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Haunted by a Fantasy of Immortality: “Spirit” by Janet Frame

This essay provides a close analysis of one story by Janet Frame, “Spirit,” from her first collection, *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, and argues that it figures the accomplishment of a desire to achieve accommodation with death. The story purports to answer the question: “What is it that happens to mankind after death?” and provides a dead-pan answer in which polysemy, paronomasia, and onomastics reveal an interaction with multiple intertextual sources which subtend a fantasy of immortality.

The story entitled “Spirit,” which is part of *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, stands out from the rest of Janet Frame’s first collection of short stories, if only because it radically diverges from the codes of verisimilitude or social realism. It has been variously envisaged as an example of “modern fabulation” (Weiss 47), or “an amusing dystopian fable” (Delrez 15), the latter two adjectives “amusing” and “dystopian” being somehow paradoxical since dystopias are commonly deemed to provoke sentiments of dislike and discomfort. Dystopian universes are remarkably unpleasant: they are places where one is submitted to the oppression of some kind of dictatorship, and this does not generally make for comedy. Yet the art of Janet Frame lies in her handling of humour in a story which could also be defined as a “fantasy,” if we are to take up the subtitle of her second volume of short stories published in 1963: *Snowman Snowman: Fables and Fantasies*. A fantasy is “a general term for any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world” (Baldick 81-2). It describes imagined worlds in which a number of impossibilities are accepted through the willing suspension of disbelief. The word “fantasy” is polysemous and not limited to its literary or musical significance. It is used in the vocabulary of psychoanalysis because it is linked with desire and the unconscious. The definition given by Laplanche and Pontalis for “fantasy” as “*fantasme*” is worth quoting *in extenso* to try and understand its relevance to the study of literature:

Fantasy: imaginary scenario in which the subject is present and which figures, through more or less displaced processes, the accomplishment of desire and in the final analysis of an unconscious desire; fantasy presents itself through various modalities: conscious fantasies or daydreams, unconscious fantasies such as the ones uncovered by analysis in the shape of structures underlying a manifest content, original fantasy. (Laplanche and Pontalis 152, my translation)¹

“Spirit” is not a fantasy about origins; it is not a fantasy in which the author is directly or indirectly present as an immediately identifiable persona. It presents itself as a literary scenario which indirectly, through displacement onto a male character, figures the accomplishment of a desire to achieve accommodation with death. It tones down its destructive power and it endeavours to domesticate the frightening unknown. The

1. “Fantasme : scénario imaginaire où le sujet est présent et qui figure de façon plus ou moins déformée par les processus défensifs l’accomplissement d’un désir et en dernier ressort d’un désir inconscient ; le fantasme se présente sous des modalités diverses : fantasmes conscients ou rêves diurnes, fantasmes inconscients tels que l’analyse les découvre comme structures sous-jacentes à un contenu manifeste, fantasme originaire.”

unnameable is turned into a down-to-earth reality that is made acceptable through the use of wry humour. The imagined scenario provided by the short story transforms the passage from life to death into a bureaucratic process destined to tame death through simultaneous matter-of-factness and derision. The desire to come to terms with death manifests itself through the use of polysemy, paronomasia, and onomastics, and finally through the powerful intertextual echoes which resonate hauntingly throughout the story and subtend a fantasy of immortality.

The story provides an imaginary solution to the mystery of death. It tames death by making it ordinary and it shows that the process of entering the world of the dead is not harmful. There is no supplementary damage attendant upon the passage. The story takes up the example of an ordinary man, Harry, who has just died accidentally while "sunning himself in the garden" (90), and is about to discover what looms ahead, now that he no longer lives. So the story purports to answer the question: "What is it that happens to mankind after death?" And it provides a dead-pan answer.

The transformation of death into a commonplace occurrence makes it possible to do away with the concepts of damnation and salvation. The man who has just died is not thrown into the abyss of Hell, he is not made to atone in some kind of Purgatory, and he is not rewarded with an entrance through the pearly gates of Paradise. His life is not assessed in terms of the sins he has committed or the virtue he has manifested. The warden he is coming up against is not concerned about reckonings and retribution. The scenario is completely devoid of religious trappings because the sacred has been repudiated. The angels have been replaced with an administrative staff. The warden to whom Harry speaks sounds like a man in charge of an allotment bureau who is asking the dead a few questions before allocating a space to him for all eternity. The sacred has given way to a bureaucracy that is not as frightening as Kafka represents it in *The Trial* or *The Castle*. The bureaucrat is not sympathetic or empathetic. He interrogates the dead with impassivity and in a neutral, non-aggressive fashion, and considers him as a client whose needs deserve to be attended to, with as much efficiency and pragmatism as possible.

