

The Eye of the Storm: Vision and Survival in *A State of Siege*

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Patrick D. Evans, one of the earliest and most copious critics of Janet Frame, calls her work 'almost unrelievedly dark', to the extent that nobody in his right mind would approach her writing 'for an evening of light entertainment'.¹ Thus, with the best of intentions, Evans assists in forming the consensus prevailing about Frame's pessimism which, allied with a dose of public laziness in the face of her difficult prose, may account for the outrageous fact that her books were allowed to go out of print. Considering this, it must be credited to Frame's artistic integrity that she never bothered to tamper with her *Wellenschauung* to regain impetus on the literary marketplace. In an essay on cross-cultural influences in literature and elsewhere, she comments on the status-quo dynamics underlying the production of a best-seller:

The ordinary recognitions abound. ... If the writer is a traveller, it will be a book which gives the reader the kind of taste of the atmosphere, material and views of another country and culture which he wants to read about and which, starting in comfort, ends in comfort (danger and excitement between), which provides in dramatic before-after change in the reader's mental or emotional growth. ...

Often these mutually-valued supermarket recognitions make authors, publishers, the Inland Revenue and the readers happy, while changing little, reinforcing prejudices and differences between cultures.²

Obviously, Frame sets this practice in implicit contradistinction to her own writing. By foregrounding unfamiliar or 'imaginative recognitions'³ rather than 'ordinary' ones, she makes a politics of constantly shocking the reader into new awarenesses, and leaves little room for aesthetic complacency of the sort outlined above. This makes one ponder upon the paradoxes of pessimism. Frame's tendency to deny the reader, with her bleak endings, some hoped-for catharsis or post-tragic return to order, may derive from a trustful conception of the human person, seen as genuinely susceptible of 'mental or emotional growth'. In so far, it can be argued that the post-cataclysmic desolation which settles at the end of her novels provides a measure of the elasticity or adaptability of the human mind, capable (as she sees it) of stretching infinitely to encompass the most alien of views.

Yet, together with *Scented Gardens for the Blind* published a few years earlier, *A State of Siege* is often regarded as marking a culmination of despair in Frame's literary production. Indeed, both novels share a concern with

the conceptual limits of human language, superseded in the end by a strange unintelligible lingo easily perceived as decreative, despite the author's (flippant?) welcome of it as the new 'language of humanity'.⁴ Also, more relentlessly than any other book by Frame, *A State of Siege* focuses on a moment of unmaking, in which a self-confined personality tips over the edge of being into nothingness, in a torment of psychic suffering. It is true that Janet Frame often embarks, vertiginously, in an exploration of life's remotest boundaries, with a continuity of concern unbroken from *Owls Do Cry* to *The Carpathians*. It seems to me, however, that *A State of Siege* outshadows Frame's other books for the unflinching singularity of purpose with which it attempts to map the darkness besieging human life, just beyond the ken of the ordinary waking consciousness. While allowing for this, and without wishing to lose sight of Frame's disposition to despair, I would like to suggest that those readings which emphasize the dark side of the novel,⁵ to the exclusion of more positive aspects, may originate in a failure to empathize with the author's proposed 'imaginary recognitions'. For it requires an effort of the imagination to take Janet Frame at her word when she appears to advocate, in *Intensive Care* for instance, a dimension of memory allowing the dead to return, somewhat hauntingly, 'within the boundary of the living human state';⁶ or when she suggests, in *Faces in the Water* and *The Carpathians*, that mental hospital patients hold the key to some larger conception of human nature than the restricted normality defined by reason or common sense. In this, she explodes the tautology of self traditionally put forward by the novel in its 'best-seller' mode, and defeats the ontological premises, essentially materialistic and individualistic, taken for granted by the trained novel-reader. In *A State of Siege*, for example, Frame's approach to the death of her protagonist Malfred Signal proves to be at odds with the assumptions of both materialism and individualism, owing to some intuition that 'there may be a point reached in chaos, a climax of chaos that will emit life, like fumes of the storm; a human beginning thrust from the inhuman natural scene'.⁷ Thus, however unengaging the premises of her quest, one cannot deny Frame's profound dedication to the spirit of life, caught up though it may be in the throes of catastrophe.

