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Cultural Wealth and Diaspora Despair: Janet Frame's *In the Memorial Room* (2013)

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Abstract: Janet Frame came into uneasy collision with the ghost of Katherine Mansfield, the 'godmother of New Zealand literature', when she was awarded the Winn Manson Menton Fellowship in 1974. This, New Zealand's only overseas literary fellowship, took her to Menton and the 'Memorial Room' of Villa Isola Bella in Menton, in commemoration of Mansfield's own stay there in 1920 and 1921.

In *In the Memorial Room*, the novel written during this time and published posthumously, the writer in the public space of diaspora is undermined by competing demands and expectations. Frame's protagonist is alienated, at odds with the local expatriate community, and disoriented, descending into a crisis of despair and creative impasse. This paper examines the novel's narrative strategies of analysis, denial (of self and others) and repositioning, as the author figure suffers sensory deprivation (being blind, then deaf), writing becomes a burden, and language a hazard. The question of posthumous fame and the 'anxiety of influence', it suggests, are possible, but not unique, explanations for this complex response to the cultural wealth that Mansfield represents and which the Fellowship celebrated.

When Janet Frame was announced in 1973 as winner of the prestigious Winn-Manson Katherine Mansfield Fellowship in Menton (as it was initially named after its benefactors), inaugurated in 1970, she had already gained a reputation as New Zealand's preeminent writer and was enjoying her own literary stardom (after the publication of 10 novels, 3 volumes of short stories and one volume of poetry). The fellowship was inaugurated to celebrate the memory of Katherine Mansfield, arguably New Zealand's greatest national writer before Frame, who after contracting TB, lived in Menton on the Cote D'Azur close to the Italian border, for two crucial years in 1920-21, writing some of her best work there. But the tensions and contradictions aroused by the need to meet the expectations placed on Frame as the fifth recipient of one of New Zealand's most distinguished award and its only overseas fellowship, contributed to a crisis of diaspora despair, or writers block, and her subsequent failure to complete her novel *In the Memorial Room* –which was published posthumously only last year. The nation's celebration of its cultural wealth embodied in a memorialising fellowship to its foremost literary icon, Katherine Mansfield, was

a weighty legacy for a writer like Frame who herself shunned the kind of adulation involved with being a national treasure. There is also 'the anxiety of influence' – of proximity to a writer of Mansfield's international fame. Yet, I shall argue, Frame's dialogue with Mansfield the literary modernist, whose journal she read in French while in Menton (finding it more moving than the English version), according to her biographer, Michael King, insofar as it can be determined in the novel, introduces in a covert way some of the text's most cohesive and resolved 'moments of being' (to use a modernist phrase). Indeed, the acknowledgement of permission to quote from the works of Margaret Rose Hurndell (alias Katherine Mansfield) on the first page, and the naming of the preliminary notes on the novel as 'Harry Gill's Menton Journal' might be read not just as starting points for fiction but also as respectful tributes to her illustrious predecessor.

In the Memorial Room charts a series of displacements both personal and physical, social and geographical that occur when Frame's **narrator**, Harry Gill who, like Frame, is awarded the Watercress-Armstrong Award in 1973 and travels to France to take up the fellowship. The novel functions on two levels as both C.K. Stead and Jan Cronin have pointed out. The literal level, corresponding to key incidents in Frame's own tenure, consists of social satire of the English and New Zealand expatriates in Menton who are associated with Margaret Rose Hurndell and the fellowship. This includes the predicament caused by the impossibility of working in the memorial room because of its lack of running water, electricity and a toilet, and the assistance offered to Harry in finding alternative accommodation, over which the exiles vie with each other. At a more symbolic or fabulist level are Harry Gill's physical impairments and the complications arising from them. From the beginning Gill is preoccupied with losing his sight; two thirds through novel he unexpectedly loses his hearing and becomes totally deaf. Both conditions involve visits to a Dr Rumor who claims that Harry's eyesight is perfect and he is displaying incipient signs of 'intentional invisibility' (60); of his sudden deafness says: 'A sealing-off, a closure. Auditory hibernation' (152), which suggests an even more inward turn into the self.

