Forbidding Bodies: Avatars of the Physical in the Work of Janet Frame

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Abstract : The human body is hardly presented as a site of desire in the work of Janet Frame, who sees it first of all as an index of decrepitude and destruction and as a reminder of mortality. In the context of the social realist criticism often brought to bear on the novels, Frame's disintegrating body has also been metaphorized as indicative of her obsession with the decay of a culture lacking the resources to regenerate itself. However, it can be argued that a more positive (utopian) drive operates within the work, so that the fading body derives an unexpected significance by virtue of its being in touch with eclipsed dimensions clamouring for ontological and epistemological reclamation.

It has become customary for Frame's critics to assert that she is a deeply original writer whose world-view is so peculiar that it brings with it "an intellectual and emotional discomposure" (Platz 204), a decentring of our most entrenched preconceptions about life, of such magnitude that the reader may at times have to "free himself from textual control in order to defend and preserve his identity" (205). I would submit that the writer's idiosyncracy of approach extends to her representation of the human body, where we should not expect to recognize any of the *topoi* traditionally associated with this theme. It is in keeping with Frame's preference for the "unfamiliar recognitions" of imaginative literature over and above what she calls the "supermarket recognitions" (1982, 87) of popular fiction, that she leaves aside the groovy paths of seduction and destruction: love and physical violence. But this is not to say that these things do not return through the back door, as it were, in view of the unobtrusive part they play in the strange economy of the work. In a sense, Frame's books may appear to be curiously puritanical in that hers is a fictional universe where the physical presence of the human body is systematically repressed, while the lingering trace of this suppression is nonetheless registered. In its more self-conscious moments, the Framean text even advertises its complicity in this process of bodily obliteration. This becomes conspicuous in *Living in the Maniototo* (1979), for example, where a character called Tommy is magically erased through the action of a powerful detergent. As he unscrews the bottle:

> There was a flash of light, a smell of laundry and the penetrating fumes of a powerful cleanser, then a neutral nothing-smell, not even the usual substituted forest glade or field of lavender or carnation, and all that remained of Tommy were two faded footprints on the floor. (38)

This is not really a murder, nor an accident, nor even a natural death at all, which makes Tommy's disappearance interestingly prototypical — a kind of naked, abstract, surgical removal. The point is perhaps that Frame does not wish to allow herself or the reader to be distracted by the usual trappings of death or by the private emotional associations that inevitably accompany our experience of disease or decease. In *Living in the Maniototo*, the two characters who witness the wiping clean of Tommy's body and mind express their natural disbelief by saying that: "Things like that don't happen" (38). Their sense of shock allows us to measure the distance covered in the passage from reality to fiction: in Frame's work there is such an intense absolute concentration on the reality of self-extinction to the exclusion of other matters that things like that *do* happen and bodies are perhaps only mentioned inasmuch as they also disappear.

The instant banishment of Tommy thus takes on an emblematic value as an epitome of experience or as a radical condensation of 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 majority 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, which is underlined by Frame's insistent punning on the ambivalence of "use" — especially in her later fiction. What makes a fictional character useful is the extent to which s/he happens to be used up and consequently exhausted by the wear and tear of ordinary living. Frame is particularly responsive to the paradox that, with the passage of time, we are reduced in our bodies even as we increase our store of knowledge, so that the disfigurement of old age is proportionate to our proximity to what she calls in *A State of Siege* (1966), "the beautiful unguessed shape of experience" (93). This ambivalence is further explored in *Daughter Buffalo* (1972) where an old codger called Turnlung seems so

diminished — there remains "so little to use" in him — that by contrast "an extremity of use" (151) must be devised to guarantee that his extensive experience will go on record.

