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Transparency and Orality in Janet Frame's *The Lagoon and Other Stories*

This article explores Janet Frame's use of effects of orality in her stories to create a semblance of transparency which both masks and reveals the tensions underlying her fictional world. By imitating the speech patterns of children, Frame creates a vivid contrast between the perception of the adult narrator and the voice of the child which can still be heard within that of the adult. She makes it possible to measure the impact of acquired speech habits embedded in social convention and cliché. Her use of nursery rhymes can also be understood in terms of orality; they offer clues to the often paradoxical relation between sound and sense and allow the reader to link the emotional dilemmas faced by the characters to the cultural substratum that structures human experience.

The importance of language and of Frame's sensitivity to the social uses of language has been the subject of a number of studies bearing on Frame's fiction. What I would like to examine specifically in this paper is the effect of her use of a simulated orality in her short stories as a vehicle for an exploration of the effects of speech in social situations. I wish to demonstrate how through a well-calculated exploitation of effects of orality Frame uses her narrators to emphasize the way in which our vision of the world is shaped by the speech of others, how in a sense we "see" the world through what others "say" about it.¹ Whether the narrators are homodiegetic or heterodiegetic, their use of an apparently oral discourse creates a simulacrum of transparency and immediacy, as well as a presumed proximity with the reader, which masks the forces of exclusion and distancing which are at work in the texts.

This use of orality belongs to the traditional mechanisms of the genre, and Frame's use of this device is certainly a reflection of her reading and of what she learned from the masters of the form. Frame refers explicitly to William Saroyan, a well-known American writer, in her autobiography, and as Gina Mercer points out, "She follows Saroyan's advice, providing an overtly subjective record of the simple, the everyday, that which is so often not recorded" (2). Liliane Louvel and Claudine Verley explain in their discussion of the short story that the place of orality in American short fiction reflects its roots in the tall tale (26). While in the tall tale, or yarn, orality is often related to exaggeration, the use of effects of orality in the recounting of seemingly commonplace events makes it possible to expand the gap between an overt simplicity and the emotional horror that often lies underneath. It is in this gap that the American short story has often created its effects, as can be seen in the works of writers like Ring Lardner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver, to name only a few of the best-known.

There are two aspects of Frame's writing that I would like to study from the angle of orality. I will first of all try to show how the presence of lexical items and syntactic structures characteristic of oral delivery affect the way in which events and their impact are perceived, making it possible to understand how Frame's characters experience a

1. See Alice Braun's study of this aspect of language.

world shaped by the speech of others. I will then look at the question of sound and its relation to sense, as suggested in the references to nursery rhymes.

In order to understand how effects of orality contribute to the impact of the short story, it is important to see the role it plays in the economy of the form. In using effects of orality, the writer emphasizes the need to retain the interest and attention of the reader, who, within the fictional frame, is positioned as a listener. The narrator therefore exploits the assumptions shared with the reader, adopting linguistic shortcuts in order to gain time and leave sufficient space for the elements he wishes to emphasize. The tendency to simplify syntactic structures and to have recourse to commonly used verbs like "to have," "to get," and "to take," serve as marks of orality. But they are also signs both of haste and of a temptation to streamline the telling of the story in order to give greater impact to the salient features of the narrative. They serve to characterize a speaking voice, making it audible to the reader, at the same time that they appear to gloss over the distance between speaker and listener, revealing the narrator's desire to create a space of shared assumptions in which he or she will be able to impose their vision of events. The irony perceived by the reader lies in the gap between the discourse of the narrator and the readers' interpretation of events; in their reading they will unconsciously rectify the omissions, repetitions, and approximations which function as traces of the narrator's subjectivity, thus producing their own internal narration of events. In order to grasp the meaning of the story, they must listen both to the story carried by the narrative voice and to the alternative stories suggested by other voices that can be heard within that of the narrator or by the traces of subjectivity that can be detected in the narrator's own voice. Orality thus also extends the framework of verbal exchange beyond the conversational universe of the characters, blurring the line between the voice of the narrator and those of the people who inhabit her world and memory.

