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## “Conquest of surfaces”

— <> — Aesthetic and Political Violence  
in the Work of Janet Frame

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WRITING ABOUT VIOLENCE in the early 1970s, Hannah Arendt remarked that, surprisingly in view of the enormous role it plays in human affairs, the topic is rarely singled out for special consideration. This relative silence on the part of intellectuals, or the reluctance to recognize violent events as “occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures,” betokens a tacit acceptance of the immutability of the course of the world. Indeed, Arendt claims,

whether it is Clausewitz calling war “the continuation of politics by other means,” or Engels defining violence as the accelerator of economic development, the emphasis is on political or economic continuity, on the continuity of a process that remains determined by what preceded violent action.

Thus violence, when it is accounted for, tends to confirm the subjective premises of the powers-that-be, while, conversely, the “inner consistency” of the dominant perspective usually means that above-board exactions will be relegated to a form of discursive invisibility: “No one questions or examines what is obvious to all.”<sup>1</sup> Arguably, this has become a truism in an age when so much opposition to the ruling order is dismissed as un-

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego CA: Harcourt Brace, 1970): 7–9.

reasonable ‘terrorism’. At any rate, it can be affirmed that violence is by no means an absolute notion, but one that will depend, if it is going to be invoked at all, on strategic decisions in terms of ethical valorization. In other words, violence, in order to operate as a concept, requires a founding correlative in the recognition of objects of integrity susceptible of being breached or defiled. Unfortunately, the indigenous populations of the world have not always been so recognized. In this sense, the settler colonies provide a context where historical violence tends to be naturalized or at least downplayed as part of a colonial legacy which is not so easy to eradicate.

This state of affairs is apparent in the work of Janet Frame, not least in *The Rainbirds* (1968), where New Zealand is presented as a country where “Centennial or War Memorials” are used as “public lavatories or tea kiosks.”<sup>2</sup> Frame’s usual satiric wit here testifies to an acute awareness of the insidious attenuation of violence that comes to pass when the link to history has become perfunctory, a matter of unthinking ritual. Thus the mindless frequentation of “War Memorials” serves to emphasize the extent to which European history continues to inform the construction of national identity in New Zealand; the similar use made of centennial monuments, by contrast, points to a gradual effacement, in the collective memory, of the impact of invasion. Arguably, these two forms of mnemonic practice work in combination to produce invisibility – the relative invisibility to which the Maori population was relegated at the time when *The Rainbirds* was written. Subsequently, of course, New Zealand would aspire to a collective identity increasingly defined in Maori terms, an aspect which Frame was to explore in novels like *The Carpathians* (1988).

Clearly, Frame’s interest in these black holes of history pervades her 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 a school homework assignment (entitled “The Lost Tribe”) into a book-length monograph. Such aspirations seem pathetic, if only because

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Frame, *Yellow Flowers in the Antipodean Room* (New York: George Braziller, 1968): 233. This is the American edition of *The Rainbirds*, in which Frame’s original choice of title was preserved. Further page references are in the main text.

Toby is hardly literate and he experiences his own artistic yearnings as a form of embattled resistance, "like tribal fighting."<sup>3</sup> In the context of the novel's concern with victims of history, or with those who were "pushed off the bandwagon of Survival,"<sup>4</sup> the Lost Tribe becomes emblematic not only of New Zealand's indigenous populations<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> Whether or not we believe in Frame's capacity to excavate, at a higher level of her own metafiction, these fossils of a forgotten past,<sup>7</sup> at any rate it can be argued that the historical present is envisaged in the work as the diminutive result of a long-term subtraction, while history itself is seen not as a progressive addition to the store of collective experience but, on the contrary, as a continuous whittling away of possibility.

By this token, violence in Frame's work should be conceived not as an external threat, potential or actual, against the perceived integrity of a modern world experienced as the only possible one but, rather, as the memory of a catastrophe which has already happened and which reverberates in the diminished present. In other words, reality itself is the source of violence, inasmuch as it is seen to repress its own various suspended others. If any postcolonial dimension can be recognized in Frame, it is because, at times, she links this 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 northern and southern hemispheres. Thus Blenheim, Frame's fictional Auckland suburb (and a rather amusing expropriation of the name of a South Island town in Marlborough province),

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<sup>3</sup> Janet Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (New York: George Braziller, 1995): 249.

