Janet Frame, born on 28 August 1924, is New Zealand's most celebrated and least public writer. She is the author of eleven novels, four collections of stories, a volume of poetry and a children's book. Her early life, spent in small South Island towns in New Zealand, was marked by a series of traumatic family tragedies such as the discovery that her brother was suffering from epilepsy, but above all by the sudden death by heart failure of two of her adolescent sisters. In her early adulthood Frame herself was committed to mental hospitals, where she had to stay for no less than eight years on a diagnosis of schizophrenia later proved incorrect. After her discharge from hospital she took to writing, encouraged by her mentor Frank Sargeson (at the time New Zealand's leading short-story writer), as an attempt to find a safer, personal foothold in a world otherwise experienced as largely hostile. When success came, as it did after a fashion even though Frame was never a best-selling novelist, it failed to make any difference to her particular social stance, characterized by diffidence and withdrawal from the fray. This legendary reticence to ordinary interaction was going to lay the foundation for the myth surrounding her personality, one that would never be entirely dispelled despite the few publications trying to do so, including Michael King's remarkable authorized biography *Wrestling with the Angel* (2000).

It is possibly ironic, in view of her literary importance, that the general public, especially outside the English-speaking world, should be familiar with Frame mostly through *An Angel at My Table*, Jane Campion's film adaptation of the author's three-volume autobiography (1982-85). The motion picture is as faithful to its literary original as this sort of venture can probably claim to be, but it remains an open question to what extent Frame's own text ever endeavoured to provide an exact rendition of the writer's life-story. During her stay in hospital Janet was administered some two hundred doses of EST (electric shock treatment), as part of the benighted approach to psychic therapy prevailing in New Zealand after the War. She would later comment that each of these was equivalent in fright to a sentence of execution. Judging from the body of work subsequently produced, it is clear enough that her intellectual faculties were altogether unimpaired by this treatment, but on her own admission her memory may have been affected so that its deficiencies had to be remedied through the work of the imagination. As one critic pointed out, "myth-making is an imaginative process […] central to Frame's writing of herself" – a perception vindicated by the opening of the autobiography itself, which starts with these words: "From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth" (*To the Is-Land*, p. 7). All of Frame's writing can be said to be gesturing towards this Third Place of myth, especially so when it presents itself as openly fictional so that its grounding in fact is even more tenuous than is the case in the autobiography – where things are anyway already ambivalent, "truthfully described and transformed" (*The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 153).

In other words the relevance of Frame's biography to her imaginative writing is both incontestable and a matter for insoluble speculation. One should certainly beware of any explanatory short-cut, such as the tendency to account for the author's eccentric prose style by way of allusion to her medical record; or even the reference to her early fiction, particularly *Owls Do Cry* (1957) and *Faces in the Water* (1961), as simply

autobiographical. Mark Williams has shown that the latter, which is sometimes considered as a mere case study or as a straightforward documentary about life in a mental hospital, can also be seen as a sophisticated literary construct, structured as it is around the "pattern of descent, discovery and return" which is central in such archetypal works as Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (*Leaving the Highway*, p. 37). Discovery here has to do less with an interest in the paraphernalia of madness itself than with the pursuit of a form of heightened awareness made possible by madness and characterized by a state of proximity with death – an acute sensitivity to "an acceleration of change and decay" (*Faces in the Water*, p. 128) even in the midst of everyday existence. Thus, no matter how much she may wish to disqualify the "romantic popular idea of the insane as a person whose speech appeals as immediately poetic" (p. 112), Frame does poeticise madness to the extent that she turns it into a vessel of discovery uniquely able to probe dimensions of experience usually disowned by those "normal" individuals who prefer to dwell in a death-free zone. Similarly, in *Owls Do Cry*, what distinguishes Daphne from her fellow human beings is her unwillingness to let go of the memory of her dead sister Francie. Inasmuch as the italicised passages of poetic prose scattered in this novel can be ascribed to Daphne, who is mutely intoning them from the "dead room" of the lunatic asylum, Frame makes it clear that the heuristic experience of madness further includes a search for the radical expressivities of a language experienced as entirely creative.