Arguably, Frame's concern with self-consuming experience is why she is so interested in the complexities of metafiction: not necessarily because she strives to be fashionably postmodern as has sometimes been suggested (see, for instance, Stead; Panny; Henke), but rather because she cannot afford to work without a net. Lest all her fictional explorations should culminate in the kind of nothingness to which Tommy has been relegated it is necessary for Frame to create multi-layered fictions in which the characters' discoveries echo each other at various levels of conception. Thus in *Daughter Buffalo* it may not matter so much that Turnlung should be senile and confused as long as his confusion can be probed by another character — Talbot Edelman — who then incorporates it into his own narrative. The punning exploitation of the ambiguities of "use" then ramifies into an ironic mobilization of terms like "confusion," "perusal," or even "refuse." Indeed no aspect of human experience should ever be discarded, so the typical Framean artist emerges as a kind of professional beachcomber, or alternatively an archaeologist specializing in the art of unearthing and recycling the vestiges of human history.

By this token, the more depleted it seems, the more the character's body is susceptible of working for the fictionalised author like a resonant cavity or an empty sea-shell, echoing with the sound of past experience. Talbot Edelman says in *Daughter Buffalo*:

> I saw myself using Turnlung as shells are used to re-create echoes of distant time and place, recent love and sadness, departures, vacancies, all heard and relived through the sound and rhythm of the washing in and out of tides of blood. He would become a personal echo of greetings, goodbyes, and though all in him would appear to be lost, nothing would be lost; his universal echo would be heard in cathedrals — he would *become* a cathedral, a mountaintop, a crossroad and cross of bone; he would be used completely. (150)

The elegiac lyricism of this passage should alert us to the fact that there is a real stake in the narrator's assertion that Turnlung's "loss would be his profit" (150). This should also disqualify dismissive assessments of Frame as a morbid author who is simply in thrall to an obsession with death. Disconcerting as this may seem, the point is apparently that Turnlung's pioneering experience of death must be mined for what it will reveal in terms of "unguessed" discoveries which can be ascribed a positive heuristic value. The extremes of solitude and solidarity are then seen to meet in this conception of vacant being. This paradox is notably indicated through the image of the cathedral, a hollow space which resonates with the chanting of communities. While the consecrated burial ground normally included in the cathedral precincts makes it an appropriate funereal metaphor, at the same time the complex architecture of the building makes it an image of ultimate constructedness. A similar paradox can be perceived in the evocation of the "mountaintop" which is associated with far-sightedness, indeed curiously so if death is seen to entail the dissolution of the consciousness. The "cross of bone" with its hint of the skeleton thus possibly suggests the sacrifice of the individual consciousness in the moment of accession to a form of collective being. In this sense, the experience of death would indeed appear as a "crossroads" rather than a dead-end.

The dissolving bodies which engage Frame's imagination throughout her oeuvre thus emerge as an avenue of inward exploration which unexpectedly leads to a landscape of universal proportions. This being said, the dying passage from the "personal" to the "universal echo" is not always described in a tone of celebration, and the existential anguish attending the frittering away of the consciousness is also notable. Most of Frame's novels can be read as studies in embattled identity in which an individual character is given intuitions of totality that s/he usually resists, and usually in vain. This sense of wholeness is indeed profoundly ambivalent, a source of nostalgia and unspeakable terror experienced either simultaneously or in alternation. All of Frame's universe is built on this duality and her gift for satire also depends on it, since her more insightful characters are usually those who perceive the crippling limitations of selfhood, while her more prejudiced characters, by contrast, tend to insist much more on the importance of maintaining their mental and physical integrity. But the same duality can also inform one and the same figure as is the case with Frame's long lineage of frustrated artists who tend to shrink from their own perceptions of universality.

Clearly, the theme of the body is relevant to Frame's concern with the imponderables of identity. Thus the body is often perceived as a too-easily-jumpable barrier, the skin as a "not [. . .] very efficient hedge" (1994, 72) between people. For example, in *The Adaptable Man* (1965) it is not surprising that Alwyn Maude, the character who is presented as the epitome of conformity, should choose his girlfriend for the good-looking firmness of her body's boundaries because she seems "so definite, geometrically definite, like a clear line upon a blank page" (63). This sharp definition is found preferable to the flabbiness of the flesh which makes one vulnerable to invasion by others, for "people *do invade*" (72). A similar perception of the porousness of people is