It is through her use of the voices of children and of the mentally disturbed that Janet Frame draws attention to the functioning of orality and its effect on narration. The speaking voices of her child narrators in stories like "Child" and "My Cousins – Who Could Eat Cooked Turnip" are, of course, double to the extent that a mature narrator is looking back on her past, mixing the imaginative projections of childhood with the distance of the adult. But the perception of the child re-emerges through characteristic speech patterns, giving them greater weight through a contrast with adult uses of speech. The verb "to have" acquires a particular significance, for its use reflects the child's perception of time and pace, his way of organizing the world. For the narrator of "Child," all dimensions of reality fit into the binary relation of having and not having, transforming events in time and space into a series of attributes governed by the verb "to have." Having a dress with a cape collar or button-up shoes is placed on the same plane with having or not having a mother and father. Speaking of her own mother, the narrator says, "I felt ashamed of having her" (81). The conversation about having a best friend ("Who's your best friend" 82) links the child's use of the term to that of adults, reflecting the way in which social experience is often perceived as "having" or "not having" relationships with others. But it is the child's persistent use of the verb to classify her experience that draws attention to the way speech patterns express subjectivity. A close connection is also established between language and a child's physical experience of the world. In the story "Child," the control imposed by the teacher, Miss Richardson, through breathing exercises represents by metonymy her censorship

of their self-expression. The narrator's friendship with Minnie Passmore is sealed when the girls refuse to count up to ten while breathing out, as the teacher has instructed them to do: "The class breathed in slowly and quietly and breathed out counting up to ten, except Minnie Passmore and me who got as far as fifteen" (79). The girls' refusal to submit to Miss Richardson's authority is punished by strapping, demonstrating the violence expressed by the narrator's use of the verb "to take" in talking about the teacher: "She took us for poems in the morning" (79). The language used by adults, with the authority that it conveys, is experienced in the body, and the relation between speaking and the use of physical force is revealed.

The syntactic structure of the sentences also betrays the way in which the logic of the represented world is subordinated to the necessities of narrative. When the narrator mentions her friend's grandfather, she adds, "We had a grandfather once, we had two grandfathers" (83). The presence or absence of grandparents is reduced, in grammatical terms, to a direct object, or rather to two direct objects. The same speech patterns can be found in "My Cousins – Who Could Eat Cooked Turnip," a story which begins, like "Child," with a series of references to what the cousins have or do not have. In addition, this story uses temporality in ways characteristic of the oral practice of children, who tend to classify events through categorical terms like "always" and "never." The first sentence of the story, "For a long time I could never understand my cousins in Invercargill" (43), thus creates a humorous overlapping of the adult's perception of time in terms of duration with the child's binary notions of "always" and "never."

In these stories, the traces of children's oral speech patterns serve, of course, to highlight the specificity of the child's perception of reality, giving the reader a keen sense of the distance between the world of children and that of adults. The insistent use of the verb "to have," for instance, reveals the selfishness that characterizes human nature but that is later buried beneath layers of social convention. Recreating the linguistic habits of children is a way of giving emphasis, by contrast, to the role of convention in shaping adult speech habits. Strictly speaking, the verb "to have" signifies a link of possession between the speaking subject and the objects and actions designated in the utterance. Frame extends the use of the verb beyond narrations involving children. Its prevalence can be considered as a mark of orality, since it serves as the foundation for a wide range of idiomatic expressions in addition to its function as an auxiliary in the construction of compound verbal tenses. Like the verbs "to be" and "to get," "to make" and "to do," it permits the formation of the simple sentences that are commonly found in oral narration. However, a semblance of informality can also be used to emphasize the patterns of exclusion and social isolation that characterize Frame's fictional world. A particularly clear example of this pattern can be found in the story "A Beautiful Nature." The narrator of this story is extradiegetic, but the marks of oral delivery stand out clearly, giving the narration the tonality of gossip and generating the expectation of a climax that will confirm the exclusion of the person who is the butt of other people's humor and sarcasm. The story takes place in a boarding house, the perfect setting for situations where people sit around talking about other people. The narrator adopts the gossipy tone of the characters, painting verbal portraits of the characters, adding details in a seemingly casual way, quoting the words of others and occasionally correcting his or her own tendency to stray from the topic, all of which constitute techniques for staging a scene and drawing the listener into a form of complicity with the boarding house