Admirers of Janet Frame usually agree that she is one of the greatest stylists ever to have enriched the English language; so that it is tempting to consider her verbal pyrotechnics as an attempt to approximate, in her writing, her own conception of this renewed language. Frame's idiosyncratic writing style can then be seen to oppose the ordeal of collective confinement in what she calls "the adjectival temple, the street of slogan, the city of distorted meaning" (*Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 119.). On the other hand it is also apparent that, most of the time, her linguistic utopianism is approached thematically rather than stylistically, because she refuses, even as she hankers after a post-symbolic level of representation, to drift into the hieroglyphic. Her thematic circumscription of linguistic supplement thus paradoxically takes the form of a concern with muteness, which spans her entire *oeuvre*. The silent Daphne in *Owls Do Cry* thus finds a counterpart in Decima who, in *The Carpathians* (1988), remains enigmatic and unknown because she does not speak, so that she stands for the "decimation" affecting unverbalised experience in the collective consciousness. The point is again that conformism of formulation brings about a straitjacketing of experience, and therefore a loss of knowledge, susceptible of redemption only through the search for the apt words. An equation is thus established between the Framean text and the poles of muteness which it encapsulates. This is possibly clearest in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963), possibly the most baffling of Frame's novels. The book comes across as the stream of consciousness of a split-personality character called Vera, who turns out in the last chapter to be an inmate in a mental hospital whom her doctor wants to nurse back into speech. The garbled sound which finally issues from her lips, "Ug-g-Ug. Ohhh Ohh g. Ugg" (p. 252), and which is hailed as the "new language" of humanity (p. 251), will only strike as regressive those readers who fail to recognize its apposition to the articulate narrative that precedes. Frame thus appears to

conceive her novelist's role as that of translating the ineffable into articulate language, as a way of bringing back into the world otherwise unknown dimensions of experience.

This emphasis on the heuristic in Frame can be seen to complement the critical view of her work as essentially satirical and static. For a long time a majority of commentators have foregrounded the contention that her investment in the positive value of the imagination served above all as an indictment of the emotional and intellectual limitations of her fellow New Zealanders – as if her main concern were to castigate her society for the ostracism which it brought to bear on non-conforming individuals. It is true that Frame's gentle humour is often pressed into service as part of a satirical project, perceptible for example at the beginning of *The Rainbirds* (1968) when the protagonist, a young Englishman, is considered eligible for assisted emigration to New Zealand on account of his being "not a convicted criminal, not suffering from physical or mental illness, politically placid, beardless" (*The Rainbirds*, p. 3). However, ironically enough, this picture of reassuring normality is presently shattered when this same character is involved in a car accident, declared dead by the medical profession, and suddenly resurrected after he awakes from his comatose condition. It then becomes clear that Frame's main objective, over and beyond any satirical scheme, is the more daring one of examining the surplus of awareness granted to somebody who has returned from the dead. Disconcerting as this may seem, death again emerges here as another of the metaphors that can be enlisted for the project of exploring the alternative ontologies which characteristically exercise Frame's imagination.

The author's impatience with set limitations, like her corresponding preoccupation with inaccessible states of being, finds further expression in her predilection for ambivalent artist-figures, whose visionary capacities represent at best a mixed blessing. Quite apart from the mute children (from Daphne to Decima) – whose insights must be translated into words by somebody else – Frame's universe is peopled by a multitude of characters occupying various positions on the Richter scale of creativity. Thus Toby, in a relatively early novel like *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), is consumed by the ambition to write a book entitled *The Lost Tribe* even though he is hardly literate. The narrator makes it clear that, as even the reader will have recognized, Toby will never realize his artistic dream; and yet his fits of epilepsy, which force his "questive head" (*The Edge of the Alphabet*, p. 189) to reach for the other side of himself as a shadowy veil falls on his conscious mind, somehow vindicate his creative velleities. Another such "pedantic dreamer" (*Edge*, p. 146) is Malfred, the protagonist of *A State of Siege* (1966) and an amateur landscape painter. At fifty-three she is going through an existential and aesthetic crisis in the course of which she feels tempted to relinquish her finicky dedication to a strict accuracy of representation, because it is enclosed in the "three-mile-limit set by law, not by vision" (*A State of Siege*, p. 50). Her struggle with artistic conventions leads her to embrace what she calls her New View, a geometric abstract manner which should do justice to her perception that "even the most trivial fact, when examined, [is] found to carry an unidentifiable growth of darkness not recorded in any physiognomy of knowing" (p. 67). Typically, though, this impulse to move beyond factual vision falters in the course of the narrative, for Malfred eventually reverts to realism as an attempt to consolidate

