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INTRODUCTION

Janet Frame: Ten Years On

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This issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* presents a special focus on the illustrious New Zealand writer, Janet Frame, whose substantial oeuvre, beginning with the short story collection, *The Lagoon* (1951) has inspired a range of critical fashions: early, and now notorious, biographical and social realist responses, followed by the application of feminist, scientific, postmodern and postcolonial theories, to approaches from cultural theory, and most recently the diverse interpretational frames offered by the essays in *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame* (Cronin and Drichel 2009) and the special issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* devoted to Frame's short fiction (Dvorak and Lorre 2011), as well as the "inside-out" readings of Jan Cronin's monograph, *The Frame Function* (Cronin 2011).

Frame's private and interior view of the world, her concerns with problems of authorship and authority, and explorations of language, memory and selfhood, may at first glance seem distant from defining issues of postcolonial writing, such as cultural hybridity, resistance and identity, nationality and globalization. Yet postcolonial readings of her work, stressing her decentring of colony-empire binaries, and her interest in Maori-Pakeha relations, have also been offered, while Marc Delrez's important study, *Manifold Utopia* (Delrez 2002), expands the concept of "postcoloniality" into a humanist utopian reading of her work. The question of the

relationship of the world of the imagination to the social milieu, and the moving boundary between fact and fiction, which Frame herself raised in polarising “this” world and “that” one, continues to haunt Frame criticism: its current dynamic comes from recognizing that her work will not fit easily into any single discursive or theoretical frame and the need for multiple entries and approaches.

The articles by Marc Delrez and Alice Braun in this focus on Frame were initially delivered as papers at the colloquium, “Janet Frame: Ten Years On”, hosted by the New Zealand Studies Network at Birkbeck, University of London on November 2, 2013. Both reflect the new wave of critical interest in her work aroused by the publication since her death in 2004 of two novels, *Towards Another Summer* (Frame 2007) and *In the Memorial Room* (Frame 2013). The third article, by Andreia Sarabando, surveys representations of objects and things in Frame’s work, and draws on recent formulations of “thing theory” by Bill Brown and Peter Schwenger to read Frame’s attitude to inanimate presences in relation to her characters’ difficulties in defining selfhood. Together, all three articles represent new perspectives on Frame in relation to the recurring themes of death and fear, the identity and self-erasure of the author, the illusions of language and reality, and most recently the issue of literary celebrity.

The two posthumous novels, along with other recently- published work like the poems, short stories and non fictional writings,¹ belong to Frame’s flourishing afterlife over the last decade, which has been marked by a productivity comparable to her most brilliant decade of the 1960s.² Their belated publication and reception locate them in relation to the mechanisms and priorities of the global marketplace, what has been called “market aesthetics” in which writing circulates as a form of capital and authors’ goals are “both facilitated by and in tension with the market demands”

(Machado Saez 2015, 1): in particular, “marginal” writing is commodified as exotic because of the need for new and original work, writers’ anxieties about reader reception are textually coded, and the life of the book is determined by the life of the author, especially those who attain some celebrity status. As both Delrez and Braun note, the posthumous novels are currently enabling a reshaping of Frame’s literary edifice, partly constructed in response to the reception of her work and authorial identity, through their intersections with adjacent novels like *The Adaptable Man* (1965) and *Living in the Maniototo* (1978).

The novels were held back in Frame’s life-time partly because of her wish not to offend people still living whom she may have portrayed in an unflattering light. Posthumous publication raises in new guise the familiar issues of authorial control, authorship, reception and the reading public. There is also the question of whether it best serves the interests of the author: some of the targets of Frame’s satire were still alive when the novels were published. In a review of *In the Memorial Room*, critic C.K. Stead (2015) dismisses the argument that negative representations of living people were the barrier to publication, claiming instead that the novel shows Frame at less than her “sparkling best” (as was claimed on the cover blurb) and implying that its unsatisfactory incompleteness may have been behind her reluctance to publish (178). Marc Delrez in his essay in this volume, “Embarrassment in the Posthumous Fiction of Janet Frame”, introduces a new angle to such discussions in identifying the role of embarrassment in the semi-autobiographical posthumous novels, not just as a reason for non-publication, but as a feature that marks this work out from her other writing. Citing Frame’s view (as represented by her biographer Mike King) that *Towards Another Summer* was “embarrassingly personal”, he points out that her work has always been concerned with acutely private experiences, and had this reason been