<sup>4</sup> Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> See Olivia Jennings, "Representing Indigeneity: The Search for the Lost Tribe in Janet Frame's *The Edge of the Alphabet*," *World Literature Written in English* 38.2 (2000): 80–93.

<sup>6</sup> Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> A possibility that is disputed by Jan Cronin in "The Theoretical Terrain of the Text: Reading Frame through *The Edge of the Alphabet*," *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, New Series 2–3 (2003–2004): 45–64.

is “named after a ‘famous victory’” celebrated in European history – indeed, like its street-names, which similarly gesture at an imported historical narrative. The point is, in part, that violence is displaced as an effect of this “historic confusion and insinuation,” so that it becomes possible for New Zealanders to ignore the more proximate violence contained in their own national history. However, the glibness of this move 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.<sup>8</sup>

In this novel, Frame’s protagonist, who is a citizen of New Zealand, seems sufficiently equipped, by virtue of her native familiarity with violence, to recognize it when she chances upon its ugly face in the course of her peregrinations in the northern hemisphere. Thus, when she stays in Baltimore, it only takes a glance at the map of the city for her to identify the districts which poverty transformed into “battlegrounds and areas of the many dead” (33). In the same spirit, when Blenheim is proclaimed twin city to Berkeley (California), she receives the news not with enthusiasm at all but with “some apprehension, as with a possible declaration of war” (26).

It is clear that Frame’s concern with war, instead of affiliating her with official Western historiographies, responds, rather, to a sense of amputated reality the world over. Thus amputation is turned into a multi-layered metaphor in *Intensive Care* (1970), the novel where she addresses the theme of war most frontally. The title refers variously to what goes on

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<sup>8</sup> Janet Frame, *Living in the Maniototo* (1979; London: Women’s Press, 1992): 21–23. Further page references are in the main text.

in the field sanatoriums of two World Wars, in the recovery units of civil hospitals in peace-time, but also, in a spirit of analogy, to the disastrous consequences of excessive attention of the loving kind. The implication seems to be that it is quite possible to “[love] too much, like bombing”<sup>9</sup> – indeed, with no less destructive results. Frame thus universalizes the theme of war, assessing its relevance in domestic circumstances where it assumes the status of a metaphysical disposition. In times of peace, war-like attitudes stand for the deadening of the imagination that accompanies the embrace of a one-sided outlook on the world. In this context, it is possibly ironic that the book’s most belligerent character should be named Livingstone, as if the petrification of the perspective exposed here were not considered to be final.

Frame’s thematization of war further extends to her preoccupation with nuclear holocaust, which is again metaphorized as a catastrophe that invites reparation. This has not been highlighted by those critics who read the eschatological note contained in the work as a nihilistic comment on the concrete circumstances immediately surrounding us. Thus Gina Mercer points out that *The Edge of the Alphabet* was “written in Britain during the Cold War,” which is why it is full of “references to atomic weapons and the threat of extinction which they pose.”<sup>10</sup> This sort of comment is valid enough, but it should not override the perception that, as we have seen, violence has already happened, so that Frame’s fictional subjectivities unfold against a backdrop of achieved ontological damage. This can be illustrated in the light of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963), a novel which is traditionally thought to end in dystopian fashion with the destruction of the known world after the atom bomb was dropped on Britain. This is the context in which Vera, the mute protagonist, breaks out into speech, though this is no more than a disturbing animal grunt coming “out of ancient rock and marshland; out of ice and stone.”<sup>11</sup> It has been tempting to see this as a regressive return to primeval chaos, or “to the

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<sup>9</sup> Janet Frame, *Intensive Care* (New York: George Braziller, 1970): 234.