her sense of identity in the face of her own intuited annihilation. In similar vein Alwyn, the eponymous character in *The Adaptable Man* (1965), ultimately desists from his youthful ambitions as "budding novelist" (p. 6) in favour of a form of journalistic writing ironically presented as the new art of the contemporary age. By contributing some "letters from faraway places" to various newspapers, he is found to pander to the public's growing demand for a fake exoticism commercialised as the new human rage and "the new tranquillizing drug" (p. 250) – one that alleviates the threat of otherness and therefore authorizes a smug cultural and ontological status quo.

Frame thus takes a deliberate distance from what she calls the "mightily capitalled abstractions" (*An Angel at my Table*, p. 16) of the railway-station novel, such as Life and Death, Art, but also Love, substituting for these her own personal conceptions. In particular, her universe is indeed a remarkably loveless one, in the specific sense that the idealizations of romance are systematically debunked in her work. This is already manifest in *Owls Do Cry* where flirtation and the prospect of marriage are associated with the material items filling the average wedding-box – as opposed to the "true treasure" hoarded by the children. In *The Edge of the Alphabet* a character like Zoe, a schoolteacher from the Midlands, has so thoroughly integrated "the alphabet of love" (p. 117) that she takes "the conventional course of action" (p. 238) for nursing a broken heart: ie, a trip to the Antipodes. Even this apparently desperate measure is still permeated by the usual fairy-tale expectations, until she receives from a drunk seaman a completely meaningless first kiss which forces upon her the unromantic truth: "In all my years in the Midlands no one kissed me. I am no Sleeping Beauty. Princes do not struggle through forests of thorns to reach me where I lie rose-red snow-white in my glass coffin" (p. 237). This disillusioned approach to love continues through a novel like *Intensive Care* (1970), which makes it clear that it is quite possible to "love too much, like bombing" (p. 234), and where all human passion is seen to culminate in a shedding of blood.

Once again, though, this uncompromising representation of human intercourse should not be understood as a biographical trait that necessarily reflects upon the life of Janet Frame herself; instead, it should be considered as a component of her attempt to delineate an alternative conception of the human person. Love in its cheaper dimensions is dismissed for being a selfish feeling which falls short of a more generous impulse of accession to an "area of universal belonging" (*A State of Siege*, p. 177), where all the barriers of identity would be lifted. In this connection, it is significant that traditional love in Frame should be locked in a sense of buttressed selfhood. One thinks, for example, of Alwyn who, in *The Adaptable Man*, admires his girlfriend Jenny for the good-looking firmness of her body's edges: these are "geometrically definite, like a clear line upon a blank page" (p. 63), so that when gazing at her he can feel secure in the sealed knowledge of his own identity – since he is one to complain that, more often than not, "the inconvenient fact about people is that their minds and feelings have no boundaries. Skin [is] not a very efficient hedge" (p. 72).

By contrast, Frame's more adventurous characters aspire for a form of communal being felt to transcend personal distinctions and singularities. This brand of selfless loving is illustrated in *Intensive Care*, where Milly's passion for Sandy emerges as a positive counterpart for the various instances of destructive passion

contained in the book. Milly is another of Frame's mentally retarded heroes who live "in the country of the simple-minded whose shores are washed and littered with the flotsam and jetsam of the Seas of Complexity" (pp. 248–49). Clearly, her backwardness goes hand in hand with a special kind of imaginativeness, in the context of which she gives life to Sandy who only exists as a figment of her fantasy and a character in her boldest daydreams. Significantly, she imagines Sandy in the guise of an artificially reconstructed man, created by his scientist progenitors from human *bits* collected on the battlefields of the world. This imaginary character therefore aims to redeem fragmentariness and to embody the totality of what is humanly lost as an effect of history's depredations. In her reverie Milly expects him to propose to her on her twenty-sixth birthday, which will coincide with the very day when, in Frame's anti-utopia, she herself must be eliminated, along with other defective people, as part of a eugenic attempt to clean up the human race. The prospect of a union between them, two of society's arch-rejects, thus comes to epitomize the consummation of callous occultation. Between the two of them they stand for the sacrifice of "a vast diseased unproductive area" (p. 251) of the collective consciousness, which is commonly thought worthy of amputation but which Frame wishes to reclaim through her special art of memory.

