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Screens in Janet Frame's "The Secret"

In "The Secret," the safe world of childhood is shattered by an enigma far larger than all the small secrets it shelters, and yet the story reads like a little riddle: Myrtle who already sees herself on the screen as the next Ginger Rogers is in fact nothing but a Gingerbread girl. Far from introducing a reassuring logic, the subtext contributes to the uncanny nature of what is touched upon. What proves particularly powerful in this story, as in the rest of *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, is the paradoxical association of opacity and transparency: the imaginary is not a veil for the symbolic that can be lifted. There is no going behind the screen – even when one crosses to the other side. Rather, enigmas in Frame's fiction write themselves on screens which, whether verbal or visual, are to be conceived both as barriers and filters.

There are in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* favourite words, words that recur with a striking regularity, and "secret" is one of them. When one takes a close look at the stories, it is clear that secrets vary enormously in nature. But the word itself always possesses the same particular charge. It marks a point where the signifier is felt to carry an excess, where it resonates with a special power and in doing so, foregrounds its resistance and opacity, screening off what it insistently offers to our attention. The effect is accentuated through repetition: at the end of "Swans," the word "secret" multiplies like the birds who give shape to the dark, "like secret sad ships, secret and quiet" (65). At this point, we seem to witness both a dropping and a lifting of the curtain: "it was as if they were walking into another world that had been kept secret from everyone" (65). There is a clear sense of having crossed a threshold and yet of remaining on the edge, or rather of moving right in the middle of a landscape which one cannot truly enter. Christine Lorre uses an interesting simile when she describes the swans as "the negative image, in photographic terms, of the world" (92). What is rightly described as an epiphany draws its power mostly from a reversibility that alters the familiar picture of the world almost beyond recognition. But then the other side is perhaps not just a shadowy version of the world as we know it, it feels like a space drawn out of a secret wardrobe, a space outside space in which everything is intensely tangible and perfectly remote, both more real and more unreal. The impression of simultaneously hitting *upon* and hitting *against* something which disrupts spatial coordinates translates itself in aural terms: the "secret sea" that has "crept inside your head forever" is a "hush," a noise that brings out the eerie silence surrounding the scene.

In a collection of stories where writing can be approached to a large extent in terms of vision, it is on the role of screens that I would thus like to dwell. If a double for the artist is to be found in the child, for whom, in Blake's words, "the doors of perception" do not need to be "cleansed," one must insist that what children see in Frame's fiction is largely what they make up. Intense and acutely physical as it may be, the relation of children to the world is highly mediated. In that respect, the verbal constraints which cramp the language of adults is not something of which they are entirely free. The fascination with which they listen to people being spoken rather than speaking is largely a fascination with words, with their enigmatic power, and not just an attempt to expose

the limitations of those who no longer hear themselves speak. The limits of what can be seen and said are set right from the start in "The Lagoon": the first story of the collection revolves around a murdered man who has taken his secret with him to the bottom of the lagoon. What remains is shrouded in uncertainty. There is no skeleton in the cupboard, no irretrievable family secret in the second story, "The Secret." On the contrary, the so-called secret comes out in full light, however awkwardly and inadequately blurted out by the mother. But what words, one may ask, are suitable when it comes to telling a child that her adored sister suffers from a heart defect so severe that she could die at any moment? The story presents itself as the portrait of a radiant creature, a girl who is literally biting into life. But the picture is in some way altered by the menace hanging over the future, especially as we can suppose that what was merely a threat has materialised some time between the moment of revelation and the indeterminate moment of narration. Of course, it is crucial to read "The Secret" together with the next story, "Keel and Kool," which opens with a photographic session in which a friend poses where a dead sister now called Eva formerly stood. In the diptych formed by the two stories, we can underline a form of chiasmic effect: in "The Secret," Myrtle who is very much alive is somehow already dead; in "Keel and Kool" Eva, who is no longer in the picture, is still there in many other ways. In both cases, the picture cannot be simple or single as it is caught in a time warp. Transparency is undermined by the invisible presence of time. Claire Bazin reminds us that in the chapter of the *Autobiography* devoted to the death of her sister, Frame dwells on a family photograph taken during a holiday to Rakaia where every member of the family has come out well, apart from Myrtle who, due to some freak technical mishap, "appeared transparent" on the photo (*To the Island* 105). We can suggest that the ghostly photograph which is left out of the fiction is not entirely absent. It can be made to stand, in both stories, for what is (already or still) there without being visible. It emphasises the presence of a blind spot or a blind field *within* the picture, of something which challenges the nature and reality of what lies in front of one's very eyes.