The transformation of the sacred into the bureaucratic is a deflation which creates the conditions for humour, as there is nothing baleful about death: what is painful or disturbing about it has been eliminated. There is an eradication of *das Unheimliche* through the imposition of bureaucratic norms. Harry is given a number instead of a name, "Spirit 350," and he is integrated within a system of classification. The story has reduced the passage from life to death to a classifiable occurrence which can be dealt with rationally. It has been brought down from the level of divine retribution to that of administrative procedure. The newcomer finds himself in a crowded environment and an empty lot must be attributed to him, as if he were an immigrant in a new land. He is coming to a foreign country where the administration is in charge of finding a vacant lot for the newcomer, a lot that will be in keeping with his needs as he represents them through the narration he makes of his previous life. Since his account is inadequate and conveys a vision of his past life as a second-class citizen, he is allocated a sub-human lot. This scenario constitutes a satire about the immigrant's progress in a foreign land, the land of the dead, and his failure to come across as a fully accredited human being in his new environment.

This fantasy about man's lot after death implicates a sophisticated wordplay with the figurative and literal meaning of "lot." The enigma about man's lot is translated into

finding a literal place for him: a lot which is allocated to the dead person for all eternity. And this lot is a leaf which makes the recipient indulge in a series of puns: "A leaf. A leaf. But I am a man. Men can't live on leaves" ("Spirit" 91). We discover here several instances of paronomasia which are humorous and meant to attenuate death, to transform its painful evocation into a playful one. "A leaf. A leaf" (91) resonates with "Alack, Alack" which is an archaic expression of surprise or regret and highlights Harry's disappointment with his lot. Given the playful dimension of the exchange, it can also be interpreted as antiphrastic: "lief" is an archaic adverb which means "willingly," "gladly," and the homophony between "leaf" and "lief" ironically underpins Harry's unwillingness to settle for a "leaf."

Another element of polysemy linked with "leaf" must be taken into account. The juicy leaf allocated to Harry is a literal allusion to the lush vegetation of the world of the dead but, given the metafictional context of Janet Frame's stories, one cannot help thinking of the leaves of a book. The eternal leaf can be envisaged as a humorous allusion to a *topos* of poetry which dates back to at least Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the idea that man's destiny, man's lot, is written in the leaves of the book of the universe.² Through the polysemy of "leaf," the facetious image of the dead man transformed into a worm sliding down his leaf co-exists with an elevated vision of man's destiny written out in the all-encompassing Book of God, and the discrepancy created by the juxtaposition of two discordant worldviews contributes to the humour of the scene. Humour can be envisaged as self-directed and self-deprecating: Frame amuses herself by conjuring up the innocuous fantasy of Harry's leaf, and simultaneously derides her own power to confer immortality upon her creation. By couching Harry's eternal life on a leaf on the "eternal" leaves of the book she has published, she highlights the process of immortalization performed by the written word but implicitly sets her own achievement against canonical accounts of eternal life. Hers and Harry's are mere green leaves, written by greenhorns, a far cry from Dante's book of the universe.

The playfulness of the exchange between Harry and the warden in the last lines of the story is also enhanced by the alliterative pattern which is used. Harry is advised in a very condescending way to "eat and sleep and slide" up and down the leaf. The assonance between /i:t/ and /sli:p/ and the alliteration between /sli:p/ and /slaid/ transform the experience of life after death into a playful peregrination, similar to children's games on a slide, in a playground. There is a sense of eternal enjoyment, as if the dead were allowed to return to the age of innocence, and to remain in that stage of pleasurable carelessness for the rest of their "death span."

Humour derives from the transformation of the dead adult into a creature who is up and kicking (or down and sliding) but there is a strong element of satire in this dwindling or shrinking process. Harry is reduced to the stature of a worm since, by sliding up and down the leaf for all eternity, he will leave a silver patch of his own on the juicy leaf, the type of silver patch that is usually left by crawling invertebrates. The element of satire does not simply derive from the diminution of his stature but also from the polysemy of the word "worm" which alludes to an unpleasant kind of person, someone who does not deserve respect. The reduction of the dead man's stature to that of a slug

2. See for instance the end of Dante's *Paradise*: "Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna / legato con amore in un volume / cio che per l'universo si squaderna" (XXXIII, 85-87). The English translation goes, "In its depths I saw that it contained bound with love in one volume that which through the universe is scattered" (quoted in Nuttall 35).

may eventually be interpreted as a particularly “dispiriting” experience and the title of the story might be regarded as ironically antiphrastic. The activities in which “Spirit 350” will indulge for all eternity are meant to be “spirited” but have nothing “spiritual” about them and some critics have gone as far as suggesting that “Spirit” found its place “among the most satirical items in Frame’s corpus, which ruthlessly expose what she views as a spiritual deficit consequent upon the lazy materialism of Western societies” (Delrez 17).