Before pursuing the point at the light of a closer reading of the novel, I would like to stress the relevance to this nexus of self-dissolution. The similarities between the two books are truly remarkable. They both deal with a protagonist at the end of his/her tether, who turns an introspective eye upon the glimpsed prospect of extinction. In both cases, the process is

the body. Also, in each of these books the death of the protagonist is treated in much the same terms, involving images drawn from the natural world. Most commentators of *Pincher Martin* have noted that Martin's rock-island could be conceived as a projection of his monolithic will to survive;⁸ alternatively the surrounding sea can be read as a symbol of chaos, or whatever formless expanse awaits the self once united the bonds of being. Martin's survival is then depicted in terms of a desperate, arch-backed resistance to the tidal attacks of the sea:

The Safety Rock would become a pock in a whirlpool of water that spun itself into foam and chewed like a mouth. The whole top of the wave for a hundred yards would move forward and fall into acres of flustering uproar that was launched like an army at the rock.⁹

In this instance, there is no resisting the sea's all-devouring appetite for destruction; relentlessly, therefore, Martin is digested and released into the flux, in a process that is 'timeless and without mercy' (p. 201), and which allows of neither redemption for Martin's hubris, nor reconciliation with the inevitability of his fate.

In *A State of Siege*, by contrast, Janet Frame deploys a similar kind of imagery within a vision that has none of Golding's finality. Much in Pincher's fashion, Malfred Signal seeks shelter on Karemoana, an island in the sub-tropical part of New Zealand (off Auckland Harbour), to 'nurture her individuality' (p. 10). A retired art teacher at fifty-three, her retreat to Karemoana springs from a determination to exclude other people from her life, with a view to recovering 'from the plague of promiscuity which she believes to have spoiled her existence, spent in the service of an ailing mother. Liberated from the mother's presence in middle-age, she deems herself not too old to 'enjoy the comforts of the longed-for separate life' (p. 11), in an environment carefully chosen for the island-like isolation allotted to its inhabitants, whose cherished privacies in 'cosy cave-like homes' appear unthreatened by the only kind of interaction they tolerate, the 'imported and exported kisses tottering in moist balance on their tongues' (p. 43). Malfred's own wooden bach, withdrawn on the top of a hill and unconnected to the telephone, proves ideally furnished and situated for her intended gathering of inner resources around the pebble-core of herself. In this sense, her withdrawal from the world enacts a kind of further petrification of her previous schoolteacher self. Called an 'old fossil' (p. 174) by her pupils, Malfred half-acknowledges the aptness of the appellation; for she knows that her disillusion with human relationships is advertised on her face, by two

lines of frustration inscribed at the sides of her mouth, like a plain message 'buried in her skin as the marauding footprint of an extinct animal was buried in stone' (p. 111). The enhanced isolation achieved on the island can thus be considered as the crowning jewel of a lifetime spent in distrust of the human family, or as the most glittering among 'those precious grief-stones and hope-stones that are indestructibly part of one's emotional geology' (p. 117).

As in Golding, it is the sea which sets about eroding this hard stone-layered geology of self, patiently pieced together over an entire lifetime. It is ironic, then, that Malfred courts so fervently 'the inexhaustible, self-repairing, lovely wall of water' (p. 99), together with the rest of the islanders:

I am one of those. We're a small, pitiful band of islanders who, tired of setting up the human walls that generation builds between generation, have come to Karemoana, asking the sea to be our wall... (p. 99)