From the moment the invisible is not outside the picture but within it, woven into its fabric, from the moment transparency itself becomes deceptive, the secret that the image hoards can no longer be clearly defined. The neat division between what is hidden and what lies in broad daylight collapses. The pattern of concealment and disclosure, the notion that revelation depends on the lifting of a veil and is only a matter of time no longer operate. In the study he devotes to the secret, *Le Seuil de la fiction, essai sur le secret*, Richard Pedot makes a distinction between the enigma and the mystery on the one hand, and the secret on the other hand. According to Pedot, the enigma and the mystery are both based on the possibility of resolution or revelation, in a more or less distant future, here or in the world beyond. By contrast, what he chooses to name the secret has nothing to do with any form of dissimulation; it eludes the opposition between the veiled and the unveiled: "[the secret] ends up calling into question the antinomy between the veiled and the unveiled."¹ Christine Lorre, as for her, in a study entirely devoted to secrets in *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, makes a distinction between two kinds of secrets, the riddle on the one hand and the enigma on the other hand: whereas the riddle, in Paul de Man's words, is "merely the deferment of a known secret,"

1. "[Le secret] arrive à en remettre en question l'antinomie du voilé et du dévoilé" (52, my translation).

an enigma "does not necessarily have a definite answer" (Lorre 87). What is brought to the fore once again, despite the difference in the choice of the terms, is the existence of a secret that does not await disclosure. Basing her analysis on Derrida and on Ginette Michaux's study of the secret in his philosophy, Lorre suggests that this particular secret is best approached through the notion of the "illegible" rather than through the "invisible" – the invisible being too pregnant with the notion of something hidden from sight and thus always ready to be disclosed, whereas the illegible suggests something simultaneously cryptic and undecipherable.

It is in fact this opposition and distribution between the visual and the verbal which I would like to examine in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* and more particularly in "The Secret," where I feel the terms can very easily be turned around. Here one might say that the visible harbours an enigma that makes all notions of unveiling irrelevant, whilst the narrative does read like a riddle that calls for some decoding. Of course, it also becomes apparent that riddles themselves can be screens, games that barely conceal the presence of what cannot be worded, so that they too become contaminated by the power of the enigma. What matters then is to see how screens themselves, *whether* verbal or visual, are not to be conceived simply as barriers preventing access to something beyond, but become the site of paradox: what is impossible to grasp or locate is nothing but what lies here, tied in the fabric of the text or the image.

To take things from the start again, let us remember that before anything is said about Myrtle's faulty heart, she is depicted as the picture of health. She is also the girl who dreams of a golden future and fancies herself as the next Ginger Rogers. Unlike what happens in the story entitled "The Pictures," we are led to understand that Myrtle does not simply take refuge or live vicariously in front of the cinema screen. Myrtle the dreamer is also a doer. In fact, in all respects she appears as a living paradox. Myrtle is girly and yet a bit of a tomboy, she is still a child and yet she already behaves like a woman, she is now tender, now cruel – a demon with "curly golden hair" (11) who also admires Jean Harlow (the blonde who, in *Hell's Angels*, is not the angel she may be thought to be). But it is mostly the impression she gives of living in a world of her own whilst being intensely involved in "this" world which strikes the reader. With the mother's revelation, the figure of paradox is nevertheless jeopardised by the figure of irony. Like paradox, irony feeds on what is double and ambiguous but irony divides; it exposes blindness, resting on the tacit assumption that it knows better. Thus a gap appears between what is thought to be known and what is not yet known: when Myrtle faints after a swim, an ominous sign to say the least, she is hugely excited at the idea of having looked "pale and deathly" (14) in the arms of the doctor. Irony also threatens to blot out the plural with a singular. We are told in the first lines of the story that Myrtle has come back from down south "full of secret smiles," which gives her plenty to hide or share with her sister and "confidante" (11). But "the" secret which gives the title its name seems to cancel the newly acquired experience or awareness in matters of love and sex, replacing it by the knowledge that death awaits and undermining the complicity between the sisters: now that Nini knows, what are all the little secrets she shares with her sister compared to "the" secret, the one and only, the one she cannot tell for she has been sworn to secrecy, or at least told not to tell? Of course irony's greatest resource lies in its ability to play on words. On second reading, the whole story appears to be strewn with hints of what is to come, such as when Nini says that Myrtle's romance with Vin-

cent “died what they call a natural death” (12). But the most powerful irony lies in the description of the mother “baking ginger bread” (15) and “sticking on raisins for eyes” (16) just as she is about to tell Nini that her sister “may go at any time” (16). Myrtle cannot be the next Ginger Rogers for the simple reason that she is just a Gingerbread girl. She may think that she is too fast to catch, but like the gingerbread man who “ran, ran, laughing and singing,” she is sure to be caught in the end. She may be literally biting into life, but she is the one who will get eaten before she knows it. If myrtle leaves are one of the symbols of Venus, the plant is also prized for its berry fruit, which, when dried, can be used as a substitute for pepper.