<sup>10</sup> Gina Mercer, *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1994): 54.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Frame, *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963; London: Women’s Press, 1991): 252.

zero point of entropic stillness,”<sup>12</sup> as if the novel sustained a decreative chronology culminating in some all-encompassing apocalypse. Yet a number of hints<sup>13</sup> suggest that Vera’s cryptic utterance is not, in fact, consecutive upon what precedes it in the book but, rather, simultaneous with it, so that, by dint of a shift in perspective in the last chapter, an equivalence is established between the catastrophic epilogue and the body of the novel. Seen in this way, it seems less surprising that Vera’s inarticulate mutter should be hailed by the narrator as “the language of humanity,”<sup>14</sup> since it is made apposite to the perfectly articulate developments which unfold in the book. The upshot is that Frame’s universe, even when it is formally realized and constructed, already bears the trace of a primary moment of loss. This state of affairs is suggestively captured by Wilson Harris in his inspired commentary on *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, which he sees as the delineation of a world where “man” is stranded in “shallows of history [...] with an ocean of space and time at his back.”<sup>15</sup>

One may, then, wonder in what ways Frame’s concern with subjective violence is reflected in the form of the fictions. Jan Cronin alerts us to the danger of overlooking “the distinction between the signification and the *modus operandi*” of Frame’s novels, a perception that relies on a sense of the disparity “between what the text says and what it does.”<sup>16</sup> In this view, the complexity of Frame’s work derives in large part from the interplay of distinct levels of realization, one that is speculative and consists of an exposition of a philosophical thesis, and another that is operative and deploys a number of enactments – so that the thesis is tested again and again. Clearly, this insight, that the text is performing a verification of its own premises, can be maintained with relation to the view outlined here: i.e. that Frame responds to a sense of eroded reality that is both ontological and epistemological.

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<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Delbaere, “Beyond the Word: *Scented Gardens for the Blind*,” in *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 108.

<sup>13</sup> See Marc Delrez, *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame* (Cross/Cultures 55; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002): 122–24.

<sup>14</sup> Frame, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, 251.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson Harris, “*Scented Gardens for the Blind*,” in *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 92.

<sup>16</sup> Cronin, “The Theoretical Terrain of the Text,” 45, 62.

In this respect, it is arguably a paradox that Frame should pursue, at least on occasion, an “incongruous adherence to naturalism,”<sup>17</sup> at first sight an aesthetic medium that may not be ideal for conveying her sense of eclipsed realities. This is because, by adopting a realistic mode of representation, she strategically enacts the partiality inherent in the “conquest of surfaces”<sup>18</sup> required by verisimilitude. Such shock-tactics can only work, of course, if made explicit in a way that points to what is occulted in the process. This makes it necessary for Frame’s works to contain a comment upon themselves, so that, as Cronin puts it, the books gesture “towards a process akin to the re-representation that is literary criticism.”<sup>19</sup> In practice, the novels subscribe to a form of fraught realism, one that is heavily signposted with the markers of an external dimension felt to exist beyond the frame of representation. The same holds true for the shorter fiction, since some of the short stories similarly undertake to emphasize the limits of traditional representation. Thus Renata Casertano detects in “My Last Story,” one of Frame’s earliest texts (contained in *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, 1951), an exploitation of ellipsis or the “three-dot space” which figures “both the metaphorical locus of dissent where the writer exposes the old tricks of mimesis, and the physical locus where the character-narrator has been precipitated, and from which she/he tries to speak.”<sup>20</sup> This breach in the surface of the text is meant to disqualify the available perspective as a “wrong way of looking at Life,”<sup>21</sup> in a manner that possibly anticipates the elision of a whole chapter in *Living in the Maniototo* or, in the no less self-aware *The Carpathians*, the eruption into Frame’s fictional world of an “invisible gap in the fabric of space and time.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jan Cronin, “Contexts of Exploration: Janet Frame’s *The Rainbirds*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40.1 (2005): 17.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, “*Scented Gardens for the Blind*,” 96.

<sup>19</sup> Cronin, “The Theoretical Terrain of the Text,” 62.

<sup>20</sup> Renata Casertano, “Falling Away from the Centre: Centrifugal and Centripetal Dynamics in Janet Frame’s Short Fiction,” in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*, ed. Jacqueline Bardolph (Cross/Cultures 47; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2001): 349.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Frame, *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991): 166.

<sup>22</sup> Janet Frame, *The Carpathians* (1988; London: Flamingo, 1993): 89.

