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Love in a Post-Cultural Ditch: Janet Frame

Love is a putting to death which makes me live.¹

Over the years the work of Janet Frame has been subjected to appraisal and appropriation by critics of the most diversified political persuasions. Frank Sargeson's early reception of *The Lagoon* testifies to his readiness to incorporate the younger writer into the mainstream literary tradition in New Zealand and to attribute to her the prevailing monocultural, universalist sensibility. He heralds the book as an unprecedented mapping of Pakeha culture: 'There is very little of what is common experience for every New Zealander that hasn't found its way into the twenty-four stories: it is all there – soil, sea and sky ... all seen and felt as though with dazzled wonder and delight for the first time in human history.'²

After Sargeson, the critics have grown more receptive to the adversarial force contained in Frame's writing. A majority of commentators have pointed out her abiding concern with social satire, directed against the ruling philistinism and materialism of the settler populations of New Zealand.³ The feminists have been more sensitive to the presence in Frame's work of a 'trenchant criticism of male power'⁴ in a predominantly patriarchal society where women are denied the freedom of spiritual self-fulfilment.⁵ More recently, post-colonial critics have considered Frame's embracing of marginality as a specific attempt to 'write back to the Centre' of European cultural expansion,⁶ while others chose to emphasize the semantic playfulness, and the consequent deterritorialization (political) meaning, brought about in the later novels by the operation of post-modern tropes.⁷

It could be argued that the revolutionary strain traversing Frame's work, and variously interpreted or recuperated by the critics, has to do with her particular use and conception of language. Long before the 'invention' of deconstruction, Frame was aware of a cutting edge to the alphabet, of a limit to the words' coverage, apt to expose both the conceptual horizons of the speaker and the gaping silent hollows beyond, which she calls 'eternity'.⁸ In a crucial sense, she circumscribes 'eternity' by resorting to metaphorical overdetermination. It is primarily the knitted richness of her baroque literary style which gives the reader a sense of language overflow,

of a semantic shift beyond the 'hieroglyphic commonplace'⁹ towards the region where words acquire poetic force and permanence.¹⁰ Szlette Henke has noted a resemblance between the cataclysmic word-storm bursting in *The Carpathians*¹¹ and Kristeva's perception of semiosis (i.e., a 'heterogeneousness to meaning and signification')¹² operative in certain literary texts.¹³ I would go further and suggest that a semiotic tug affects the whole of Frame's writing, in which language carries consistent signs of its own inverse factor and points to exhaustion, tumour-like, through proliferation. However, Kristeva defines the semiotic order, in complex psychoanalytic terms, as the memory perpetuated in language of the symbiosis existing between mother and child 'before the logocentric organization of thought in patriarchal law and language'.¹⁴ Therefore, her theory of a semiotic force embedded in language and disrupting received social meanings is made subservient to her feminist thinking. To some extent, Frame shares Kristeva's abhorrence of phallogocentric discourse; throughout her fiction she charts what she calls 'a no-woman's-land of feeling'¹⁵ characterized by an outgrowth of freedom from the assumptions afloat in a male-governed society. But Henke does not hesitate to stretch the concept of semiosis (as applied to Frame) and to make it a tool of political subversion as well, by suggesting that the law/language of the father is 'replicated in the logocentric discourse of empire and conquest'.¹⁶ Thus, in *The Carpathians*, the breakdown of language can be regarded as a symptom of cultural decolonization, since 'A new music arises from the choruses of Carpathian voices; a mother tongue ritually released and free to ... well up from a primitive, instinctual memory obscured by centuries of Anglo-centric domination – by the white man's colonial burden and the black man's enforced subservience.'¹⁷