taken seriously, she may never have published anything in her lifetime. Delrez identifies embarrassment in the posthumous novels as a narrative trope in which her characters' struggles with shyness make them "blush and squirm and writhe", and also as a literary strategy that in *In the Memorial Room* enables Frame to expose those societal norms and modes of articulation to which such self-conscious shyness is a response. Such a condition of reticence and hesitancy, with a near-existential questioning of selfhood, is reminiscent of the most famous 20th-century literary example of inarticulate self-consciousness, expressed by the protagonist of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

Alice Braun in "*In the Memorial Room: The Condition of Being a Writer*" makes a different claim, in arguing that this is the first of Frame's novels to examine the issue of literary celebrity, and its consequences in the dissolution of the artist protagonist, a revision of the author's relationship to her art, and the diffraction of the artist role through different figures to destabilize its conceptualization. Frame often shunned public visibility in her own life, but upon taking up the Winn-Manson Katherine Mansfield Memorial Fellowship in France in 1974 (the occasion for the writing of *In the Memorial Room*) she encountered the effects of literary fame in the posthumous adulation accorded to New Zealand's most famous writer, Katherine Mansfield, after whom the Fellowship is named, experiencing as never before "the shadow of the precursor". As recipient of New Zealand's most distinguished international Fellowship, she experienced this legacy at first hand, becoming subject to public exposure and unwanted attention from the Award's benefactors, as well as from the New Zealand and British expatriate community in Menton, both of which are unflatteringly portrayed in the novel (Stead 2009, 172). The preternaturally reclusive Frame found the tenure of her fellowship dogged by problems of over-

exposure publically, reduced privacy and, most excruciating, the lack of a convenient, comfortable room for her writing. Delrez makes the valuable caveat that in all her fiction, based on a realism-fiction axis, Fame attempts to distract attention from allegedly personal material by heightening the narrative's fictionality. He and Braun consider Frame's author-protagonist, Harry Gill, recipient of the Watercress-Armstrong Fellowship, and a writer of historical novels, who becomes blind then deaf, as a purely fictional response to these pernicious and blighted circumstances. Delrez finds the process of artistic erasure and dissolution of ego present in the earlier posthumous novella, *Towards Another Summer*, where painful shyness in social situations leads to linguistic metamorphosis: the protagonist, Grace Cleave, feels that she mutates into a migratory bird, and on another occasion is compared to a bi-valve mollusc, whose vulnerable flesh may be partially exposed when the shell clamps shut.

Braun argues that in *In the Memorial Room* Harry Gill's disabilities -- the symbolic blindness (a Dr Rumor tells Gill it is only imagined) and unexpected onset of deafness -- are related to the imposition of literary celebrity and the failure to uphold the related romantic image of the artist. The figure of the privileged "victim" artist, which recurs in Frame's work is rewritten by that of the disappearing artist, whose deafness, sealing off the self as an "auditory hibernation" (Frame 2013, 151), contributes to Gill's reduced and marginalized presence. By contrast is the new image of the celebrity artist (as Gill considers in his uncomfortable proximity to the famed Margaret Rose Hurdell, alias Katherine Mansfield), who is cannibalized, emptied out and reduced to a brand as admirers feed off their fame parasitically, sustained by "the power of permanence" (Frame 2013, 65). Memorialization through the sale of Margaret Rose Hurdell's letters, for example, becomes a form of commodity fetishism. Braun points out that the traditional economic dependence of the artist

conjured up in the themes of hospitality and accommodation is ironically reversed in the image of the famous artist whose work nourishes a parasitic public, hungry for vicarious fame, and it anticipates the conceptualisation of the guest-host relationship in *Living in the Maniototo* in which the artist figure occupies the creative space of the “manifold”, and hosts four guests who contribute to the process of creation.³