It must be noted that the same qualification of realism is enacted in those among her novels where, as in *The Adaptable Man* (1965), Frame appears to make a closer “approach to the plot conventions of the traditional novel.”<sup>23</sup> This book has been likened to a ‘whodunit’, for it sustains a teasing interest in a plot centering on the killing of an Italian immigrant, Botti Julio, who made the mistake of straying into an intolerant rural community in East Suffolk. Strangely, the killer’s name is gratuitously revealed immediately after the murder in what looks like a deliberate flouting of the laws of suspense; but even more surprising is the narrator’s confession that the murderer may have had no other motive for his deed than that he was a man of his time, true to the spirit of the twentieth century. Once again, violence emerges here as the foundational principle on which our present reality is constructed, especially since Botti Julio had spent some time in a concentration camp before his decision to emigrate, so that through him the novel rehearses the repression of all those who have “stayed behind in the camps.” In this sense, Frame’s comparative flirtation with the rules of realism in this novel serves to highlight the constrictions of the *hic et nunc* perspective to which she herself subscribes in *The Adaptable Man*. As the narrator says, in one of those moments when the fiction turns upon itself in a literary critical move: “Here, now, a ghost in our story.” It is noteworthy that, within the terms of Frame’s scale of creativity, detective fiction thus slides into a sort of revenant story, probably in token of what is snuffed out in the mimetic gesture. The haunting loss involved in Frame’s truce with realism is further advertised through the reference to a “gash” in the world, which might “be wider than at first you imagined.”<sup>24</sup> Again, scarred surfaces serve as a warning against the seductiveness of a regime of reality that is mere camouflage, for it conceals “the scene of the crime.” Therefore, if Frame’s aesthetic appears to make her complicit with this “crime,” it may well be the case that it responds to a logic of exposure of its own premises, in keeping with the perception that “you were given the world whether or not you wanted it and in whatever shape or form it was presented to you.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick Evans, *An Inward Sun: The Novels of Janet Frame* (Wellington: New Zealand UP, 1971): 31.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (1965; New York: George Braziller, 1992): 20.

<sup>25</sup> Frame, *The Adaptable Man*, 273.



This crisis of legitimation, which is then seen to affect both the real and its representation, of course begs the question of a remedial scale possibly contained in the work. Humanist readings of Frame usually assume the existence of a transcendental dimension which underlies her universe and which stands in inverse relation to her formal strategies. Thus Wilson Harris discerns in Frame's aesthetic a "reigned in" quality, an obsession with "strictest control" which can be seen to "invite the antithesis of resignation in a sensation of violent internal/external bloom." Such antithesis is likely to be starkest in those of Frame's novels which, like *The Adaptable Man*, attempt a simulacrum of realism and espouse "the very reactionary premises that threaten to seize the poet's imagination."<sup>26</sup> This is why it is my intention, in the remainder of this essay, to return to *The Rainbirds*, another Frame text which "sticks doggedly to a naturalistic, realistic context,"<sup>27</sup> in order to show that this aesthetic choice pursues the paradoxical goal of exposing the limits of realism and of modes of perception found to be "historically stagnant" (187). Even though it is ostensibly concerned with the private trajectory of an individual character, Godfrey Rainbird, who dies and is presently resuscitated, this novel is nevertheless patterned around the metaphor of war in a way that points to the latent violence – or to rankling amputations – inherent in the otherwise peaceful New Zealand setting. Thus it seems relevant that, in the aftermath of his strange experience, Godfrey finds himself "becoming confused with the popular words of statesmen at the end of a war, 'This must never happen again'" (195).

The irony of the matter is that Godfrey had sought refuge in New Zealand, where he was "accepted as an assisted immigrant" from Great Britain after World War II, precisely as an attempt to outgrow the trauma endured "in the Trossachs where he spent the war years as an evacuee" (3). His country of adoption was going to provide satisfaction, initially at least, in that "his workmates had other things to talk about" (5) than the war, and also because the climate promised relief from the rain which had been such a permanent feature of his experience in the Trossachs. However, Frame is here playing a game of make-believe, whereby the myth of a war-free New Zealand is set up only to be debunked; and Godfrey, in his

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<sup>26</sup> Wilson Harris, "On the Beach," *Landfall* 155 (1985): 337, 338.

<sup>27</sup> Cronin, "Contexts of Exploration," 17–18.

escapist impulse to move to another country, was deluded anyway, since his time in “the Trossachs haunted him” (3) and he “had brought much of it with him, in his luggage, on his back, in his heart” (11).