The overlapping relationship between the two fictional modes of representation, the literal/satirical and the metaphysical/fabulist develops as

Harry starts to write 'The Tenure', notes toward a novel which he plans to complete on his return to New Zealand. An historical novelist, Gill in his own terms, wears a cloak of invisibility because he is a nonentity, lacking in any personality: 'shy, bespectacled, rather slow on the uptake, and [...] an accidental novelist' (4) he 'resembled a clerk, a doctor, a commercial, traveller, anything but the accepted idea of a writer' (193). Dr Rumor explains that his lack of eyesight/invisibility shows he is susceptible to psychological annihilation practiced by human on human, (64), and that he is cooperating with his assassins for he has a 'collaborative condition' caused by the wish 'to fall in with the plans of others' (CHECK). **[Gill's doormat identity is confirmed by his saying that 'he has to take the words of others on trust' and that 'he is forever being imposed upon' (26).]** Total deafness is a more serious affliction than shortsightedness in this hierarchy of disabilities, for it reduces communication to writing only, and destroys Harry's superficially cordial relations with the expatriates as he insists on staying on in face of their assertion that being deaf disqualifies him for being the Watercress-Armstrong Fellow, and it brings about his exit from the narrative.

By contrast to Gill is the socially acceptable concept of the literary star as understood by the New Zealand expatriate community -- one target of Frame's satire. Connie and Max Watercress, responsible for the funding and sponsorship of the Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship, promote their son Michael, a 'handsome richly bearded young man, the "perfect stereotype" of the young writer' (30) who shows up the shabby, unprepossessing Gill. In their opinion this 'young Hemingway' (41) will become greater than the famous poet herself: 'They were preparing for the life of their son ... to obscure and obliterate both the life and death of Margaret Rose Hurndell' (55). This bogus claim to inherit the mantle of the national literary heroine, depends upon the opposite tradition to Mansfield's literary impressionism, that of the Hemingwayesque muscular realist, modernist style -- a tradition in which the writer, like Hemingway, is prone to become the victim of his own mythology (Braun), and be consumed by his own ego. The confusion between real writer and the fake is enacted humorously on the occasion of the public welcome to the newly arrived

Watercress-Armstrong Fellow. Michael Watercress is mistakenly acclaimed as the recipient and his hand is shaken enthusiastically by the mayor, leaving Gill to ponder, 'which is the substance which is shadow' (35) and later to believe that he might be the imposter. The New Zealand-Menton cult of the famous writer, based on a stereotypical version of literary celebrity, also corresponds to the cultivation of permanence that is referred to throughout the novel, the belief that literary fame fixes a writer and her work permanently. Cultural wealth is represented as solid gold, because it can be captured and retained, preserved for posterity, and added to unexpectedly: 'who knows' – there might be golden fruit left, up there, away up near the sky, for the picking, solid gold fruit [...] we may find an unpublished manuscript' (114). Such reverence for the relics of the deceased constitute a falsification or denial of the living writer's personality for it does not recognize or allow for the evanescent, mercurial nature of the living writer who responds to people and events with an open mind in order to create. Writing 'The Tenure' necessitates an emphatic rejection of the cult of celebrity (65) indulged in by the English/New Zealand expatriates who enrich their milieu in Menton, through cultural consumption of the famous artist as in a pagan ceremony 'feeding on the death of Rose Hurndell, nourishing themselves with the power of permanence which death has and which they so much desire' (65) .

Alongside this satiric attack, I suggest that Frame is using the disabilities/social deficiencies and timidity of her artist figure, and his aim to write something new, 'an imaginative work as compared to one that is historical', (61) in order to covertly introduce a central tenet of Katherine Mansfield's modernist credo, one that is strongly associated with her sojourns in the Mediterranean. Harry Gill's self-deprecating admission of mediocrity: 'I am a dull personality, almost humdrum, a plodder from day to day with **only an occasional glimpse of light**, literally as well as figuratively for the disease in my eyes has worsened' (4) hints at a knowledge of Mansfield's literary aesthetic of the glimpse, that flash of identity between subject and object brought about by change. This might imply that, by contrast to Michael Watercress and his parents who do not know Margaret Rose Hurndell's work, that he is the true inheritor of her fame and glory. Furthermore it suggests an interest in Mansfield's literary impressionism, which like the art of the impressionist painters, Matisse, Monet,

Renoir, Cezanne , was strongly influenced for its forms by the Mediterranean climate and landscape; finally it offers an a greater awareness of the flow of time and its potential for change than the cult of permanence which is associated with death, the memorial room, and a famous reputation. Although articulated within Harry's imagined pathology failing vision and disease, the reference to a 'glimpses of light' recalls Mansfield's different constructions of the glimpse or aesthetic moment of vision: as a new perception of natural phenomena as a moment out of the flux and flow of durational time (van Gunsteren, 64):

And yet one has these 'glimpses' before which all that one ever has written... all... that one ever has read pales... The waves, as I drove home this afternoon and the high foam, how it was suspended in the air before it fell... What is it that happens in that moment of suspension? It is timeless. In that moment (what do I mean?) the whole life of the soul is contained. One is flung up – out of life—one is 'held' and down, bright, broken, glittering on the rocks, tossed back, part of the ebb and flow¹ (*Notebooks* II, 209)

[Secondly in her own artistic powers that allowed her momentarily to pierce the veil that obscures a greater reality (her art offers 'those glimpses of reality that in themselves possess a peculiar vividness' – JMM

***Discoveries*, 1924, p. 142) ;]** As her health deteriorated her own reduced realm of possibility is articulated according to this aesthetic: 'Don't I live *in glimpses* only?' (*Letters* 4, 236), here referring to a glimpse into the fragments of her existence in a temporal stretch of time (Van Gunsteren, 64).