These considerations throw into focus the ultimate inadequacy of those readings which stress Frame's opposition to transcendental signification, supposedly expressed in post-modern strategies of semantic disruption. Indeed, despite her systematic decentring of the patriarchal languages of domination, she appears to remain in thrall to the possibility of meaning,¹⁸ acknowledged as a paradoxical 'conviction of the "unalterable certainty of truth"'.¹⁹ However, the probing direction of her truth-seeking remains to be identified, especially in cultural terms. To my mind, it is not enough to state that 'The criticism of New Zealand life in Frame's novels is directed at the linguistic forms in which the culture embodies its repressions, prejudices and fears'.²⁰ Equally important is the task of delineating, beyond a perception of the anarchic potential inherent in her prose, the author's proposed guidelines for re-constructing the cultural subject, for herein lies her true innovative gesture. Although Henke's appeal to the notion of semiosis proves to be helpful for suggesting Frame's relevance to the field of post-colonial studies, I remain under the impression that hard-core political readings of her work tend to fall short of addressing the key question of the writer's 'imagined culture'.²¹ Clearly, Henke's reference to

a primitive-instinctual tongue or memory, reclaimed over history and shared by both colonist and colonized, poses the problem of cultural regression. Similarly, the analysis of *The Edge of the Alphabet* offered in *The Empire Writes Back* strikes me as being largely aimed against culture, in so far as the authors view the book as effecting above all a *dismantling* of 'received epistemological notions'.²² I want to argue the reverse and put forward that Frame takes culture very much in her stride even as she moves, novel after novel, towards an apprehension of life best described as post-cultural. I shall do this by articulating my case around the concept of love, arguably a pillar-stone of Western cultural constructions, and by showing that Frame's revision of the theme postulates, beyond mere dismantling, a new enlarged conception of the human person. In this, she resists and opposes the pull of cultural vacancy.

Janet's personal probings into the feel of 'True Romance' are recounted, in *The Envoy from Mirror City*, in a chapter headed 'Figuretti's'.²³ Her growing attraction to Bernard seems to be prompted, somewhat ironically, by the intrusive ring of his laughter, since 'each time he laughed I felt within me a reverberation of his laughter as if I were a vast empty palace awaiting the guests and the feast' (pp. 79-80). This observation rings in turn with the accents of nascent awareness. Although she has so far remained 'new to seduction' (p. 80), Janet proves swift to experience the seism of personality that love generates, as well as the longing to be peopled and to accommodate 'guests' or 'others' within a 'vast' unbounded self. However, simultaneously, the fairy-tale setting of the 'empty palace' points to the literary-cultural nature of the compulsion; also, the ostensible emptiness of the palace of herself suggests the masculinist sexism inherent in Janet's received definition of love. Predictably, therefore, the hoped-for housing communion with Bernard fails to occur and the sterility of their relationship is acknowledged when Janet, contemplating the possibility of pregnancy, finds herself unable to 'imagine Bernard's contribution to another myself' (p. 94). Importantly, then, the failure of love is ascribed here to some bankruptcy of the imagination inherited from tradition. Cardinal to this awareness is Janet's recognition that her love has fed on obvious clichés 'drawn from all the *True Romance* magazines' read in girlhood, as well as 'romantic quotes from poetry' (p. 80) destined to 'apply cosmetics' on the emotions and 'make them acceptably *love* as it should be without doubts and suspicions' (p. 83). The consequence was the birth of what Frame rightly calls a determined kind of love' (p. 86), nurtured by a specific culture, and found to preclude genuine cross-personal encounter.

Indeed, Frame's conventional chronicle of short-lived love on the shores of Ibiza is pitched against a counter-narrative of impossibility. The story is pervaded by a sly awareness of love's inadequacy to provide any mental grip on the 'other'. Bernard's invitation to love comes forward as a