For this is to ignore the sea's natural tendency to surge ever closer in a paroxysm of storm, and to push beyond the walls erected in self-defence: 'The windows cannot be stormproof, she thought; no window could be, against this driving wind and rain from the sea' (p. 142). In fact, the proximity of the sea appears to confer fluidity of being to the island, made 'forever fluid in image' (p. 36) by the reflection of light on the waves. Also, the absence of mountains on Karemoana, to provide a 'background to refer to when the points of one's personal compass became confused' (p. 136), seems to Malfred to account for the fact that 'her images were lost, they moved beyond the boundary of her mind, and... she experienced the *toppling* sensation of reaching for them across a surrounding edge of darkness' (p. 216, my emphasis). Little by little, then, for all kinds of reasons, the island emerges as an unsafe setting for the endeavoured consolidation of self-boundaries. For it is part of 'the natural exiling power of islands' that they concentrate the 'vicious, the unloved, the diseased' (p. 40), or indeed all the aspects of his humanity that man has felt a need, throughout the centuries, to put out of his sight. In this sense, Malfred's journey across the sea to the island can be seen as a pilgrimage into a repository of outcast humanity, beyond the bounds of accepted normality. This gives ironic reverberations to the question she asks herself on the eve of the trip: 'She wondered, though, if she were not relying too much on the island, Karemoana, to provide all that she felt to be missing from her life' (p. 36). One guesses, at this stage, how this might depart from the nihilism inherent in Golding's vision. In *A State of Siege*, the erosive force of the sea

is combined with a more constructive effect exerted on the widening imagination. This ambivalence of the sea continues throughout Frame's work. In both *Owls Do Cry* and *The Edge of the Alphabet*, for example, Toby Withers' expedition into the unknown is prompted by 'an affliction of dream-called-overseas',¹⁰ and takes the metaphorical guise of a voyage across the ocean, 'in a sailing vessel or was it round and round himself?'¹¹ The exploration results at once in the shattering of his life illusions, and an increase of self-awareness. As a symbol for life's unvisited complexities, the sea is a mainspring of inspiration also for those characters who, like Turnbull in *Daughter Buffalo*, entertain 'disbelief in substance and self'¹² as they approach the ultimate boundary of death. In *A State of Siege*, it can be argued that the new perspective gained by Malfred on herself and her life owes a good deal to what turns out to be, on her part, a venture into the realm of non-being. In this sense, Golding's playful fiddling with the tricks of *faux-semblant* narration in *Panther Martin* finds an echo in this novel; for Malfred Signal's hallucinatory revision of her past experience can be construed, much like Martin's, as the few final flickers of a consciousness on the verge of annihilation, hugely magnified as the result of some egocentric inability to admit to the fact of death.

Obviously, this reading is contradicted by strict attention to the narrative plot; for the stone which Malfred is found holding onto upon her death-bed reaches her at a very late stage in her ordeal, and she must have been fully alive, even in the last chapter, to pick it up from the floor and hold it, 'until it seemed that it lost its chill and grew warm, with promise of sun' (p. 230). Nevertheless, I remain convinced that the novel supports, if only at the level of metaphor, the view that Malfred dies to her long-harboured vision of the world, concomitantly with the onset of the quest. This is conveyed throughout the narrative in a variety of manners, indeed with such insistence that the reality of her death is never allowed to slip from the reader's mind. For example, the long journey from Malfred's native town of Matuatangi to Karemoana appears to be taxing the strength and patience of the traveller, almost beyond the limits of endurance: 'the full agony of metamorphosis lay in its being a gradual process recorded by a personal time which translated the mythical "overnight" almost into the length of years between birth and death' (p. 33). The island itself, once she gets there, strikes Malfred as a kind of limbo at the outskirts of existence, peopled with old-age pensioners half-way through some process of degenerescence: 'Decrepit was the word. Am I like that too? she wondered. Have I really come here like a worn-out elephant or those animals that hide when they are lame or sick, to die?' (p. 99). Moreover, the twin-engined amphibian