This tension between the suffocating cult of celebrity and the struggling creative processes of the artist frames the various types of artist and literary style that come under scrutiny in the novel -- Watercress, Harry Gill, Margaret Rose Hurndell— and in the contrast between Gill's reposnse to the imagery of death and enduring desolation emanating from the memorial room, a 'sanctuary' only 'if one were a spirit or dead' (44) and his impressions of nature and movement. Visual descriptions of natural phenomena of light and shade suggests an intertextual relationship with Mansfield's *Journal* of those years in Menton, which registers similar impressions. This interior scene with changing patterns of light, measured against the passing of time, responds to the effects

¹ Mansfield, *Notebooks* vol. 2, 209.

of the Mediterranean landscape and climate in ways that are reminiscent of impressionist painting.

Each day the patterns of light in the room were different. If the sun did not shine there were no light patterns. When the sun shone, window-shapes patterned themselves on the rust-red rug of which there were two, of equal size, square, on the polished wooden floor. The light fell on the table by the window [...] I looked at these patterns from time to time during the day to observe their changing positions and to note, when the sun had moved out of the range of the room where I worked, the moment when the yellow light was withdrawn and there was no longer window-shaped yellow light lying on the carpet. (88-89);

Mansfield's pictorial atmospheric descriptions also define the geometric shape of an interior and the animating effects of sun and light in ways that recall the distorted light and heightened palette of Matisse.

The sun came full through the two windows, dividing the studio into four—two quarters of light and two of shadow, But all those things which the light touched seemed to float in it, to bathe and sparkle in it as if they belonged not to land but to water; they even seemed in some strange way to be moving' (Mansfield, *Notebooks II* 133)

Or of the movement of the light: 'The sun comes slowly, slowly the room grows lighter. Suddenly, on the carpet there is a square of pale red light' (*Notebooks II*, 218).

Gill's association with the glimpse (literally of light, metaphorically of a greater reality) which he links to the onset of blindness provides a new dimension to Frame's strategy of literalising artistic problems (light, sun and illumination are tropes developed in the novel under the theme of failing eyesight): that is, her protagonist's encroaching sightlessness provides opportunity for her to consider the modernist mode of perception associated with Mansfield: this is, according to Sarah Sandley, 'the fragmentary, evocative reality that *is* or *becomes* reality for the Literary Impressionist' (Sandley, *In From the Margin*, 73; Smith 9).

As Jan Cronin has outlined, the novel's trajectory moves from the real world of objects to consider modes of perception and expression. Gill varies the range of focus in seeing and perceiving as he tests the boundaries of his eyesight. His comical attempt to record reality -- what is visible or external, 'the common

property of human sight' (without the intermediary presence of the consciousness), -- with a visual impairment also recalls the subjective treatment of objects, things, scenes associated with some kinds of impressionist writing or painting. His mistakes lead to a focus on his reactions not the object themselves, conforming to Cezanne's view that 'Art should not reproduce nature but should reproduce the sensations aroused by nature' (Van Gunsteren, 16). Without his glasses Gill sees two human figures talking and gesticulating, with them on he discovers 'that I had been looking at two tall narrow chimneys standing side by side' (100); when he revolves his lenses to intensify the magnification the green flecked jacket of George Lee 'lay in the corner of my eye like a public park which moved every time he moved his arm' (103) teacups are set out on flower bordered craters, a bookshelf is like a cliff ... neatly filled with gold and red bricks (103). Gill's experimentation with perception remind us of literary impressionist's attitude to subject-object relations :

The writer presents an expression of an impression, the character [in the text] becomes the impressionist painter, seeing nature, objects, people through immediate, fresh, intuitive and prismatic eyes. Characters may make errors of perception, seeing fragments of nature and forms which decompose before their eyes. They may hear words and phrases that make little sense to them. They cannot grasp the relationships around them (Van Gunsteren, 1990, 57)

In Mansfield 's writing transformations of reality are caused by the workings of imagination or the viewer's disturbed subjectivity: **[e.g. in 'Prelude', the aloe tree in the garden at night becomes a ship at sea: 'The high grassy bank on which the aloe rested rose up like a wave and the aloe seemed to ride upon it like a ship with the oars lifted' (Prelude);]** similar to Gill's myopia, are discrepancies in perception due to distance or lack of visibility: the image of the three travellers coming over the hill who are mistaken for hawks in 'The Woman at the Store'.