proposal to take a walk 'along the beach past Figuretti's' (p. 76), a place previously unknown to Janet and henceforth wrapped in mystery: 'Soon, her own love evolves into a fascination for 'the person who talked longingly of the mysterious Figuretti's' (p. 78). Janet's sense of the diffuseness of Figuretti's in the landscape and sky of Ibiza turns it into a figure of otherness, a thing-ness impossible to 'figure out'. The alienness of Figuretti's certainly lies at the root of Janet's surrender, yet, importantly, she never seeks to discover 'the nature or meaning of Figuretti's' (p. 76): 'Strangely, I cherished my ignorance and never inquired' (p. 77). Thus, even while she yields to the mechanics of love, she strives to protect herself from the touch of the 'other', which is experienced as 'not the Midas touch but the touch of ash' (p. 87). I take such strategy to be paradigmatic of Frame's general attitude to culture, as expressed in her fiction. The ashen touch of Frame's prose involves an experience of thresholds, a stumbling upon a space of cultural penumbra or 'blank uninhabited darkness' (p. 87) that cannot be approached save tangentially, by walking 'past Figuretti's' (p. 76, my emphasis). Crucially, then, she endorses the architecture of love and occupies the palace, its every nook and cranny, so as to negatively delimit a further expanse of 'blank uninhabited darkness'. This negativity of inverse definition accounts for the much-advertised bleakness of her work. My suggestion is that Frame's novels support a more positive construction of this utmost space of love/culture (Figuretti's), long obscured from the critical record by the unaccustomed novelty of her 'imagined culture'.

This deviation through autobiography is not meant to repeat the assumption that the author's life can be equated with her fiction. I would rather share Simon Petch's belief in 'the fictive condition of all autobiographical discourse',²⁴ particularly evident in the case of Frame, who resorts to memory as an imaginative process of myth-making, central to her writing of herself.²⁵ The same transformative laws apply to the raw material underlying both fiction and autobiography, which aspire likewise to the condition of myth - Petch's other name, perhaps, for what I call 'imagined' or post-culture. However, a detailed examination of the representations of love in all the novels would fall beyond the scope of this essay. My intention is to show that a 'mythic' conception of love pervades Frame's earliest work. The relevance of this conception to her great 'love stories', such as *Intensive Care* and *Daughter Buffalo*, will then be more or less self-evident to the addicted Frame reader.

Owls Do Cry has been regarded as Frame's arch-novel of social alienation, stigmatizing all manner of conformism and ostracism in New Zealand, including the repression of strong emotions deemed embarrassing or disorderly.²⁶ Such readings usually concentrate on the character of Amy Withers, the loving housewife exploited by a husband who 'almost kisses'²⁷ her by way of showing affection. Amy is depicted as a victim of

emotional deprivation, whose life withers away in a 'perpetual bereavement-of-cooking-and-muddle' (p. 84). However, at the same time, Amy impersonates a conception of community or family-love symbolized by her undefeated capacity to darn socks and knit people together. Her attributes as a peaceweaver are the pikelet and the cup of tea, found infallible for settling disputes and restoring a sense of community among the family. Aply, the cakes she bakes to accompany the rituals of tea-taking display a 'fairy ring of criss-cross that she made around the edge with an old knitting needle, for decoration' (p. 25). If the criss-cross pattern of togetherness tends to crumble away when dipped into the beverage — that is, to unstitch under the high demands of living — Amy faces up and drinks 'the dregs of love' (p. 133). Yet this leaves untouched her resourcefulness with the needle, which extends to the realms of imagination and language, as when 'she seized the words ... and with them knitted herself a warm half-minute escape from the forever problem of facing up' (p. 84). Her irreplaceable contribution to the creation of community is measured, after her death, by her son Toby, who purchases tea in the outside world and finds its taste undrilled, 'as if it had been brewed in a world of no people' (p. 159).