Onomastics are equally humorous, if not satirical, and deserve special attention, all the more so as proper nouns seem to be absent from the world of the dead. The warden is surprised to hear Harry mention his wife’s name: “Emily Barker? Do you have names?” (90). The name of Harry’s wife happens to encapsulate the first and the last names of two women writers: Emily Brontë, whose family Janet Frame strongly identified with,³ and Mary Anne Barker alias Lady Barker, who published in 1870 her first book entitled *Station Life in New Zealand*, which became a classic of New Zealand literature. We may legitimately assert that Janet Frame did not use these writers’ names innocently. The story of Harry’s eternal lot is very much concerned with immortality and posterity. Harry informs the warden that living people are “always trying to leave their mark on the world” and the warden comforts Harry by telling him that he will be able to make “a little permanent silver patch” of his own on his juicy leaf. By allusively encapsulating the names of two female writers in her own story about Harry’s taking leave from the world to settle on an eternal leaf, Frame humorously and self-reflexively points in the direction of her own leaves, and leave-takings, which may also “leave” a mark upon the world.

In addition to this playful allusion to two female writers’ names, another collocation must be taken into account. Lady Barker’s letters to her sister in England were published under the title *Station Life in New Zealand*, a specific reference to life on a farm, since in Australia and New Zealand a “station” is a large farm with animals. In Frame’s short story, we recognize an account of “Station Life after Death.” The deceased is represented as a pioneer colonizing a juicy country and finding his “station” on a leaf which he exploits for eternity. His reduced circumstances may be regarded as a satirical response from Janet Frame writing back to deride the greed attendant upon juicy colonization.

The other names which appear are equally facetious or satiric. The warden challenges the fact that people should be given names. He questions their validity and seems to imply that a name is not necessary. In response to the warden’s challenge, Harry tries to establish the legitimacy of names and their individuality. To do so, he paradoxically resorts to names which are not individualized but on the contrary multiple and unspecific. He explains: “I was Harry and there was my brother Dick and my sister Molly” (Frame 90). This enumeration closely resembles the collocation “Tom, Dick, and Harry” which is used to refer to any male in the world. With “Tom” being replaced with “Molly,” the collocation is partly appropriated and partly modified, creating a sense of departure from linguistic norms and ironic discrepancy. Frame is drawing attention to the arbitrariness of names and to the dispossession of identity that institutions are

3. “In the autobiography her construction of herself as a writer is clearly an intertextual activity, this construction being primarily the result of the interaction of the Self with literary others. [...] It is marked by an early identification of the young Frame sisters with the Brontës; Janet seeing herself as Charlotte, and all three of them setting out to write novels” (Oettli-van Delden 73).

liable to perform: a situation which she encountered herself as a patient in a psychiatric hospital and which is reconfigured and revived here, as Harry comes up against his eternal lot, a lot which is partly that of Tom, Dick, and Harry and partly his own.

Critics have much commented upon the “Trojan horse strategy” used by Janet Frame in her stories and more specifically on her capacity to insert powerful intertexts in a covert way through absorption, disguise, and displacement (Dvorak 145). Allan Weiss has investigated Frame’s debt to Edgar Allan Poe, in particular to his apocalyptic tale “The Conversation between Eiros and Charmian” in which two characters discuss the manner in which the world ended when a comet hit the planet Earth. Poe’s tale, which is included in the collection *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, takes place in an imaginary “Aydenn” after the world has come to an end. Despite the fact that Poe’s protagonists display much more empathy towards each other than Harry and the warden do, the overall frame, that of a dialogue between dead people, is the common fact which links both stories and, in Dvorak’s words, “imparts upon the readers the awkward task of eavesdropping” (145). By secretly incorporating this apocalyptic dialogue within her own story, Frame does not only achieve a complex act of “frame-breaking” and “a heteroglossic stratification of voices” (Dvorak 146); she allows her characters to live (and to die) in a referential world which is simultaneously located on a longer temporal axis and a narrower spatial plane, thus heightening the satirical torsion of her revision based upon a process of derision and debunking. Through her reconfiguration of Poe’s version of the Apocalypse, Frame’s story sweepingly reaches back and forward to the original biblical account of the final cataclysm while reducing its span to a silver trail on a juicy leaf.