experienced by Edward Glace in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963), when he is travelling by bus and decides that "three to a seat [is] a dangerous practice" because some passengers may wish to claim more than their allotted space and certain "bodies might overflow the forbidden boundary and perhaps be stolen and never returned" (128). It is not unusual for these threatened individuals to seek the shelter of a self-contained existence, in the context of which it is "no small comfort," as Malfred Signal ponders in *A State of Siege*, to feel "wanted by one's own skin" (31). By contrast, the more artistic characters are endowed with such a surplus of sensitivity that, as the rumour goes about the "famous poet" in *Living in the Maniototo*, they are wearing their skin inside out, so that "it must have hurt even to have the air touch it" (55).

Part of the duality informing Frame's work thus involves an opposition between thick-skinned individuals who are determined to consolidate their identity and sensitive people whose raw skin works as a soft membrane authorizing a form of interchange with the outside world. There are, however, more ambiguous instances too, which testify to the character's hesitation at the crossroads between two different scales of being. For example, Malfred Signal in *A State of Siege* experiences such ambivalence when she sees the "wound in the ceiling" where the light fitting had been:

> It reminded her of something she had witnessed when her mother was in the hospital. There had been a woman in the next bed, and for some reason, or as it may happen in hospitals, the woman was being attended to during visiting hours. [. . .] Malfred saw with horror the woman lying with her body exposed, and on her lower right side there was a small, dark red hole with raw edges, as if something had been torn from the woman's body. At first, besides horror, Malfred felt anger and envy that the woman should have an extra, as it were, illegitimate hole in her body. What right had she? The holes of the body were so carefully counted and tended, and at death were given the last lingering attention [. . .] a triumphant, determined sealing [. . .] (71)

The final sealing of the body's orifices may well have its own usefulness as a last attempt to contain the literal overflowing brought about by putrefaction — though one suspects that the triumph can only be temporary. Malfred's duality of response here places her at the intersection between "horror," which confirms her devotion to bodily integrity, and "anger and envy" which hint instead at the desirability of intercourse between self and not-self. Interestingly, her hesitation at this stage represents in itself a chink in her armour, an unprecedented opening to others, for she is an aging spinster who always denied herself to her former lover Wilfred. Therefore her body has remained unused or, as she realizes with a sense of absurdity, "a spare part kept to replace nothing" (23). This yields the semantic possibility that the body be considered as part of a larger whole, although the characters' individualism tends to keep them exiled, often painfully so, from this intimated wholeness, which is identified in *A State of Siege* as an "area of universal belonging" (151).

Frame's remarkable reticence about including love in her thematic gamut can be explained by reference to this notion of shared being, from which love in its common human manifestations necessarily falls short. This is another aspect of her disconcerting angle upon the world: rather than considering love as a desirable emotional state, worthy of interest for its own sake, she subordinates the theme to her personal exploration of commonalities of being on a large scale. In this context, love is most often presented ironically as a clash of self-centred personalities and is therefore counterproductive in terms of the desired goal of commonality. This is why it is usually associated, as Carole Ferrier points out, "with misunderstanding, thwarted [. . .] desire, and death" (201). This is probably clearest in *Intensive Care* (1970), a novel in which Frame examines the private and public dimensions of warfare, so that similarities are discovered between the explosions of napalm and orgasm. Some of the characters are condemned here for loving "too much, like bombing" (234). The book's title can thus be seen to contain a pun: our care for others can be misdirected or misapplied, in a way that results in a brand of diminishing love. There is a strict parallel with the kind of healing that goes on in field sanatoria and in the "Recovery Units" of the world's hospitals, where nothing is recovered but more and more is lost, since the patients must agree to the removal of bits and pieces of their bodies as the only available bid for "recovery." For example, the character of Naomi Livingstone has been amputated almost into nothingness so that she must resign herself to a form of inferior existence. Part of the point is that a comparable lack of completeness used to affect her love life, as she indicates when reminiscing about her failed marriage:

> I thought, in the beginning, that each of us was carrying load upon load of personal treasure to the common pool, a kind of emotional acclimatization venture, but when I looked in the pool I saw nothing but my own face, and he saw his own face. (12-13)

The "common pool" of experience briefly evoked here finds an extension in the last section of the book in the character of Sandy Monk, a fictional and artificial figure who claims to be "the First Reconstructed Man" (258) since he was fashioned from human bits collected on the battlefield. He thus emerges as

a counterpoint of amputation, somebody who reverses the process of bodily removal and who therefore embodies the creative principle that can be pitted against the law of dividedness apparently inscribed in nature itself. In conformity he acknowledges his filiation to his creator who had a "theory that memory and forgetfulness are one," so that Sandy himself is endowed with a "mechanical memory" (247-48) likely to keep track of both what exists and what is lost.

In retrospect, one can better understand Malfred Signal in *A State of Siege* who exclaims when trespassing upon the "area of universal belonging": "I am there always. There can never be an amputation of me" (153). This interestingly complements or indeed contradicts her earlier assertion that "[her] nature is [her] own surgeon" (120). Once again, Malfred appears to be divided between self and selflessness, but her preconceptions are overturned inasmuch as self-devotion, the natural temptation to "nurse [one's] individuality" (3), is now found to be equivalent to the wholesale amputation of herself whereas the "area of universal belonging," which involves a relinquishing of singularity, nonetheless guarantees a form of permanence. Mysterious though it may seem, this ideal of wholeness is an ontological state of considerable potential, linked as it is to the prospect of survival.

The dilemma faced by the Framean character thus revolves around the question of deciding whether it is desirable to die to oneself in order to survive as something else — though this is usually a matter not of choice but of necessity. To an irreligious person like myself it is not easy to determine whether Frame's intimations of immortality can be related to any established religious orthodoxy; but it is safe to say at any rate that her pursuit of totality is spiritual in essence and is presented as the culmination of the body's self-consumption. Bodies are approached as transient dwelling-places which are connected to each other but also to a sense of an ultimate destination. It has been suggested that Frame's "bias against materialism" shows affinities with a form of Platonic idealism inasmuch as her created reality constantly gestures towards a realm that is felt to be "prior and superior to things" (Williams 47). This kind of reading which considers the body as a footnote to some sort of mystical text certainly seems more faithful to the work than the more realist approach in which "images [. . .] of the body and bodily decay" are interpreted metonymically — and exclusively — as an expression of social decadence in New Zealand or elsewhere. While there is no doubt that Frame's work includes a satirical dimension, it is important to recognize that her criticism of "the cultural body" (Mercer 54), albeit striking, remains an auxiliary endeavour inasmuch as she pursues it in the name of a reality felt to be superior. Nor is it enough to affirm that "physical collapse can be read as a metaphor of profound despair in Frame's work" (Ferrier 200), for this is to ignore the extent to which the collapsing body paves the way for a form of alternative, post-subjective materiality.

The sublunary world constructed by Frame is therefore studded with signs of its insufficient nature. In *A State of Siege* the surname of the protagonist, "Signal," can be taken as a hint that she refers and defers to an intuited further dimension. In a novel like *The Rainbirds* (1968) the incompleteness of the known world is indicated through the metaphor of land reclamation which is made apposite to the exploration of death. Also, ever since he returned from the dead (having been knocked down by a car), the protagonist Godfrey Rainbird has felt cold in his bones and cut off from things as if he were no longer fully there; yet the suicide of his wife Beatrice makes a difference in this respect and "for the first time since he woke from the dead he was conscious of warmth flowing through his body as from a secret outward reservoir" (245). Callous as this may seem, the point is apparently that there is a secret subterranean correspondence between the dead and the living, which makes the two categories interdependent. This strange idea finds an echo in *Living in the Maniototo* in the death of Lance Halleton, the debt collector. Debt collecting is another metaphysical metaphor in a novel which posits that one owes "even from before [the] very first breath" (44) for the simple fact of being alive, so that dying — giving up the ghost — is an obligation that one must pay "to nature" (Jones 187), as it were to even the account. The peak of Lance's career as a debt collector is attained when he manages to capture Yorkie Wynyard, a devilish crook so famously in debt that he is presented as a kind of emblem, "the chief professional debtor" (47). However, there is an intriguing symmetry to the episode for Wynyard is himself disguised as a debt collector, so that his arrest reflects back upon Lance himself and the cancellation of debt which is at stake includes his own. This is probably why, not unlike Godfrey in *The Rainbirds*, Lance begins to feel warm after catching the chief debtor "as if he'd spent all day and night in a bath" and he becomes "existential" (63) for a brief moment as a prelude for his sudden death. Death, then, again comes across as a moment of plenitude, a putting of two and two together when the mystical long-division sum is completed.