Toby's bereavement here finds a counterpart in the reader's own at the novel's close, fostered by the drabness of an 'Eplilogue' which reports the family's split into so many lonely figures. However, significantly, the disruption of community recorded at the end derives not from Amy's death but from Daphne's leucotomy and apparent restoration to 'sanity'. Central to Frame's conception of community or 'love' is the role of the mourning memory, embodied by Daphne in *Owls Do Cry*, and victorious over the separations of death. It is important that the madness of Daphne erupts in the novel, at the strategic moment of Francie's disappearance, as a growth of vision sprouting from a piece of seedcake placed 'in a dish, beside a packet of needles and a wad of darning wool' (p. 41). With her madness, then, Daphne inherits her mother's capacity to 'knit and weave and sew' (p. 151), and to hold onto some vision of the family's wholeness. The odes sung from the dead-room of the mental hospital and interspersed in the novel are as many evocations of the spirit of oneness in the world. In each of these, Francie survives. So does Amy, felt until the leucotomy to be alive and 'sitting at home now, with a handleless cup stuck in the heel of my brother's thick grey work-sock, and darning the whole, criss-cross criss-cross ...' (p. 169).

A further aspect to this process of survival through commemoration concerns Francie's rescue from the lure of romance. Her brand-new pubescence makes her distinctive among the children for her commitment to the rhetoric of love, 'suitable only for Francie who had come, that was the word their mother used when she whispered about it in the bathroom' (p. 11). Such experience of arrival into adulthood translates as an increasing departure from the family circle. Francie is sent to work at

Mawhinney's, where she receives as payment the complete fabrics of ordinary love, 'an evening dress with foley-black lace along the hem' (p. 34), to go to a dance. Her flirtation with Tim Harlow, Teresa's future husband and dealer in fraudulent love, signals her further alienation from true treasure. Significantly, Francie and Daphne 'didn't sleep together any more' (p. 34), while the elder sister 'grew more and more silent about what really mattered' (p. 36). In this context, the 'sacrificial fire' (p. 134) of the rubbish dump bestows the virtues of transformation and purification. Francie's rite of passage through fire purges the taint of worldly love, through her association with Joan of Arc (a notorious virgin), and restores the bonds of community in the mystery of accession to a 'new place ... of home again, and Mum and Dad and Toby and Chicks; an all-day Mum and Dad' (p. 20). Frame's myth-making conception of memory is well-exemplified in Daphne's mourning ministrations of her sister's life-facts. Memory here unravels the entanglements of love, symbolized by the valuable cloths, lace and blankets filling the average (Fay Chalkin's) wedding-box — prior to weaving afresh the stitched fabric of community.

Aply, therefore, the sacrificial site of the dump is littered with the needles of the fir tree, 'needles of rust that slid into the yellow and green burning shell to prick tiny stitches across the living and lived-in wound' (p. 11) of the tip. Hence, the burning hollow of refuse becomes a gateway also into the 'grey crater' (p. 136) of the mad mind, since Daphne turns out to bear the stigmata of her own private link to the wound: the asylum nurse 'did not find the scars the pine needles had sewn' (p. 129). Daphne's needle-literacy involves a pointed understanding of the suffering occasioned by the fact that 'being alive was tangled' (p. 37) and frayed. According to Frame, such awareness eludes the majority of people. Bob Withers, the father of the family, embodies the bewilderment of the average person trapped in a web of complexity and randomly picking and unpicking 'something inside himself that every year of being alive had knitted, with the pattern, the purl and plain of time gone muddled and different from the dream neatness' (p. 34). Similarly, Chicks remembers her helplessness on the day of Francie's death, for her hair-ribbon 'kept coming undone and there was no one to tie it for me' (p. 100). Lack of care at this stage left for ever 'a kind of gap' (p. 100) in her life, an incapacity to link up death and community to her store of common experience. In this context, Daphne's hoard of insight makes it her responsibility to salvage her relatives from alienation and to incorporate them into a close-knit pattern of wholeness. Such possibility alleviates, ever so slightly, the bleakness of the epilogue. Bob's predicament of loneliness seems absolute at the end; his deafness, his voice which has 'grown thin like a thread' (p. 172), point to the likelihood of broken communication. Yet the imminence of fire, which burns upon him already 'hot as the stove ... ready for pikelets if there were anyone in the world to make them' (p. 173), suggests his possible commitment to the realm of the stitching,

transforming memory. The erasure of Daphne's consciousness – the leucotomy – by no means suppresses the reverberating song which she once emitted. Bob's thread of voice is there for the taking and weaving. Indeed the spirit of Daphne is resuscitated in each of Frame's novels,²⁸ which can also be looked at as utterances in the language of community, and which therefore speak for everybody: him, you, me.