One may reread the whole story looking for possible inscriptions or reminders of the story of the Gingerbread man. One of them lies in the fact that Myrtle dies swimming; the gingerbread man gets eaten by the fox which, in some versions of the story, has carried him on its back across the water. There is no fox in “The Secret,” but on their long way back from down town the partying girls come across a “fox terrier” chained up; the sisters also stop at Mrs Feathers on their way back from town – we may remember that one of the creatures which threaten to eat the Gingerbread man is a chicken. If this sounds slightly too far-fetched, what cannot be overlooked is the inversion of the motif of eating into being eaten. The narrator points out that kind Mrs Feathers is always ready to treat the girls to a “chocolate fish with pink inside” (despite the bills the family runs at a time when their father does not “see how he [is] going to keep the wolf from the door” 14-5). Having just mentioned Mrs Feathers’ generosity with the chocolate fish, the narrator immediately proceeds to inform the reader about Myrtle’s skills as a swimmer: “Myrtle taught me to swim too. She was good at swimming [...]. You’re like a fish the people said. Isn’t she like a fish” (15). Let us also remember that the first paragraph which mentions Myrtle’s holiday and romantic interlude in the south presents us with an orchard where “the fallen apples go squelch squelch underfoot” (11). Myrtle’s appetite for life includes boys and she gives every sign of promising to become a bold and ruthless man-eater; she certainly makes no bones about ridding herself of Vincent after “observing him in the intimacies of eating and drinking and going off to the bathroom for an abortive shave” (12). Little does she know that she is the one who is going to be prematurely cast out and devoured.

It is possible to explore this process of ironic inversion further but at this point it is perhaps more important to try and assess its value, the division it introduces within the same story between two tales, one of which seems to work as a screen for the other. One could crudely oppose the realm of the Imaginary – the screen on which Myrtle projects her life as if she were already a Hollywood actress – and the realm of the Symbolic where words obey an implacable logic of their own, and where the letter always gets the better. But the fact that Myrtle’s death reads like a riddle is potentially more disquieting than reassuring. Play turns out to be entirely at the service of death, and death conversely encroaches upon the territory of childhood, borrowing its games. There is something eerie in the very ability of words to take on a life of their own, in meaning the opposite of what they mean, or in meaning exactly what they mean. The fact that Myrtle’s death should be spelled out in no uncertain terms finally makes room for something opaque, an opacity which actually translates in visual terms. Even before we

get to the last scene, where for some critics, "a quasi fantastic"² mood or mode prevails, there is something slightly disturbing in the picture of the mother sticking her raisins into the gingerbread man, and in the very crude and cruel relevance of the little tale. According to Claire Bazin and Alice Braun, tales in *The Lagoon and Other Stories* offer refuge into a parallel imaginary world in moments of anxiety.³ To illustrate this – what they have more particularly in mind is fairy tales – they quote the description of the mother in "The Secret" just before she is about to confide in Nini: "My mother looked sad and helpless like the princess in the fairy tale when she has to empty the sea with a thimble or spin a room full of thread in a night or find the lost ring lying at the bottom of the lake" (88). If the fairy tale works as a stopper to the child's anguish, it is important to remark that it *first* brings it out and makes it intensely tangible. In that respect it remains perfectly ambivalent. One might add that the anxiety does not lie just outside the picture here, i.e., in the gravity of what Nini perhaps senses her mother is about to say. It is the vision of the mother itself, a mother "sad and helpless like a princess" which introduces something uncanny – something which makes the situation either ridiculous and laughable or "funny" in a more disturbing way (needless to say, this ambiguity is also crucial in Frame's fiction). "Sad" is another special word in *The Lagoon*, another word charged with meaning, and meaning more than it means. At that moment, the mother looks strange, almost unrecognisable, especially as she is pictured in one of those scenarios that belong to dreams or rather, nightmares. On second reading the fact that she should also be baking at that very moment – i.e., made to play, unwittingly, a more than ambiguous part in another tale – adds to the remote and potentially unsettling quality of the scene: the mother who is shuddering at the thought of death is the maker of the gingerbread, the giver of life but also of death. We can identify in *The Lagoon* a pattern where the flight into the imaginary is sanctioned at the end by a violent return to reality ("Treasure," which Bazin and Braun quote to support this point, is probably the best example of this). But we get a different story here: for a moment the imaginary is closely woven into something which one might, precisely, call real. The screen at this point simultaneously hides and conceals; it is not just a barrier, but a filter which both stops and allows something of the unspeakable Real, in this case in the form of anguish, to come through.