Godfrey is saddled in particular with the burdening memory of his mother, who died in the bombing of Balham Tube Station in London, and whose body was “never found or claimed or reclaimed” (39) along with three hundred others. There is a sense in which his own rehearsal of death on a strip of coastland recently reclaimed from the sea constitutes an attempt to snatch what had been cast away: it gestures at the exploration and recovery of his mother’s experience, which had been thus far repressed along with the nightmarish fantasy of being buried alive – a horrific notion that has suddenly become inevitable in the wake of the timely resurrection. Arguably, the condition of being buried alive aptly characterizes the sort of enhanced consciousness, or familiarity with “areas like wells [which] appeared in his mind” (100), that Godfrey develops after his death. He discovers within himself a subterranean sensibility quite undreamed-of before, as if his life “had become without warning a torrent that dropped suddenly into a small dark hole in the earth and was destined to flow underground for ever” (101). Interestingly this new being-to-the-world is found to have more than individual relevance, which is why its advent is again signified in terms of the novel’s war metaphor:

How fearful, irrevocable pronouncements were! The Air Ministry had made a pronouncement. The War Office. Pronouncements, Bulletins, the details of the raids; the casualties; all the official words webbing themselves about the idea of *pronounced death*. (55)

Naturally, *The Rainbirds* can be seen on one level as just another of those existentialist novels in which Frame stigmatizes the course of persecution typically brought to bear, in a conformist society, on the foreign, the unexpected, or the imaginative.<sup>28</sup> In a sense, this pattern is developed *ad absurdum*, since death is here presented as the ultimate stigma of an irreducible difference – the social taint *par excellence*. The ostracism to

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<sup>28</sup> See esp. Annemarie Backmann, “Security in Equality in *The Rainbirds*,” in *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*, ed. Jeanne Delbaere (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992): 139–48, and Ruth Brown, “The Rainbirds – and Other Dunedins,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 10 (1992): 115–25.

which Godfrey is subjected by neighbours and colleagues alike testifies, then, to the capacity for self-delusion, even the intimations of immortality harboured by human beings only too intent on dissimulating death behind some self-indulgent "personal smoke screen" (182). In this context, it is only apt that Godfrey should be bracing himself for the familiar dismissal of those asking him to "go back to [his] own country" (123), perhaps in recognition of the fact that, by daring to die, he has broken the rule for political placidity which had been set as a precondition for his assisted emigration (see p. 3). Similarly, it seems significant that his sister Lynley, on hearing of the ghastly news, should decide to emigrate in turn, notably on the strength of the feeling that, coming from the northern hemisphere, she might be better equipped than Godfrey's wife Beatrice to cope with the young man's death. One more time, this is linked to the perception that her war experience gives her an edge over New Zealanders, whose national history fails to accommodate the "burden of suffering" resulting from "all the tortured and the dead in other countries" (117). Indeed, Lynley's undertaking competence includes "not only conventional death, but sudden ghastly explosions of bombs, mass killing and mass burial" (47).

Of course, this presumption of superiority in suffering can only be resented by New Zealanders such as Beatrice, who protests: "We're *people* here, you know" (117). One is, then, entitled to ask what difference is made by the centrality of the war metaphor in the economy of a novel otherwise set in an environment best described as politically innocuous. Can it be that an equivalence is felt to exist between ordinary parochial ostracism and the weightier crimes of "mass killing and mass burial"? Although not entirely inapposite, perhaps, the analogy would seem excessive if it were the only justification for Frame's arsenal of war images in this book. Thus it seems that another ground of explanation must be sought in the phenomenology of Godfrey's post-mortem perceptions of the world around him. After his initial feeling, upon walking out of the mortuary, that the world is replete with a wealth of "new details" previously unexamined, the predominant mood which subsequently settles in his mind is "the anguish of knowing that all should be as it seemed" (193). The two feelings are not incompatible, as the sense of epistemological predictability which has begun to disturb him derives from his awareness of what is left out of account in any conservative reading of reality. Thus, from "the dividing distance of his time spent dead" (57), he becomes

aware of vertiginous vacancies inscribed within the real, unperceived by those who find “peace in the certainty and rhythm” (200) of solid lives.