As early as *Ozols Do Cry*, Frame's sense of community extends beyond the range of the Withers family. Throughout her years of confinement in hospital, Daphne explores a dimension of outcast dilapidated humanity which is found to hold a mysterious promise of sprout or fertility, despite the blight of unprepossessing appearance:

And so passed one morning and every morning and day but the people growing gentle and together, like old bulbs without promise of bloom, thrown to the rubbish heap and sinking in the filth and blindness to sprout a separate community of dark, touching tendrils and root to yet invisible colour of maimed flowers, narcissus, daffodil, tulip, and crocus-leaf stained with blade of snow. (p. 137)

This idea of a detritus humanity, thrown to the rubbish dump of society yet somehow treasurable, is taken up and developed in *Faces in the Water*, where the 'touch of ash' or 'blade of snow' turns into the suffocation of drowning. In this novel, Frame again reckons 'the sum of truth'²⁹ made available to mankind through the so-called deranged rationality; significantly, she sets this new journey into the reason of madness against a background of apocalypse, an evocation of 'the final day of destruction' (p. 9) or metaphoric death of the dominant culture. This is symptomatic of the strategic location of Frame's writing beyond the usual bounds of Western conceptualization. Throughout her work Frame's concern with cataclysm is ubiquitous and takes the many forms of nuclear holocaust, ordinary death or the dying passage from madness to 'normalcy'. Cataclysm, however, is never much more in Frame's novels than the flippancy foil or last-minute counterpart to her vision of enlarged humanity. In *Faces in the Water*, the restoration of reason once again provides closure and bereavement of the compound personality which is alive in the madhouse and which is characterized by prodigious empathy with the world. Compound personality is very much the subject of *The Edge of the Alphabet* also, where the characters unite in a vacuum of identity symbolized by 'the terrible Hoover at the top of the stairs'.³⁰ In this novel, what triggers off Zoe's awareness of 'the confusion of people's identities'³¹ is the kiss enforced on her lips by a drunk seaman. This, her only experience of love, is closely entwined with the necessity of suicide, for it seems that she must die to her ordinary restraining self in the process of accession to extended being in the Hoover bag, with the 'scraps of hair and bone welded in tiny golf balls of identity to be cracked open, unwound, melting in the fierce heat of being' (p. 107).

In the last analysis, it is hard to make out the extent of my indebtedness to Jeanne Delbaere's insights into Frame's treatment of death.³² Delbaere herself notes upon the collocation of death and love in both *The Edge of the Alphabet*³³ and *Daughter Buffalo*.³⁴ 'The utmost potentiality of man', death is felt to be akin to love in that it 'unites all ... potentialities and binds him together in the totality of his existence' (p. 147). Yet Delbaere's approach to the paradox of Framean 'being', defined as a state of 'constant watchfulness' (p. 147) or imaginative relation to death-the-enemy, leaves room for reinterpretation. My own reading of *Ozols Do Cry* suggests that 'the fierce heat of being' need not bring about a full stop to identity in the paroxysm of death. By making memory and imagination the key constituents of her sense of survival in this novel, Frame anticipates much of her later fiction, particularly *The Carpathians*.³⁵ With regard to survival, the question of Maori influence may have to be investigated, by someone with fuller knowledge of the role played by the Ancestors (for example) in the making of Maori identity. In the meantime, what seems clear to me is that Frame's conception of community defeats death and disconcerts Western readers. It may well be that the puzzling force of her prose derives from her free and unique location beyond the bounds of culture. This post-cultural stance would account for the semantic disruption effected by her novels, so deep and pervasive that it becomes difficult to enlist them within any one strict particular political agenda. Such, then, is the fate of freedom.

NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d'Amour* (1983; rpt. Paris: Editions Denoel, Coll. Folio, 1988), p. 50; trans. mine.
2. Frank Sargeson, 'A New Light', *New Zealand Listener*, Vol. 26, No 667 (18 April 1952), p. 13; rpt. as Janet Frame: 'The Lagoon' in F. Sargeson, *Conversation in a Train and Other Critical Writing*, selected and edited by Kevin Cunningham (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1983), p. 67.
3. See for example Patrick Evans, *Janet Frame* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977).
4. Mark Williams, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), p. 17.
5. For a feminist approach to Frame see Cherry Hankin, 'New Zealand Women Novelists: Their Attitudes towards Life in a Developing Society', *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 14, No 1 (April 1975), pp. 144-167.
6. See the comments on *The Edge of the Alphabet* made by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 104-109, 115.
7. See Susan Ash, 'The Narrative Frame: "Unleashing (im)possibilities"', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, No 5 (Spring 1991), pp. 1-15.
8. Janet Frame, *Living in the Maritoto* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p. 43.
9. Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water* (London: The Women's Press, 1980), p. 251.
10. Janet Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), p. 3.

11. Suzette Henke, 'The Postmodern Frame: Metalepsis and Discursive Fragmentation in Janet Frame's *The Carpathians: Aestheticism and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, No 5 (Spring 1991), pp. 32-35.
12. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine & Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 133; quoted in Henke, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
13. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
14. Henke, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
15. Janet Frame, *The Envy from Mirror City* (London: Paladin Books, 1987), p. 83.
16. Henke, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
18. What George Steiner calls 'the meaning of meaning', *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 6.
19. Janet Frame, *The Carpathians* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 51.
20. Mark Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
21. A concept I borrow, though in a different sense, from George Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
22. Ashcroft et al., *op. cit.*, p. 115.
23. Janet Frame, *The Envy from Mirror City* (London: Paladin Books, 1987), pp. 75-88. Further references are to this edition and given in the text.
24. Simon Patch, 'Janet Frame and the Languages of Autobiography', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, No 5 (Spring 1991), p. 58.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
26. See Ruth Brown, 'Owls Do Cry: Portrait of New Zealand?', *Landfall*, Vol. 44, No 3 (September 1990), pp. 350-356; John Beston, 'The Effect of Alienation on the Themes and Characters of Patrick White and Janet Frame', in Daniel Massa, ed., *Individual and Community in Commonwealth Literature* (Maida, Malta: The University Press, 1979), pp. 131-139.
27. Janet Frame, *Owls Do Cry* (London: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 22. Further references are to this edition and are given in the text.
28. See Jeanne Dalbaere, 'Daphne's Metamorphoses in Janet Frame's Early Novels', *Ariel*, Vol. 6, No 2 (April 1975), pp. 23-37.
29. Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water* (London: The Women's Press, 1980), p. 170. Further references are to this edition and are given in the text.
30. Janet Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), p. 107. Further references are to this edition and are given in the text.
31. Dalbaere, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
32. Jeanne Dalbaere, 'Death as the Gateway to Being in Janet Frame's Novels', in Hena Maes-Jelinek, ed., *Commonwealth Literature and the Modern World* (Brussels: Didier, 1975), pp. 147-155. Further references are to this edition and are given in the text.
33. Dalbaere, 'Daphne's Metamorphoses', p. 27.
34. Jeanne Dalbaere, 'Janet Frame and the Magic of Words', in Hedwig Bock & Albert Wertheim, eds., *Essays on Contemporary Post-Colonial Fiction* (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1986), p. 325.
35. See Jeanne Dalbaere, 'Memory as Survival in the Global Village: Janet Frame's *The Carpathians*', in Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kristen Holst Petersen & Anna Rutherford, eds., *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies - Then and Now* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp. 213-224; and my own "'Boundaries and Beyond': Memory as Quest in Janet Frame's *The Carpathians*', *Commonwealth*, Vol. 13, No 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 95-105.

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