Just like at the end of "Swans," this duality gains power in the last scene, as darkness materialises into shapes, and as the familiar bedroom turns strange. It is as if Nini had to accommodate the so-called "secret" and accommodate herself to it, having first tried to fend off the veiled truth contained in the mother's euphemisms with what you might call direct words: "That meant die and death, but Myrtle couldn't die. Gosh we had fun together" (16). The shadow of the tree outside actually enters the room and the objects within also make "fantastic shapes of troll and dwarf" (17). But in the midst of all this there is another shape, much closer and much more familiar but which has started to alter and to become less recognisable. Within a story which can loosely be called a portrait, the last scene constitutes a close-up, a vision made sharper by stasis and silence. However, what the narrator sees is not a face but the slumbering form of her sister; what she sees is in fact one of her father's old shirts that Myrtle is wearing as a nightie.

2. See Sambamoorthy.

3. "In *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, fairy tales provide [...] a parallel imaginary world in which children can seek refuge, in moments of anxiety in particular" (87, my translation).

This small detail is all the more arresting if we think of the next story where Winnie is left with her dead sister's clothes: "It was so funny at home with Eva's dresses hanging up [...] But it was good wearing Eva's blue pajamas [...] But it would have been better if Eva were there to see" ("Keel and Kool" 24). In "The Secret," the shirt that does not belong and that hides the body already announces the dress that will hang empty or the pajamas which will be worn by somebody else in "Keel and Kool." In the dark, the only thing that shines is not Myrtle's eyes, as they are closed, but the "pearl buttons" of the father's shirt, small unseeing eyes. We may find here a last reminder of the Gingerbread man whose eyes are, in fact, no different from the buttons of his coat. Rather than simply vanishing before the larger enigma, the riddle reveals perhaps one last time its eerie potential. Nini simultaneously sees and does not see what lies in front of her, as she is not just gazing but gazed at – to paraphrase the title of Georges Didi-Huberman's *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* – by something opaque.

One may remember at this point another little "funny" detail mentioned earlier when Nini, lying in bed next to Myrtle, shares her own dreams with her: "I would be an opera star, I said, or a blind violinist" (14). We are enlightened in the next sentence about this odd pronouncement when the narrator adds that she was once moved to tears by a violinist who came to play in their town and happened to be blind. There is something both quirky and comic in the process through which "blind" becomes attached to "violinist" to form a sort of compound, as if it designated a separate, clearly identified category. Yet the theme of blindness takes on a new, sharper relevance in the last scene. The comic effect is gone but what remains is a paradoxical association, a simultaneous sharpening and cancelling of the power of the senses: in the darkness of the room, the sister who lies next to Nini has started to become invisible, and yet Nini has perhaps never been so much in touch with the enigma of life and death.

Finally it seems that seeing – or not seeing – becomes too unsettling: Nini calls her sister to try to wake her up, but gets no response. She then listens to her sister's heart at the same time as she reaches for the shape next to her. The emphasis which is placed on all the senses throughout the story helps establish that Myrtle is not just a product of the imagination, a shadow on a screen: how could anyone doubt that Myrtle is alive when she pinches you so hard (no need to "pinch yourself," as the phrase goes, to make sure that you are not dreaming) or when she actually "smells alive"? The thick "lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub" of her heart in the last scene seems to have the power to dispel the shadows and to shut out the threat of death. Nini's final gesture can be read as a form of escapism or denial, but as one knows, denial is double-edged. Just as the sound of the sea at the end of "Swans" is a "hush" that brings out the silence, the drum-like "lub-dub," the only fragile assertion of life in the quiet of the room, may bring home to the reader (if not to the child) the threat that this heart could stop at any minute. The ambiguous nature of what is now a vocal screen is even more apparent at the end of "Keel and Kool," where Eva is now truly invisible, gone for ever (it so happens that "ever" is the last word of the story and it reinforces a "never"). A difference of modulation in the same cry allows Winnie to make two voices out of one, to imagine two gulls which would bear the names of the sound they each produce: as she sits alone, it is something that connects her with her sister, shields her from absolute solitude and sheer absence. But the piercing sound, now a call, now a mere cry, now a name, now just one of nature's noises, also allows something of that absence to filter and sharpens