gossips. Liberal use is made of expressions based on the verb “to have”: “If he had time...” (109); “Let’s have a real old sing-song” (109); “he’s had a hard life” (110); “he had a stepmother” (111); “hello, Edgar, had a hard day?” (111); “he didn’t have any real friends” (112); “he had his gramophone” (112); “he had the sack” (112); “you also had morning and afternoon tea” (113); “some of the cards had robins in the snow” (114) and finally, “He has a beautiful nature” (114). The most interesting use of the verb can be found in the opening sentence: “Edgar was a tidy man to have in a boarding house” (109). The use of an impersonal construction draws attention to the problematic status of the verb and to the narrator’s unwillingness to take responsibility for the statement. What does it mean to *have* a person in a boarding house? This is clearly the crux of the matter, for the boarders would prefer not to have Edgar, with whom they are obliged to share a bathroom, although he is useful as a scapegoat. The oral tone of this story serves a specific purpose; the use of verbal constructions based on the verb “to have” highlights the implication of the speaker in the narration; the speaker clearly asserts that this is her story: “But my real story is about Edgar,” she says at one point (110); furthermore, it reveals the extent to which undermining others and what they do or do not have is a way of affirming one’s own superiority. This is, of course, the essential function of gossip. By linking the treatment of Edgar to the narrator’s preoccupation with having a story to tell, Frame shows to what extent the social conventions of ordinary speech serve to establish patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

In using effects of orality in this way, Frame is exploiting spoken language as a reservoir of acquired habits, a form of collective unconscious which reveals the nature of our relation to others. Her use of nursery rhymes can be analyzed in the same perspective. The meaning of many nursery rhymes is buried in a distant cultural past, but their sound patterns are still a part of the acoustic world in which children grow up. The pre-eminence of sound over sense in nursery rhymes can be exploited as a way of drawing attention to the world of speech, sound and voice and their impact on both the human psyche and the body. In the same way that fairy tales point to the fluid boundary between fantasy and reality in the child’s imagination, nursery rhymes reveal the porous and problematic frontier between sound and speech. While the repetition of sounds in nursery rhymes may have a humorous or reassuring effect, it can also emphasize the absence of a correlation between sound and meaning, thus disturbing the child’s sense of logic. The lines of “Tinker Tailor,” a rhyming game found in “Keel and Kool,” with their relentless trochaic metre – “Boots, shoes, slippers, clodhoppers, silk, satin, cotton, rags” – run the gamut of vestimentary possibilities in a way that underlines the role of chance in determining the destinies of those who play the game (26). In stories like “Keel and Kool” and “Swans,” sounds also play an important role in conveying the anxiety associated with an unfamiliar setting, suggesting the influence of fairy tales with their frightening settings. In “Keel and Kool,” Winnie’s anxiety at seeing her father go off down the river to fish “like a man in a story walking away from them,” is associated in her mind with the “roaring noise” made by the river, which she describes as “deep and wild” (22). In “Swans,” the fear generated by the absence of other bathers is reinforced by the sound of the sea:

Why wasn’t everyone going to the Beach? It seemed they were the only ones, for when they set off down the fir-bordered road that led to the sound the sea kept making for ever

now in their ears, there was no one else going. Where had the others gone? Why weren't there other people? (61)

The narrator's adoption of the term "for ever" confers on the space/time framework the absolute otherness that has already been identified as a characteristic of children's perception. "The desolate crying sound of sea" (61) referred to further on reinforces the children's impression of entering a world that has been emptied of all human contact and meaning, and prepares the reader for the reference to "the wrong sea" that severs the experience from all that is known and comforting. In opposition to the frightening sound of the sea, the voice of the parents provides security and familiarity. It is in this context that the memory of being bounced on the father's knee to the sound of "This is the House that Jack Built" takes on a particular significance:

I wish today is always but Father too, jumping us up and down on his knee. This is the maiden all forlorn that milked the cow.