His own sense of vacuity first develops as a special sensitivity to the area “at the centre of the room where [his] coffin would have lain” and which everybody in the family instinctively moves away from. Interestingly, this is further envisaged as a matter of competing spatialities, for “when the body had dropped prone, never again to stand upright, it leaves a vacant space of air that is quickly seized by the hungrily prowling beings starving for space” (93). Beyond the usual satiric dig at human beings whose struggle for breathing-space reveals a compulsive form of death-denial, it seems clear that Frame is intent on exploring, before it closes, the gash in the world torn open by the entire removal of a particular individual. In this sense, *The Rainbirds* can be seen as an experiment in historical memory, creating as it does, through the fictional trick of resuscitation, the conditions in which a character can fight for the preservation of his own perspective after his obliteration by death. This permits the verification of Frame’s heart-felt conviction, one often voiced in the work, that the wishes of the dead are too swiftly interpreted, their point of view seized, by those who survive: “How freely we may help ourselves to the wisdom of the dead without their protest or argument!” (202). This is inseparable from the notion, examined in *The Carpathians*, that the assumption of anybody’s perspective, even in fiction, necessarily relies on a form of imposture. In a sense, *The Rainbirds* constitutes a kind of “protest or argument” against this; the fact that Godfrey here sticks to his perspective, “maintaining his foothold [and] his mindhold” (199) in the face of those (like Dad Muldrew) eager to invade his physical and mental space, enhances the sense of usurpation that attaches to an environment which threatens to become all-consuming. Moreover, while this verdict of imposture concerns primarily people, it also extends to the realm of “inanimate objects” that are similarly felt to “intrude beyond” their “allotted share of space” (141), thus claiming a relative supremacy which the novel denounces as illegitimate. Arguably, the triumph of object over subject figures the ineluctable attrition of human reality effected by death, which is probably why, in a typical instance of Framean humour, Beatrice resorts to “barrier cream” (150) by way of self-protection in the course of her daily battle with things within the household.

*The Rainbirds* can, then, be seen as an attempt to invest, occupy, and defend – the military metaphors seem appropriate – the perspective of the

dead on the level of an individual character. However, it must be noted that the novel also articulates the link with a more collective dimension of experience, notably in the following passage, which deserves to be quoted in full:

Although premature burial had not become his prevailing nightmare the fear of being pronounced dead and in another’s power haunted him. This power did not include his burial by another, the refusal to unlock his tomb when he thudded his fists against the coffin lid – this might have been so in a time when he thought of power as physical domination, when gods showed their power by playing games with thunderbolts, hurling them from the sky to strike and kill; even Christ had been content to prove his power with the acceptable popular method of displaying force to perform immediate visible miracles though his permanent power in the end was wielded by words. In an age of sophistication where primitive demons still haunted, when total destruction of the world or the cleaning of a wooden bungalow on a quarter-acre section could both be accomplished at the turn of a switch, when minds became so confused that the difference between a bomb and a vacuum cleaner was not as obvious as it might have been, when a world-cleaning, man-cleaning, race-cleaning process became as casual as house-cleaning and was thought by some to be as necessary and satisfying, then the varieties of power were endlessly subtle and it was these invisible powers that frightened Godfrey. (194–95)

This meditation on “varieties of power” is explicit about the correlation perceived to exist between personal and group “destruction,” though the latter is said here to be the more immediate danger in our “age of sophistication.” My contention is that the war metaphor, as deployed in a novel like *The Rainbirds* which is ostensibly concerned with the private fate of individual characters, serves precisely to underline this connection. It is, of course, customary for Frame to invoke domestic images, like the “terrible hoover at the top of the stairs” in *The Edge of the Alphabet*,<sup>29</sup> or the erasing power of ordinary detergent in *Living in the Maniototo*,<sup>30</sup> to point to the felt ubiquity of something akin to “a world-cleaning, man-

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<sup>29</sup> Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> In the much-discussed episode of the “Blue Fury”; see Frame, *Living in the Maniototo*, 37–40.

cleaning, race-cleaning process.” Within the terms of this analogy, the condition of being “buried alive” similarly acquires a more than personal relevance, in a way that intimates imaginative solidarity with – or towards the remembering of – categories of people victimized wholesale by history. Thus “the fear of being pronounced dead” also finds some justification in the light of a conception of deprived reality which is the direct legacy of an oppressive line of history.