The novel charts Gill's dispossession in literal and metaphorical terms: his condition of 'diaspora despair' intensifies when the place where he moves to, generously offered by Dorset and Elizabeth Foster (Margaret Rose Hurndell's sister and brother in law) is renovated and he is forced to move his study into a hallway. His comment 'I felt homeless. The Fellowship tasted not bitter but

sour' (132) suggests a nadir. Deafness soon follows. Corresponding to this alienation is the increasing threat of the fake artist, Michael. 'Regularly the Watercresses claimed me ... to enlist my cooperation in their annihilation of me and their replacement of me by their son' (80). The sense of being disposable because exchangeable for the socially appropriate artist, leads to ontological speculation on 'the nothing-nature of the novelist' who because he 'lives only through his characters must be obliterated, erased' (65).

These existential fears are partly overturned in an uncoordinated fashion with one of Frame's characteristic reversals. After his experimentation with purifying language [he speaks/writes without adjectives or adverbs in order to get away from the deceptive myth that language creates, afraid of being trapped by images] and with different modes of perception, Gill returns to the belief that subjectivity is inevitable, and reality is inherently metaphoric and representational. He reintroduces the myth of the journey –first used of the sea voyage to Menton-- which he had abandoned in his drive for purification of language. The image of the empty, moving train provides an objective correlative for the writer, a home in which to shelter his characters while he enters their minds, and so forestalls his own obliteration (65).

Have you sensed the nothingness of my nature, that I am as empty as the carriages of the trains that pass, dusty, used in the morning sun? A novelist must be that way, I think, and not complain of it, otherwise how shall the characters accommodate themselves in his mind? To this you reply that it is he who must enter the minds of his characters? Certainly, but where shall he house them while he enters their minds, but in those empty used trains that pass and pass forever before his gaze?(116)

In another passage the natural phenomenon of the sun as co-occupier of the empty space suggests the preparation of a suitable location for the characters .

The sunlight shone through one side window of the carriages and out the other, revealing the dust-beams travelling with the train and lighting up the emptiness of the compartments. The sun was always a morning sun, approaching a midday sun and its beams were hot against the windows (90).

This central metaphor of the journey and the artist as an empty railway carriage, incorporating the play of the sun and the movement of light, might be one of Gill's 'glimpses of light' (equivalent to a new perception into the fragments

of his existence in a temporary stretch of time), a space heated by warmth from the sun that the chilly, inhospitable Memorial Room with its long dead inhabitant, so conspicuously lacks. The carriage is a place enveloped by heat through which illumination streams; as a receptacle used for the housing of characters, it is comparable to the manifold in Frame's next published novel, *Living in the Maniototo* (1978) which does the receiving of substance without choice, as a place in which impressions are registered, material is gathered and sorted;

In the Memorial Room ends with a different kind of text: transcriptions of Gill's written exchanges, following his deafness. The metafictional comment, 'I would never have let this happen in fiction—a man going blind who instead becomes deaf' (153) defines a new boundary: the end of his fiction and narrative collapse. Gill's fears that he is a 'removed man' (149), whose 'removal is complete' (150) are realized. He disappears behind banalities and inanities, as he enacts his vow 'I did not want my words to be unknown to me' (189): the pages of 'seeming manuscript' consist of a concatenation of clichés, commonplaces (191), unauthored epistolary endings, invitations, anonymous discordant voices.

I suggest, that in this posthumous novel Frame is asking questions about what imaginative fiction is by comparison to other non fictional and fictional types of writing (letters, diaries, journalism, notes), the conditions under which it might be written and the forms of its representation. The novel's dialogue with Mansfield's glimpses and other aspects of her literary impressionism shows a more hopeful dimension to Gill's unfulfilled aim to write an imaginative novel than the despair which finally causes him to exit. This new novel will not be incubated in the grave-like memorial room as this novel's title suggests, with its atmosphere of death, desolation and neglect, but in the image of the author's adopted house – the railway carriages with their Mediterranean warmth, dustbeams and light. These are ready and waiting for passengers – i.e. characters - although none of the company in the Cote D'Azur are likely candidates. The guests that Frame's narrator will host in her interior world, railway carriages or its equivalent, the manifold, will not appear until her next novel *Living in the Maniototo*, Gill's deafness and subsequent disappearance merely underlies the

fact that this crucial phase of the journey has been embarked upon but not concluded.