– Totty, it's my turn, isn't it, Dad?

– It's both your turns. Come on, sacks on the mill and *more on still*. Not Father away at work, but Father here making the fire and breaking sticks, quickly and surely, and Father showing this and that and telling why. (64, italics in original)

The father's presence is associated not only with the reciting of the nursery rhyme and being bounced on his knee, but also with his physical dexterity and his capacity to explain things, all of which elements are reinforced by the rhythm and rhymes which make sound dominate over sense. And yet one has to admit that there is a curious tension, even irony, between the sound of the nursery rhyme and its meaning, for it is Jack that builds the house just as it is the father who seems most able to deal with the world in the story. The nursery rhyme presents the maiden as "all forlorn," a choice dictated by the rhyming pattern, without giving an explanation for her sadness. Although the sound of the nursery rhyme may be comforting, the poem does not necessarily offer the promise of a world that will conform to the desires of the little girls.² The children internalize the sound of the poem as it is recited by their father without reflecting on its meaning.

Nursery rhymes reveal the tension between sound and sense and, therefore, are a particularly appropriate vehicle for exploring the role played by sound in a child's attempts to come to terms with the mysteries of the adult world. What Mladen Dolar says about proverbs in his discussion of Jakobson's *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* is equally applicable to nursery rhymes: "I am tempted to say that, on the whole, proverbs make more sound than sense" (147). Janet Frame, in her use of nursery rhymes, is clearly exploiting the meaningful tension between the sounds heard in childhood and the sense that an adult narrator attributes to these sounds. The distance between the voice of the child and that of the adult narrator is precisely the gap between perception and understanding to which Dolar refers in talking about Freud's theories of fantasy:

There is a voice which constitutes an enigma and a trauma because it persists without being understood, there is a time of subjectivation which is precisely the time between

2. The ways in which this nursery rhyme has been parodied attest to the negative perception of the series of events that follows the building of the house, a series reflecting the relationship between predator and prey. During World War I, British Propaganda circulated a parody that included the following line: "This is the gun that killed the Hun who dropped the bomb that fell on the house that Jack built." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_Is_the_House_That_Jack_Built>. Accessed 19/04/2011.

hearing the voice and understanding it – and this is the time of fantasy. The voice is always understood *nachträglich*, subsequently, retroactively, and the time-loop of the primal fantasy is precisely the gap between hearing and making sense of what we hear, accounting for it. (136)

Dolar, and of course Freud, are talking about the way in which a child tries to make sense of his parents' sexuality; while the sounds Frame's narrators are hearing may not seem to be directly related to the primal scene, one needs only to think of the story "The Lagoon" and the narrator's remark about the lagoon never having "a proper story" to realize that the primal scene is very close to the surface in Frame's stories. One might also object that the repeating of nursery rhymes in stories like "Swans" represents a reassuring use of sound rather than the troubling memory of sound referred to by Freud. However, to the extent that nursery rhymes like "This is the House that Jack Built" present a world in which sound seems to determine the relation between cause and effect, hearing nursery rhymes, as I have shown in the example of "Swans," simply reactivates an unresolved contradiction between sound and sense.

Nursery rhymes can also be used very effectively in the short story because they represent highly condensed forms of cultural narrative. They reflect multiple layers of cultural memory, triggering a complex series of reactions that are sensory, emotional and social as well as intellectual. One of the most interesting examples of this use of nursery rhymes can be found in the story entitled "The Birds Began to Sing." The first line of the story is not the first but rather the sixth line of the nursery rhyme entitled "Sing a Song of Sixpence."³ The way in which the narrator fits the reference to the birds into the nursery rhyme demonstrates the power of such rhymes to structure our experience of the world. She backtracks from her experience of sound to her memory of a nursery rhyme that, like many of them, is enigmatic, but that imposes its pattern through the acoustic power of childhood memories. The reader is drawn into the process by his own memories of the nursery rhyme, demonstrating another way in which orality creates a space shared by narrator and reader. Upon encountering the words, "There were four and twenty of them," he cannot avoid the necessity of mentally filling in the blanks, providing the missing lines of the poem.