shunting across the sea-stretch between the mainland and Karemoana comes in to land near a bunch of 'decayed houses' (p. 139), and the task of luggage-carrying for the travellers is maintained, rather ominously, by the undertakers of the island. Malfred's own house on the hill is referred to as 'decayed estate' (p. 46), on account of the previous owner, a middle-aged lady who died mysteriously during a storm at night. From a left-over collection of dust-stained, sea-corroded photographs found at the heart of a gale assaulting the house, it appears that the former owner's relatives are Malfred's own, with the attendant irony that the death she suffered must have been the pre-enactment of Malfred's own death also. This intermingling of the categories of life and death, specific to Frame's vision, carries deep implications with respect to the issue of her alleged pessimism. My suggestion is that she posits the possibility of a survival of sorts, even in the midst of the storm's devastation. The nature of this survival, insofar as it transcends the habitual bounds of individuality, is now in need of further delineation.

What is clear so far is that Malfred's death involves a 'conflagration of clichés' (p. 113), a shattering of the presuppositions upon which her life was resting, which opens the door to keener vision and self-awareness. In this regard, it is significant that Malfred's quest for wholeness of being runs on a parallel with a search for aesthetic perfection, carried out through her art as painter. She considers her retreat to Karemoana as an occasion for treasuring her talent, long neglected throughout her nursing years. This aspect of the quest also purports to sever the bonds with the rest of humanity, since Karemoana was in fact preferred to other destinations for the predominance allotted, in its vast landscapes, to the natural scene: 'more air than people, dominant air, sea, sky' (p. 60). Thus, Malfred's new aesthetic program, what she now calls her 'New View' (p. 27), is meant to be totally uncluttered by human beings. Although this New View remains much of an abstract conception, a forever receding 'hinterland of truth'¹³ never couched on canvas, Malfred does actually bring herself to paint (just once) in the novel. In this instance, it is significant that she chooses to depict the sea, and that she mixes to her customary tempera paints some of the blue lanolin in which she used to anoint her mother throughout her illness. This episode links the various dimensions informing the quest since it makes it clear, with wonderful economy of means, that through her experimentation with art, and through her perusal of the sea, it is in fact the world of death that is being explored. Also, the finished picture appears to depart alarmingly from the traditional realistic manner of Malfred's marines:

There was no foam on the real sea like that which frothed its creamy sweetness, smelling of death, on those blue and green waves flowing in from the wide oceans of the world. The lanolin blossomed as death had blossomed in the last hour of old Mrs Signal's dying. (p. 62)

The title-Malfred gives to this painting, 'My Last Days in Matuarangi' (p. 63), goes some way towards suggesting that she never even left her home town, indeed that she died there, since the violent storm which seizes the island on the same night looks like a pathetic fallacy for the 'storm of lanolin' (p. 63) blowing the spray of death in the picture. In this sense, the storm can be read as the embodiment of the upheaval attending Malfred's passage from life into death. This interpretation is confirmed by the otherwise inexplicable presence, at the heart of the hurricane, of an area of darkness and silence, dimly related by Malfred to an ominous 'ache in her breast' (p. 152):

She could not quite locate it or explain it until she realized that the silence had remained, that it had fallen like an irremovable weight upon her body, the room, the house, the island, the world. It was not merely a gap in the sound through which one could peer into the stillness; it was utter silence spread like a sealing blanket, from world's edge to world's edge, from night to night. (p. 152)

However, despite the darkness which drops over the world, Malfred somehow manages to develop new vision, 'to mine light and colour' (p. 152), from the 'eye' of the storm. This indomitable thirst for vision is symbolized by a big moth which comes thudding against her windows, crazed by the lit bedlight, even while the silence starts 'collapsing at its boundaries' (p. 155). As a kind of positive counterpart to the blackbeetle of death in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*,¹⁴ the moth testifies to the possibility of drawing vision from the void, a paradox expressed by the contrast between its 'black-patterned wings' (p. 156) and the amber gleam of its large lit eyes. Thus, the insect establishes a mysterious connection between the separate worlds of light and night: 'as if starved, it surged again and again upon the light, drawing food to the gaunt poverty of the darkness that it had known and absorbed outside in the night' (p. 156). In this, the moth imitates Malfred herself, who resolves to abandon her old unimaginative way of seeing in order to build up a 'vast imaginative force' whose wealth also derives 'from its initial poverty' (p. 72). By scanning the limits of prejudice and suspicion, she breaks through like the moth into the area of the unknown, unexplored yet real, since 'even the most trivial fact, when examined, was found to carry an unidentifiable growth of darkness not recorded in any physiognomy of knowing' (p. 67).

