging as it does to ‘an Order of fossils, rockbound for ages, that have in turn given rise and brought extinction to other Orders – yet permitted *one remnant to survive*, apparently immune to the dominant sway of evolution’ (Ditmars 1922: x; qtd. in Mercer 1994: 181). Thus its value derives from its having remained in touch with eclipsed strata of history, which emerge as an object of fascination for the curious mind.

In all, this suggests that Frame invests in a conception of fossil-studded landscape-in-depth: i.e., a notion that space subsists upon its very losses and invites a creative response akin to a descent into humanity’s ‘sediment of thought or imagination’ (Frame 2007: 222). This importantly implies a rejection of any evolutionary teleology as well as an implicit disavowal of Darwinian progress. In this sense, *Towards Another Summer* shares a number of preoccupations with *The Adaptable Man* (see Cronin 2011: 173), written concurrently (as we know), and where adaptation is presented as a disposition to endorse the felt limitations of surface realities. By contrast, it is clear that Frame favours an approach to evolution that may not depend on accumulations of loss – ‘a cast-off appendix here, a shrivelled gland there, a forever sealed third eye, skin-enclosed flightless wing’ (Frame 1965: 137) – but, to the contrary, on a devolution of historical premises whereby loss might mutate into the beginnings of recovery. By forsaking any celebration of the process known as ‘survival of the fittest’, and by opting for a fiction of memory aiming to circumscribe dimensions of extinct ontology thus tentatively recuperated within the work, Frame tries to oppose the erosive force of history and to enlarge the scope of what may be imagined. This occurs not by way of positive conceptualization, as might happen in science fiction of the sort which represents ‘visitors from outer or inner space’ (Frame 2007: 125), but through an intense and often ironic pondering of the narrowness of any realistic description. She thus calls into question the familiar parameters underlying the fashionable chronology of national identity construction, and points to an element of self-deception (as well as aggrandizement) that inevitably inheres in any attempt at collective self-definition – in a way which coheres with developments to come and with the country’s continuing attempts today to transcend any monolithic perspective upon its own culture.

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