By way of conclusion it is worth investigating the nature of the survival which underlies the transcendent urge perceptible in Frame's work. One may well wonder if her approval of death should be taken literally, or if it simply betokens her yearning for a larger perspective than the one offered by the separating personal eye/I. It is certainly remarkable that Frame appears to be preoccupied not with the persistence of the individual soul but with a form of all-encompassing and therefore collective memory. This involves a transformation of sorts for, as Malfred remarks in *A State of Siege*, "when a person is taken from

the hazardous weather of being into the shelter of memory, he enters on the terms of memory alone, that is, as prey will be devoured in the end" (165). Moreover, redemption from forgetfulness is achieved not through the willful intervention of the individual — whether in the form of prayer or of good deeds — but through the work of the creative artist, who alone is capable of pushing back the limits of the knowable. The novelist, then, is given the responsibility of accounting for other people — a vocation often represented as a burden to carry: "the human burden of millions of years set within the so cleanly dismissed three hundred and sixty-five days, of time unrecorded" (1991, 148) lived by people unknown or unimagined. The object of the artist's imaginative attention may then be entirely secular since the challenge of infinity can be wholly contained in one's next-door neighbour.

This challenge is even heightened in the case of mentally deficient or autistic persons who cannot communicate through language: hence the artist's strong connection to mute people, such as Decima who figures forth in *The Carpathians* (1988), the category of those who were "decimated," unhoused in history through being unknown and therefore debarred from representation (Delrez 2002, 207-8, 215). This gives rise to another avatar of the physical in Frame's universe which is worth mentioning because it pervades the work from *Faces in the Water* (1961) through *Intensive Care* to *The Carpathians*. This is the figure of the aging child, a curious "double-crossing two-timer" (1970, 269) who straddles two different realities. On the one hand the stunted growth or apparent innocence of these creatures suggests that they are new, virginal, unused by their own lives; but, on the other hand this impression is belied by the wrinkles and scars on their faces which witness to an intense spiritual life going on behind an inscrutable mask. The danger is that this secret experience may be lost from the archive, which makes it all the more urgent for the artist to penetrate the mystery and complete the picture.

In the last analysis, the obliterated body from which we started also makes sense in terms of this impulse to record. Its value derives from its connection to an eclipsed dimension, which serves as a focus for the aspiring artist's attention in all of Frame's books. This was already indicated in a relatively early novel like *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), where one of the characters is suffering from a mysterious disease which causes her bones to turn to chalk: here, bodily decrepitude puts her in danger of "breaking into articulate language" (299). Physical disintegration thus emerges as a component of creativity, essential to the aesthetics of human recycling that Frame favours. In a fictional universe in which "even snowflakes leave a stain where they have fallen" (1991, 151) the obliterated body also lingers on, like a ghost in the story. In this sense Frame "rehabilitates the body" (Bazin 26), but only as a point of entry into an elusive hidden dimension. Metaphorically speaking, and perhaps also literally speaking, the wasting body materializes as a major object of retrieval in the work and ultimately as the subject of the fiction. And while this concern with the retrieval of eclipsed experience makes Frame's work open to post-colonial reclamation, my impression is that her primary impulse is not political so much as existential, philosophical, and possibly even religious.

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