Although she does not make an explicit connection to *In the Memorial Room*, Andreia Sarabando in her article, “‘The dreadful mass neighbourhood of objects’ in the fiction of Janet Frame”, also finds that Frame introduces a hierarchy of sense perception in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1964), possibly anticipating the techniques of the later one. Frame’s protagonist Vera Glace, plays with being blind in order to hear better, but also to define the boundaries between her physical body and domestic objects like furniture, whose solidity may represent a stable core within her multiple and conflicting selves. This is just one example of Sarabando’s insightful analysis of Frame’s treatment of things and objects, which draws on a theoretical distinction between them: that things can be materialized or utilized as objects, losing their inert, inanimate quality when invested with human meaning for particular purposes, and they are also the excess; i.e. what is irreducible when the object breaks down because no longer fit for purpose. Sarabando focuses on the role objects play in the creation of Frame’s characters’ inner landscapes as they attempt to define selfhood by negotiating the boundaries of language and other representative modes. After examining the relationship between things and estrangement, things and perceptions of reality, comfort in things, death and things, she concludes that the world of Frame’s novels is undermined by the systems of meaning arising from references and metaphors that implicate things as active elements in existence. Her texts reveal that our inconsistent use of things to categorise and appeal to, or deny,

blame or evade them, means that things, despite their proximity to humans, are “seldom neighbourly”.

In the Memorial Room offers little hope for the reintegration of the dissolving figure of Harry Gill, as is hinted at for Vera in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. The novel concludes in linguistic disarray, in a welter of clichés and disconnected formulaic phrases. As often occurs with the Framean text, the conclusion poses a problem of interpretation that points to one of the faultlines of Frame criticism – between more biographical, sociological assessments -- for example, of her as artistically inconsistent -- and broader readings of her entire work that recognise her authorial presence in and control over the fictional world. Braun argues that Harry Gill eventually settles for a postmodern representation of the author as no more than a vehicle for language in the opaque conclusion; Marc Delrez also argues that the author disappears from the text to be replaced by “crippled language”, and that a “brand of literalism” pervades the entire work; but, alluding to Frame’s fascination with the *nouveau roman* of the 1960s in which words become the heroes of fiction, he concludes that this reduction of meaning, in gesturing toward what has been lost in the attempt to conform to social norms, is not irreversible.⁴ For C.K. Stead, however, who knew Frame personally and held the Menton Fellowship in 1972, the conclusion represents “a slow loss of vital functions” (2015, 177), that betrays the failure of narrative momentum, making the novel seem incomplete.

Nevertheless, as this special focus suggests and as the editors of *Frameworks* claimed in 2009, “these are exciting times for Frame studies” (Cronin and Drichel 2009, ix): the wave of interest that Frame’s posthumous work has aroused is likely to continue. Whether in the author’s interests or not, the publication of the novels suggests that some more comprehensive reassessment of Frame’s entire oeuvre is

desirable, and further analysis and interpretation of her implied judgment on the fictions that she either abandoned, put aside or left to posthumous publication, might lead to a new critical consensus.

Notes:

¹ Other posthumously published works by the Janet Frame Trust include two volumes of poetry, *The Goose Bath* (2006), and *Storms Will Tell: Selected Poems* (2008), a volume of nonfiction, *Janet Frame: In Her Own Words*, edited by Denis Harold and Pamela Gordon (2011), and another of stories, *Gorse is Not People; New and Uncollected Stories* (2012).

² In the 1960s Frame published six novels, three volumes of short stories, one volume of poetry and a children's book.

³ For a Buddhist reading of this part of the novel see Gabrielle 2015, 145-165.

⁴Jan Cronin (2014) also comments that the conclusion recalls "the exploratory nature of Frame's fiction" (11).

Notes on Contributor

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