In this sense, the New View emerges as a reaction to the rigidities of realistic representation, associated in Malfred's experience with her activities

as schoolteacher. Then, her attachment to the strictures of realism was manifest in the care which she took to shade certain models, such as fire shovels, fire tongs or coal scuttles. The halo of hell which surrounds these objects points to what must be regarded as a Faustian concern, on Malfred's part, with the shape of reality. By contrast, she conceives of the New View as a kind of creative assault on her 'limiting environment' (p. 49); it entails a necessity to clean her old 'dusty way of seeing' (p. 15), which had been too 'limited in its journeying' (p. 106).¹⁵ More particularly, Malfred realizes that her obsession with shading was springing from a secret fear of the unknown, and a need to tame the darkness besieging the world by wielding power over the 'swelling light that chased the shadows into the corners' (p. 88). By intending to make herself a 'criminal of vision' (p. 160), she now repudiates the measuring standards of the naked eye, in order to enforce the legislation of the imagination:

She would walk with a dream of [light] in her head, shuffling the spectrum over and over behind her eyes. ... The colours would range themselves side by side in a picket fence of light; then desperately, she would tear down each paling to see the darkness it enclosed and concealed. (p. 158)

One recognizes, in this statement of intention, a translation in pictorial terms of Fraume's own poetics. Indeed, much of the creative thrust underpinning her work consists in a move away from 'the confined space of a coffin prose' (p. 31) of ordinary language, to reach beyond the barrier of words for the shafts of truth which they may keep hidden. Thus she takes arms in *A State of Siege* against the short-cuts of face value inherent in realism, and dismisses the 'ingrained habit of dutiful looking' (pp. 25-26) in favour of the New View. Indeed, in its first manifestations at least, the New View differs satisfyingly from the banished shallow seeing, owing to a fresh abstract vein to Malfred's eyesight in the light of which she perceives the outside world as 'a series of golden and brown squares' (p. 29). Malfred herself welcomes this trick of vision with a touch of complacency: it would not be 'admired by those who were pleased to recognize in her work the place where they had picnicked last summer' (p. 29).

However, as the novel unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that geometrical figures are bound also by their own limits, and it is possible to resent 'the elbowing tyranny of triangles, the seeds of Hell enclosed in the jovial, well-fed circles' (p. 110). In other words, there is a sense in which the New View only proves subversive of 'the outlines of objects, the prison of shape' (p. 113) insofar as it remains within the order of 'preliminary dream' (p. 113); beyond this stage, it threatens to solidify in turn into an absolute

system of belief or perception. This potential danger is inscribed into the island itself, the chosen site for the elaboration of new vision, which is covered with a native bush called pohutukawa, prominent for its fiery blossom: 'when they are in bloom along the coast the island has the appearance of being ringed by fire: Hell is your comparison' (p. 141). Besides, one suspects that the New View, premised as it is in a willingness to cut through all entanglements with the human species, may have failed from the start to convey Frame's unreserved approval. A more detailed analysis of the workings of the New Vision will bring to light its built-in limitations, as well as the extent to which it falls short of the author's ideal of survival through vision.