It is worth noting that *The Rainbirds* makes clear the political nature of Frame’s metaphysic – of her view of the world as essentially partial – in a way which recalls Wilson Harris’s insight that the “cornerstone of realism is ‘deterrence’.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Frame’s work is political because it circumscribes the extent of the loss induced by the embrace of a limiting perspective: “Many people are involved. People is politics” (187). Also, while her realist aesthetic can be seen to enact this partiality, it can be argued that violence is encoded into the text for yet another reason. As an aspect of his new lucidity, Godfrey becomes fluent in an alternative language characterized by a juggled spelling which he calls “the orthography of the dead” (152). In a sense, this can be regarded as an improvement on the ordinary “topsy-turvy language of lies” (145), for it turns out that the world “reads more truthfully” (161) in the new spelling; but Godfrey himself nonetheless considers that his new literacy also makes him, by virtue of a clever anagram, a “let-irate” man (160). This suggests that the release of anger or violence potentially attends the passage from the known world to some intuited beyond, as is also the case with the disastrous irruption of hieroglyph at the end of *A State of Siege*, or when the destruction of human language is staged through the outbreak of “midnight rain” in *The Carpathians*. In the last analysis, the paradox is that, when she argues for the demise of an inherently violent world order, Frame necessarily calls upon further violence which may never reach a climax in her work, but which is nevertheless implicit in her more daring formal experiments – so that she ultimately withdraws from this extreme apprehension.

In an essay entitled “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” Jacques Derrida observes that the politics of deterrence relies by definition on strategies of dissuasion – which is, of course, itself a negative form of persuasion – to

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<sup>31</sup> Harris, “On the Beach,” 335.

the effect that a particular world order should be favoured over others.<sup>32</sup> This insight is relevant to Frame's work, particularly to *The Rainbirds*, in which Godfrey feels the "pressure" of a similar "persuasive force":

He felt the pressure of the daily routine, its invitation to oblivion; the changing seasons, the unchanging sun were allies in this persuasive force. Men, women, children too brought their persuasion that "all was well"; how hard it became to resist the pressure! (199)

It is typical of Frame's dialectical stance that she exposes this sort of persuasion, along with the concurrent wish to underwrite the inevitable, while remaining in awe of the falsified image of the world that might act as a corrective. Thus Godfrey sets his mind's eye on a remote abstract horizon, in a way that contrasts with New Zealand's "national pastime of view-gazing" (103), but with a good deal of resistance and longing for the relinquished concreteness of the scenery. His tentativeness appears to be justified by an atavistic fear of violence, as he acknowledges when speaking of the inclusive bothness of his preoccupations: "I'm talking about destruction, about the lie and the truth..." (183).

A similar dialectical move is encoded in the aesthetic of *The Rainbirds*, which includes a distancing parody of itself through the reference to the story of Joe Treacher, a distinguished "journalist who had survived entombment" (211), since he and his fellow American tourists were disinterred from their bus, which had been engulfed in a landslide in Central Europe. Beyond the affinity which links Godfrey and Joe in a common sensation of being risen again in the wake of catastrophe, down to the "nostalgia felt for the three days spent in the [...] tomb," it is clear that the main emphasis is placed on the formal differences between their respective stories. Indeed, Godfrey marvels at the commercial packaging of information in Joe's story, which unfolds in ten instalments and gains the journalist a promise of book publication, film rights, and "marriage to the daughter of a paperclip millionaire" (212). There is actually a sense in which Joe's narrative effectively displaces Godfrey's, for its release and success lead to the termination of negotiations with the overseas news agency that had been interested in writing up the strange happening in

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," in *Psyché: Invention de l'Autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987): 372.

New Zealand – under the auspices of a ghost-writer (see p. 205). Frame, of course, cannot resist the fun of pitting the life-story of a revenant like Godfrey against the production of a ghost-writer; but again, over and beyond the amusing association, the point is that a difference exists between the tautological conformities of commercial fiction and the more exploratory speculations that unravel within the narrative of *The Rainbirds* itself.