A number of explanations have been offered as to why the nursery rhyme tells of living birds being baked in a pie, but it is easy to perceive parallels between the situation of the birds and that of the narrator, if one places her among the mentally disturbed. Yet what seems most important is the functioning of the nursery rhyme as a synecdoche for language itself in its organization of the relationship between sound and sense. The narrator interrogates the birds in order to find out *what* they are singing. Her own capacity to give written form to her experience is linked to understanding the song of the birds: "So I said what is the name of the song, tell me and I will write it and you can listen at my window when I get the finest country musicians to play it" (158). The reference to country musicians shows to what extent the narrator has placed herself within the frame suggested by the nursery rhyme. The way in which she finds herself trapped in the inexplicable logic of the nursery rhyme reinforces rather than clarifies her relationship to language as a tool for articulating her own experience. Once again, a cha-

3. The use of this nursery rhyme is also discussed in Mortelette (40).

racter is trying to make sense of sounds as a way of solving the riddle of her existence. At the end of the story, silence takes over and the birds stop singing.

A somewhat different use of nursery rhymes can be found in "Keel and Kool." The same fear of inarticulate sound that is present in "Swans" can be found in "Keel and Kool," where Winnie is frightened by the roaring noise made by the river. The sound of the river reinforces her fear that her father will not come back from fishing, just as her sister Eva has died and will never return. The dead sister's friend Joan teases and frustrates Winnie by implying that she played rhyming games with Eva. Joan boasts that Eva showed her "some new bits to Tinker Tailor" (26). This nursery rhyme, which has already been discussed, presents a number of interesting characteristics in addition to its use of sound. It refers, of course, to a past world, and the reference to "tinker" as an occupation is a particularly strong reminder of this. Furthermore, alliteration and rhyme as well as meter create acoustic patterns that remain in the mind, explaining why "Tinker Tailor" is so often used as an intertextual reference. But it is used, furthermore, as a game by girls to foretell their futures, to predict whom they will marry, how they will live. It possesses therefore, like all games, a social role, distributing gains and losses in the form of husbands, professions, wealth, houses, clothing and so on. The nursery rhyme comes to life only by being reactivated in an exchange involving at least two people. Joan proves to be doubly malicious in referring to Tinker Tailor, for Winnie is excluded not only from playing the game, but also from knowing all the lines that must be remembered if one is to be included in the game. Social exclusion is reinforced by linguistic and cultural exclusion. The relations of power suggested by the jingle itself are compounded by the power conferred on the person who is able to use the poem for his or her own purposes, as Joan does in the story.

The complexity of Frame's use of effects of orality shows to what extent she saw the spoken forms of everyday language as a reservoir of acquired habits in which people are easily trapped. The surface transparency of speech in her stories hides, like the murky lagoon in the opening story, the depths of ambiguity that characterize human relations. Like the great masters of the short story, she creates a complex tension between the narration, which relies for its effects on complicity with the reader, and the intricate folds of human perception, which escape the grasp of language. She furthermore exploits nursery rhymes, like clichés, as a particularly potent form of collectively acquired speech habits. In her use of nursery rhymes she is relying on the intimate relation between sound and memory to suggest that her narrators are still trying to solve emotional and social issues which have their roots in childhood experiences. Anyone who has read Frame's autobiography can clearly see the relevance of this perspective. Frame's narrators, like the narrator of *An Angel at my Table*, are indeed listeners in the sense that Dolar attributes to listening in the distinction he makes between hearing and listening:

To be brief: hearing is after meaning, the signification which can be linguistically spelled out; listening is, rather, being on the lookout for sense, something that announces itself in the voice beyond meaning. We could say that hearing is entwined with understanding – hence the French double meaning (double entendre!) of *entendre*, *entendement* [...] while listening implies an opening toward a sense which is undecidable, precarious, elusive, and which sticks to the voice. (148)

Frame's narrators are indeed also listeners, constantly on the lookout, like the narrator of "The Lagoon," for the sense that is as elusive as the lagoon itself.

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