That the New View may not bring about the boundless release of imagination Malfred was accounting with, is made particularly evident by the tenor of her final dream. For if, as I have said, Malfred fails to substantiate on canvas her novel aesthetic, it nonetheless asserts its laws in the realm of sleep, her New View unfolding without hindrance, an island canvas that tries to make some pattern of her life' (p. 167). The floor of the warm windowless room in which she then finds herself is patched with 'the kind of squares that belong to everyone's memory ... tablecloths, tea towels, or games played with a hierarchy of tall kings and bishops or with squat wrinkled draughts' (pp. 172-73). The allusion to *Alice's Adventures* suggests that Malfred has finally broken through the looking-glass of mimetic representation, into the 'room two inches behind the eyes' (p. 14). Frame's metaphor for the imagination. At the same time, however, the chess-board pattern dictating the moves of her imagination upon the linoleum squares of the ground ensures her long-courted loneliness; for it is part of the rules of the game that no single square can be shared. Perhaps for this reason, the room is depicted as an embodiment of hell, where Malfred roams endlessly 'in a cloister of dreaming, seeking the fire' (p. 173). In particular, the nightmarish quality of the exploration appears to derive from the presence, inside the room, of Malfred's shunned relatives and friends, and from the unflattering insights about herself which she induces from the confrontation.

As her relatives materialize, then, trooping past the room in slow procession, she perceives them as never before, in the light of her new stock of vision. Her father, in the dream-room, is the real being, shy and slight, as opposed to the 'whole being' Malfred had imagined from the statue 'fashioned in stone, in hero stance' (p. 177) by the citizens of Matuatangi, for whom he has remained a public figure of some stature. From an imaginary conversation with her mother, Malfred catches a glimpse of her inner being

also, when hearing of the old woman's unsuspected love for her bedroom view of 'the sun shining on those tall, white, autumn lilies' (p. 188), cherished through her own autumn of life. The shock of this discovery rekindles Malfred's earlier realization that 'she had kept her mother's illness apart from her personal life' (p. 112). Furthermore, she sees through the unfairness of her school-report dismissal of her sister Lucy as lacking in imagination, and recognizes that she herself may have benefited by Lucy's ventures into the poetical world of 'highwaymen and soldiers home from the war' (p. 22) – as many images which stuck in her memory. Finally, Malfred reminisces the episode in the fernhouse, in the Botanical Gardens of Matuatangi, when she and her lover Wilfred, later killed in the war, made love for the first and only time. This evocation of the love scene differs substantially from an earlier account by Malfred, a parody of scorn and mocking in which the dimension of love had been obliterated (see p. 133). Thus, Malfred's descent into the dream-room of imagination allows her to circumscribe 'the dreamest-of but unreliable tide, the irrelevance, the complexity, the personal flotsam of fifty-three years' (p. 166) of systematic forgetfulness. This eruption of the repressed brings about an insight into the 'beautiful unguessed shape of experience' (p. 112) which survives the cold touch of death. This appears most clearly at the heart of Malfred's encounter with her father, when she realizes from the way he distributes his being about the dream-room that 'there is nothing I can grasp of him that does not belong to another person, age or place; even snowflakes leave a stain where they have fallen' (p. 117). Malfred herself belongs to the same category of being, encapsulated in timeless relationship within the father's 'left arm, right arm, ten fingers', so that she exclaims in a spurt of triumph: 'I am there always. There can never be an amputation of me' (p. 180).

This is the closest Malfred ever gets to Frame's vision of survival. Momentarily endowed with a capacity of realization, she breaks through in dream into 'the area of universal belonging' (p. 177) and discerns there a dimension of being normally eclipsed in the process of domestic living. Overawed by the enormity of the discovery, however, she then reverts back to the dictates of human nature: 'My nature is my own surgeon' (p. 143). For Malfred belongs with those human beings who struggle 'to resist the invaders, whether they [are] forces of love, hate, knowledge, awareness' (p. 53). Therefore she denies the mutuality of belonging envisioned inside the dream-room, and dismisses her relatives on account of their ordinariness:

It would be different if all people were so, but they are not. There are those who have distinction in death; if they came to this room I could admire them, feel satisfaction

at their singularity, but I cannot do this with my mother or with my father ... (p. 184, my emphasis)