its power. The end of the "The Secret" restores and consolidates the duo or duet that breaks apart in the last sentence of "Keel and Kool." Having checked that her sister's heart is beating, Nini thinks: "tomorrow there'll be a ripe plum on the plum tree, Myrtle and I will eat it" (17). In this sentence which reverses one last time the motif of eating / being eaten, the reader may hear a need for reassurance: the repetition of the word "plum," the consonance produced by the plosives and the choice of the rounded vowel which echoes the "u" in "lub-dub" all underline the desire to recreate the happy bubble that was burst by the mother's news. But what is not entirely clear is how this vision of fullness and ripeness should be read. In other words, whether this is yet more fodder for irony, or whether paradox might not have its place after all in Nini's "tomorrow." In spite of many differences, I find here a form of ambiguity and complexity which is not unlike that which prevails in the last sentence of Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss": "But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still" (105). The vision which can be thought to cast a cruel light on Bertha's earlier happiness could also mean that not everything has been blighted, that the moment she shared with another woman in the contemplation of the tree has left something which cannot be destroyed. As I pointed out earlier, the singular in Frame's title cancels or conceals a plural: the mother's secret potentially overrides all other secrets, but in this story which brims over with the fierce energy of life, one may ask whether "*the* secret" could not just as well be Myrtle's secret gift for happiness, or the force of a "for ever now" ("Swans" 61) which opposes its resistance to "the never ever" throughout *The Lagoon*.

I have suggested that riddles cannot simply be opposed to enigmas in *The Lagoon* but can be contaminated by the power of the enigmatic, shattering the secure world of childhood where one delights in talking in code or cracking codes. However, what is no longer available at the end of "The Secret" or "Keel and Kool" is not just a code or a cipher; it is the possibility of relying forever on a very special bond, which is perhaps what the trading of secrets is mostly about. You "keep" secrets or you "trust" someone with them, you might "betray" them, but you can also "share" them – none of these apply either to riddles or enigmas. In the various attempts at definition one can make, it seems that this is a key distinction. "The Secret" marks a moment when the world becomes opaque, not just because it ceases to be legible but also because a vital tie is suddenly broken. Nini's mother does not so much share a secret with her daughter as she relieves or unburdens herself on her. Simultaneously, she makes her the bearer of a secret that cannot be shared. The sense of solitude with which "The Secret" leaves us is even stronger at the end of "Keel and Kool" where the screen formed by the sky turns into a kind of mirror in front of which Winnie stands alone.

Whilst mirrors are not that frequent in *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, such mirror effects sharpen the impression that "the antinomy between the veiled and the unveiled" is always ready to collapse – that what appears as single or simple is not just double, but potentially shaped or distorted by a blind spot which remains outside the frame. In an article called "Through a Glass Darkly: Reading the Enigmatic Frame," Jan Cronin concentrates on the double translation which is given in *The Adaptable Man* of the famous passage in St Paul's "Letter to the Corinthians." The first translation offered is: "For now we see through a glass darkly" and the second: "Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror" (Cronin 13). Cronin insists on the importance of stressing that "glass" is to be read as "mirror" and on the relevance of the correction as far as Frame's

fiction is concerned, as her novel points to “a flawed closed system rather than a flawed route to the transcendental and the absolute” (19). This motif already finds a translation in several stories of *The Lagoon*, and most clearly in an image which is to be found at the beginning of the first story, “The Lagoon”: “sometimes at night there is an underwater moon, dim and secret” (3). The moon comes both from above and from below, it is both a reflection and an emanation from another world. Unfathomable reflection can prove more puzzling than unfathomable depth, as it causes a disruption of space. The uncertainty that results from this *dis-location* suggests a “flaw” in the “closed system” which in fact makes it not entirely closed, or potentially both closed and infinite. In this flawed world “to see through a glass darkly” sounds potentially as a good synonym for having “the wrong way of looking at life” (“My Last Story” 183), Frame’s closing line in *The Lagoon and Other Stories*. Both phrases should invite us to think, or rethink, what it may mean to be a “visionary.”

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