This reclamation of eclipsed humanity depends upon a praxis of heightened creativity, conceived as distinct from and superior to a mode of mimetic representation (journalism) that would endorse sacrifice and reinforce prejudice. This discriminating approach to fiction yields the key to one of the work's most enigmatic aspects, the treatment of Botti Julio in *The Adaptable Man*. This apparently minor character is a Spanish-speaking migrant from Andorra who travels to East Suffolk in search of a job, and who is mindlessly murdered in a village lane upon the very night of his arrival in England. Some critics have seen in this element of the plot – murder in the country – an indication that Frame was seeking a compromise with the conventions of the detective novel. However, unaccountably, she discloses the killer's name almost immediately, thus giving up the enticements of suspense in favour of a reflection upon the strictures of the contemporary world. Indeed the idea is that Alwyn, the "adaptable man" of the title, disposed of El Botti simply to prove his at-homeness in an age, the twentieth century, in which "genocide is the basis of survival" (*The Adaptable Man*, p. 149). The further implication is that any trace of the murder will be erased in those fashionable forms of writing which only reflect the dominant preoccupations of the age, thus consolidating its main biases. It is therefore significant that the novel's narrator, a certain Unity Foreman, is a city journalist whose report on life in the country fails to acknowledge the fate of Botti Julio. By making her the novel's narrator Frame points up the extent to which her own fiction, inasmuch as it flirts with the conventions of realism, becomes complicit with a rigid world-view that privileges sameness and is "stitched up so tightly that not a thought could get in of the Andorran night" (p. 18). On the other hand, the paradox is that by drawing attention to its own epistemological limits, as it were from the inside, the novel implicitly gestures towards a larger perspective. The narrating voice telling us that "Botti Julio persists" (p. 149), indeed like "a ghost in our story" (p. 20), cannot then entirely belong to the journalist, so that as the novel proceeds a gap opens up between the staid writing in which Unity indulges and another form of imagination, as practised by Frame herself, which

appears to be conversant with impersonations of otherness surreptitiously included in the text of *The Adaptable Man*.

Clearly, Frame's willingness to ponder the implications of novelistic form is coterminous with her interest in the complexities of metafiction. As we have seen, this is apparent in her preoccupation with artist-figures whose creativity varies in scope; and it is likely that her array of creative registers makes sense above all in terms of an implicit comparison with the model represented by her own art. A peculiar brand of self-dramatization therefore pervades the work ever since the inclusion, in *The Edge of the Alphabet*, of a character like Thora Pattern whose surname ironically echoes Frame's own. In this novel the stress is laid on Thora's determination to recuperate the experience of her own characters (especially Toby and Zoe), for recycling into some ulterior narrative authored by herself. By this token the stuff of fiction is seen to gesture beyond its own limits – it is presented as both insufficient and open to completion through the intervention of a self-conscious artist like Thora. This sets the pattern for much of Frame's writing to come, where the strategy is consistently to stage both the cancellation of experience inherent in daily living and the compensatory retrieval implicit in acts of recreation. This predilection for *bothness* – for a duality of approach in the context of which all stricture is always provisional – accounts for the author's move, in her later fiction, towards a new phase of experimentation in which she will exploit to the full the potentialities of reflexiveness and *mise en abyme*.