As noted by Dvorak, Weiss and Delrez, the last part of the story makes an intertextual reference to one of the most well-known stage dialogues in the history of drama: that between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Harry tells the warden: “But I tell you I was a human being, a man in form and moving how like an angel” (90). This is an allusion to:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither. (II, 2, 307-13)

When Hamlet is speaking to the courtiers, his sincerity is in question. He explains his melancholy but, as commentators concur, he might very well be putting on an act, “an antic disposition” (I, 5, 171), making the courtiers believe that he is mad. By simultaneously aggrandizing man’s status and reducing it to a handful of dust, Hamlet lays the emphasis on the biblical theme of vanity: vanity of vanities; all is vanity.⁴ Frame literalizes the resulting process of devastation when she makes Harry shrink to the level of a slug.

The allusion to *Hamlet* also makes the reader cast a retrospective glance at the story and at Harry’s account of his life, which contains an unmistakable element of melancholy. He had high aspirations for himself, which are presented in a humorous way: he wanted to be “an inventor or explorer or sea captain” (89), and he puts the three possibilities on the same level, erasing social hierarchies. None of his dreams came true, and

4. *Ecclesiastes* 1:2. The Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate) renders it as “Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas.”

he found himself fenced in an alarmingly limited existence. The depiction of Harry's life approximates Hamlet's confinement in a degraded kingdom, which he calls a prison. Harry felt caught in the prison-house of routine: "we are creatures of habit. Lived in a little house..." (90). He felt threatened by the common enemy, death: "a big black death swoops down from the skies to carry us away" (90). His death rescues him from death: he is safe because he is dead. As the warden tells him: "and remember no blackbirds to bother you" (91). Death is represented as a protection through a major ironic twist which reconfigures life-in-death as nonsensical, and claustrophobic.

In the closing paragraphs of the story, immediately after quoting Shakespeare, Harry also exclaims: "I've wept and laughed and fallen in love" (91). It is difficult not to hear in this sentence an echo to the poem by T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In the words of Marta Dvorak, this sentence "ventriloquate[s] the well-known lines spoken by T. S. Eliot's persona Prufrock, 'I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed' (Eliot 16), in turn containing a Biblical ring (2 Samuel I, 12)" (Dvorak 146).⁵ The last words which Harry is allowed to utter are borrowed ones. To express his disappointment with the restrictions of his lot, he is left without words of his own and uses those derived from Shakespeare, Eliot, and the Bible. The citational process is highly ironic because it is predicated upon a discrepancy between the glory of the embedded sources and the diminutive nature of the embedding narrative: one of the shortest short stories in the first collection of a short story writer from the most distant periphery in the English-speaking world annexes and incorporates some of the most acclaimed sources in the English Canon. By placing her Everyman (Tom, Dick, and Harry) on the same axis as Hamlet and Prufrock, not only does Frame ironize him but she also ironizes herself by implicitly aligning her short story with a canonical tragedy and a canonical poem. Through the partial quotation of Prufrock's lines, and the misquote from *Hamlet*, Harry is simultaneously granted and denied such affiliation with his grand predecessors. Like Prufrock exclaiming: "No, I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be," Harry is submitted to a process of denial, which reinforces his illustrious lineage. He is simultaneously aggrandized and debunked by being allowed to ventriloquize a canonical madman and a canonical fool. In this very short short story, Frame is ironically incorporating some of the major master narratives of the Western world. Not only does this create a "dialogical cultural continuum" (Dvorak 146), it also paradoxically illustrates a postcolonial strategy of appropriation and recycling based on a poetics of ironic debunking. Frame annexes the canon to write a counter-narrative organized around reduction – a reduction of the size of the narrative as well as a reduction of the protagonist's legitimate expectations, of his aspirations, of his activities, of his space, of his stature. Frame's narrative is diminutive and her hero is a sub-man who crystallizes the frustrations and emptiness of an infra-ordinary existence. Nevertheless the story is a far cry from despair and hopelessness; despite its ironic deflation or possibly on account of it, it manifests the desire to leave "a mark on the world some sort of a trail" (90). The trail is reduced to "a little permanent silver patch," with the preposterous association of "little" with "permanent." This association might be regarded as a metafictional comment pointing in the direction of the accomplishment of desire. The reconciliation of "little" with "permanent" reinstates the modest short

5. The second *Book of Samuel*: "They beat their breasts and wept, because Saul and Jonathan his son and the people of the Lord, the House of Israel, had fallen into battle."

story in the permanence of literary genres. It gestures towards immortality through the imperishable work of art. Frame's fantasy about coming to terms with death might be ultimately read as a defence and illustration of the act of creation under the guise of a recreation, in which a slug is allowed to turn into a silkworm so as to renew with silver threads⁶ the eternal fabric of fiction.

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6. See the analysis of the genealogy of the silkworm image in Frame's work developed in Delrez 17-8.