She regrets her father's demotion from the handsome marble likeness of his statue, and reflects in renewed bitterness that her life was scavenged by her predatory mother. As to Wilfred, the young man in the soldier's uniform' (p. 196), she refuses to go to him and wipe the blood from his face, in stubborn re-enactment of her former rejection of him: 'I have nothing to say to this young man now, no words to ease his suffering' (p. 197). In short, Malfred disavows the amplification of being envisioned in the dream-room, 'the dead child in one's life' (p. 53) which could live anew if only allowed to. If one may risk a comment about Malfred Signal's enigmatic name, it is possibly through this propensity to strip and sever that she 'signals' her common humanity with the rest of mankind, who stick according to Frame to 'commonplace thoughts without anguish, simple wishes that do not bring within their boundary the past, the future, death, relations of people one with the other, love affairs with men and land' (p. 227).

In the last analysis, however, this surgical conception of life is in turn mother of anguish; for dismissing the 'area of universal belonging' is tantamount to committing oneself to oblivion. When Malfred realizes that the inhabitants of her dream-room are shadowless, herself included, she cries out in terror: 'Help, Help' (p. 174). The paradigm of shadowlessness anticipates *Daughter Buffalo*, where the characters are seen to attain fullness of being under the vertical rays of the noon sun.¹⁶ In *A State of Siege* also, Malfred brands her own hellish vision of the world, 'in a burning wholeness of shape that is deprived of shade' (p. 176), at the outcome of a quest that is wrongly oriented, since it results in a moment of shadowless noon deprived of 'the generosity of darkness' (p. 176) potentially attending human lives. This accounts for the strange ambivalence of the novel's ending. For if Malfred appears to welcome, through a crack in her plated armour of self presumably provoked by the thrust of death, the cryptic message heralding 'last century's or tomorrow's news in verse' (p. 229), this final reconciliation with the world of difference is somehow revoked by the words 'Help, Help' (p. 229) which gloss the text and seem to be her own. Does Malfred find peace of mind at the other side of death? The reciprocity of living and perishing which informs the novel suggests a persisting reluctance to come to terms with the darkness, with the shadows that must 'stand or lie strongly wiring or husbanding their shape, in the only true eternal unity, fitness, completeness' (p. 174).

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the relevance to this novel of the theme of the artist's responsibility, later to become central to Frame's fiction, especially in *Living in the Manioto* and *The Carpathians*. In *A State of Siege*, Malfred Signal hardly qualifies as an artist, perhaps, since she fails to take advantage of the assets of the New Vision. Nevertheless, the conflagration of prejudice attending the storm of her death gives her new insight into those outgrowths of self usually eclipsed by the trimmed and tapered consciousness. In particular, from the vantage-point of the dream-room, she catches a glimpse of the ineradicable essence of the people who lived close to her, mining it as if it were 'gold dust on the butterflies' wings' (p. 203). For it is the task of the artist to retrieve, by the mere force of the imagination, 'the common pool' (p. 193) of being, and to safeguard it from further oblivion through the mind-stretching action of the work of art. Malfred knows that it behoves her, on account of her stock of vision, to shoulder the burden of unacknowledged suffering, for she alone has in memory 'the personal irrelevances that make each year of history a different age of each person, not one year but millions each seen through the eyes of one person here, there, north, south, east, west ... the human burden of millions of years set within the so cleanly dismissed three hundred and sixty-five days, of time unrecorded' (pp. 173-74).

In this context, *A State of Siege* must be regarded as the record of an imaginative failure, insofar as Malfred finally refuses to load her memory with 'an assortment of people clinging one to the other' (p. 167). When she descends into her grave of experience, she unearths a perspective of the 'heavy dullness' (p. 189) that used to inform her mother's illness, among other things; but she shrinks from the task of supporting such burden of imagination, out of a sense that 'it would need more than one, two, twenty, a thousand people to shift it ... there were no shoulders to bear the weight' (p. 189). It may be that Frame, distrustful as ever of the monoliths of truth, maintains the desirable 'fluidity of image' in *A State of Siege* by having her protagonist vacillate between an impulse to vision and a more egotistic strain for self-definition, bent on the congealed certainties of arrested truth. It seems to me, nevertheless, that this tension must be set against the background of Frame's fiction of imaginary recognition. Returning to the same theme in *The Carpathians*, the author may have found that Malfred's blockage was by no means to be seen as final. There indeed she gives it a more positive outcome, truly in accord with the capacities of retrieval liberated by a mode of writing that is exploratory and inclusive of 'the shadows of things seen, not separating object and shadow, not exposing the object to the striking down of the sun, but folding the shadow within the object itself' (p. 159).