Thora Pattern then returns, in Frame's later work, in the guise of Turnlung, a poet from New Zealand who turns out to be the main creative agency in *Daughter Buffalo* (1972); of Mavis Furness, who becomes a character of her own fiction in *Living in the Maniototo* (1979); or of John Henry, a secondary character in *The Carpathians* (1988) who retrospectively emerges as a main imaginative force who has had a hand in the writing of the book itself. However cliché this may all seem, it is worth pointing out that Frame's adoption of apparently fashionable Borgesian or postmodernist techniques is in fact a response to the requirements of her own original poetics of remembrance. She thus advertises the fictionality of her own work less in order to relativise her assumptions or to undermine her will-to-truth than because she wants to emphasize the recuperative capacities of fiction as she conceives it. In this context, each of her artist characters is endowed with special gifts of attention meant to oppose the forces of attrition and oblivion. This is clearly why, in *Living in the Maniototo*, Mavis must witness the wiping clean of a character called Tommy who is erased by the "Blue Fury" (*Living in the Maniototo*, p. 38), a cleansing tornado released from a bottle of household detergent. Despite the familiarity of this sort of incident, since the Blue Fury is only one among many "disintegrators and demolishers" (p. 38) advertised on television, Mavis cannot believe her eyes: "Things like that don't happen" (p. 38). A similar sense of estrangement was registered by the critics, who detected in this episode an indication that Frame was moving towards a species of magic realism that made "the bizarre novels of Thomas Pynchon seem mundane by comparison" (Williams, *Leaving the Highway*, p. 25). Yet there is such an intensity of concentration on the reality of self-extinction in Frame's work, to the exclusion of other matters, that things like this *do* happen, and the instant banishment of Tommy only epitomizes the slow process of attrition by virtue of which we are all consumed, as it were from within, by our own lives. There is then a continuity of

significance from this sort of sudden erasure to the more gradual erosion which affects the remainder of Frame's characters. Seen in this light, what may seem like an inconsequential episode from *Living in the Maniototo* in fact acquires a form of symbolic centrality, so that, not surprisingly, it will also receive the spotlight of the fictional novelist's redemptive attention. The surreal disappearance of Tommy can be understood in these terms: ie, as a reminder that "he still exists" (p. 39) – indeed, no less so than Botti Julio in *The Adaptable Man* – while awaiting his re-creation as a character in the narrative that Mavis will produce.

Other magnets for the same investigative spirit are the lycanthropic twins seen in hospital, whom Mavis cannot bring herself to forget; or her own friend Brian, who died of a heart attack even as she was setting out to write. In this latter case, the private nature of her bereavement serves to remind the aspiring novelist that there is a stake in creation, though obviously its relevance also bypasses her own personal sphere. As she comes to realize, writing is equally relevant for all "those creatures and worlds that we know only in sleep and dream and mythology – of yesterday and of today" (p. 39), so that, beyond the level of individual excavation, there are entire cultures which can also be "brought by force to mind" (p. 73). In other words Frame's concern with eclipsed presence potentially extends into an anthropological probing of submerged strata of civilisation – including that of the Maori in New Zealand. This aspect of her work, which makes Frame eligible for inclusion into the canon of post-colonial literature, is probably most explicit in *The Carpathians*, her latest novel to date.

In this book, the protagonist is an American millionaire called Mattina who travels around New Zealand with a view to collecting factual data which she intends to hand over to her husband, a novelist who has been struggling with writer's block for many years. In this context, it is significant that a whole chapter of *The Carpathians* recounts Mattina's day visit "among the Maori families" who took up residence in the heart of the country as an attempt to resurrect ancestral customs and a communal way of life. It is generaly believed by the settlers that the Maori harbour a more "authentic" version of the land's memory, "which the latecomers, the other immigrants, were only now learning to seek and share" (*The Carpathians*, p. 81). However, the irony of the matter is that the natives themselves are involved in a search for information about their own culture, in the context of which they tend to depend on the protocol of scientific knowledge popularized in TV documentary programmes about wildlife in New Zealand. Thus, one of them complains to Mattina that her own people do not have "multicoloured plumage" (p. 88), like the birds studied in such programmes, which get more attention, and are therefore better known, than "rare species" (p. 105) of human beings. Clearly, the point is in part that the Maori share with Decima the plight of occupying a position which "nobody knows" (p. 106); but it is also that, because the documentary mode is structually unable to provide the expected reinvention of memory, only the passage to fiction can hold a promise of cultural recovery. By this token, the post-colonial condition, indeed like much else in Frame's fiction, emerges as an infinitely deferred, utopian possibility, which should never be taken for granted in any contemporary situation.

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