This is in keeping with my view that Frame's incongruous realism paradoxically accommodates a sense of intuited depths quite irreducible to the usual conventions governing the representation of surface realities. This is further confirmed, in *The Rainbirds*, in the allusion to television as another such ambivalent mode of communication. At first sight, the local television station, whose manager shows interest in the "topicality" of Godfrey's experience and requests an interview (200), panders to the same pre-packed curiosities as trash literature and thus reinforces the centrality of what the author elsewhere calls the "supermarket recognitions"<sup>33</sup> which feed into the cultural consensus. Yet Frame is bent on complicating the picture by presenting the apparently objective genre of the documentary programme as offering more than a mimetic snapshot of the natural world. This is evident from the outset, since Godfrey's descent into his comatose sleep is described in terms of an unexpected passage into the Wildlife Programme: "The giraffes grazed in his eyes, crossing the screen" (39). Then, when he emerges from his catatonic state, he retains the feeling of having dreamt inside the television: "On Safari" (43). Later in the course of the novel, his continuing capacity for subterranean consciousness will keep on being explored through the idiom of the animal documentary, and Godfrey Rainbird's very name carries the suggestion of an affinity with "those birds [...] seen on the Wildlife" programmes, which "nest and live on the backs of animals that, submerging suddenly, send them rising clear and shrill from the dark death-filled pools" (205). Some provision is made, then, even within the most objective of representational protocols, for unusual recesses in space and experience, so that Beatrice, who constitutes a landmark of perceptual convention in the novel, finally dismisses these documentaries as implausible: "How unreal-

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<sup>33</sup> Janet Frame, "Departures and Returns," in *Writers in East-West Encounter*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982): 87.



istic the television programs seemed when she switched on, hoping for comfort” (207).

It is not unusual for Frame’s fiction to contain a number of more or less distorted images of itself within the text, which range from the comforting to the discomfiting in terms of their relation to the reader’s expectations. Frame’s intention is in part to create a textual hierarchy where truly imaginative fiction reigns supreme over debased forms of writing figured under the guise of journalism. However, as suggested by her comments on the documentary genre in *The Rainbirds*, these various forms of discourse also complement each other within a collaborative design that works dialectically. In this scheme, the more rudimentary modes of representation (a strict realism) have the merit of tracing out ontological limits which the more imaginative fiction will then push against or explore. Frame’s “accessible realist and absorbing fictional world”<sup>34</sup> is therefore functional, since her aim is to probe these limits and to pass them by, *through*, and away from fixed habits of perception. Realist (journalistic) fiction, then, indicates an outline of loss which creative work attempts to penetrate. Because both forms are included in Frame’s books, they testify to a mutuality between absence and presence, or between seeing and non-seeing, which becomes apparent as a game of distorting mirrors deployed between distinct levels of representation. In *The Rainbirds*, this sense of correspondence possibly explains the conundrum of Godfrey’s final recovery from the pall of death, which is seemingly achieved at the price of Beatrice’s suicide: indeed, as if absence and presence were mysteriously – and painfully – equivalent. Perhaps we may see the death of Beatrice as consistent with the need to move through an awareness of catastrophe as undergirding mimetic reality if another vision is to be attained.

Besides, the novel’s epilogue corroborates the suggestion that realistic fallacies can be accommodated within a larger technology of representation which capitalizes on the former’s shortcomings. Here the narrative comes to a proleptic close upon the revelation that, many years later, the story of the Rainbirds remains available through “press cuttings” and a “brochure put out by the Tourist Office” which relies on fiddled facts:

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<sup>34</sup> Jane Stafford & Mark Williams, “Janet Frame’s Peopled Pastures,” *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings* 4.2 (2004): 29.

The brief biography includes a mixture of fact and fantasy about the life and death of the Rainbirds and you may not know which story to believe but it does not matter does it? (247)

Thus the novel's narrating voice acknowledges the collaborative work realized within a scheme of fiction which combines truth-telling and invention, while at the same time creating a *mise-en-abyme*, suggesting that this conjunction is relevant to *The Rainbirds* itself. But the statement by the narrator is potentially double-edged. The point is possibly that no art of total capture exists, so that sheer originality via an escape from formula is impossible, a condition which the book humbly shares with inferior avatars of literature – down to the tourist leaflet mentioned in the last chapter. But the suggestion may also be that, once a hiatus has been planted in the oppressive code of naturalism, there is no predicting the aesthetic transformations that will follow in unending waves of creativity.

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