NOTES

1. Patrick D. Evans, "Farthest from the Heart": The Autobiographical Parables of Janet Frame, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27, 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 31-40.
2. Janet Frame, 'Departures and Returns', in Guy Amirthanayagam, ed., *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 87.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
4. Janet Frame, *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), p. 251.
5. See for instance Monique Malterre, 'La Recherche de l'Identité dans *A State of Siege* de Janet Frame', *Études Anglaises*, VVX, 2 (Avril-Juin 1972), pp. 232-44.
6. Janet Frame, *The Adaptable Man* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 122.
7. Janet Frame, *A State of Siege* (London: W.H. Allen, 1967), p. 66. Further references are to this edition and quoted in the text.
8. Jeanne Delbaere, 'From the Cellar to the Rock: A Recurrent Pattern in William Golding', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17, 4 (Winter 1971-72), pp. 506 & 511.
9. William Golding, *Pincher Martin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), p. 201.
10. Janet Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), p. 49.
11. Janet Frame, *Owls Do Cry* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), p. 78.
12. Janet Frame, *Daughter Buffalo* (London: W.H. Allen, 1973), p. 159.
13. Janet Frame, *The Campbells* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 51.
14. See Jeanne Delbaere, 'Beyond the Word: *Scented Gardens for the Blind*'
15. The train from Invercargill taking Malfred north towards Auckland is referred to as 'the Limited' (p. 24), as a first hint perhaps that the quest is doomed to abort.
16. See Jeanne Delbaere, 'Turning in the Noon Sun: An Analysis of *Daughter Buffalo*', in

Security in Equality in *The Rainbirds*

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Whenever you come into contact with any book, person, or opinion absolutely comprehend nothing, declare that book person, or opinion! Respatter it, vituperate against it, strongly insist that any man or woman is a fool or a knave, or both. Carefully abstain from studying it. Declares to annihilate that book, person or opinion.

Our [New Zealand's] novels are man-hunts of one kind or another, that one who cannot accept the social pressures of conformity, to agreement not to rock the boat.

In all her writing Janet Frame is concerned with the plight of man in a hostile society; she is preoccupied with man's insecure position in a society that exerts pressures upon him. This theme is first touched in *Lagoon*, a collection of rather extraordinary short stories which compassionately tell the story of the lost and the unhappy. It then follows a series of nine novels in which Janet Frame explores the sensitive individual in conformist society by letting him voyage into strange geographies (Toby in *The Edge of the Madness* (Daphne in *Owls Do Cry*, Istina Mavet in *Faces in the Wind*), the people's identities (like Edward Glace in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (like Godfrey Rainbird in *The Rainbirds*)).

Of these novels *The Rainbirds* is perhaps the gentlest and most however haunting and relentlessly disconcerting it may seem in reading. While in her earlier books she is primarily investigating the inner world of her heroes and heroines, and on the individuality of each of them, Janet Frame in *The Rainbirds* is unusual in dissecting the outer world, the society in which Godfrey Rainbird, her protagonist. It has been argued that on the part of Janet Frame to make a comment on her surroundings takes her mind off her central figure and that her book as a whole seems less convincing; and that her preoccupation with the novel's social reality has a weakening effect on her use of imagination that more emphasis is laid on the exploration of the environment that shape the individual and determine his behaviour, I postulate that this does not affect the quality of the novel's message. Nor does it affect the richness of the imagery, a richness that