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Mark Williams

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“Tending the ovens”: Janet Frame’s Politics of Language

This article argues that Janet Frame’s fiction does not have a “politics” in the sense of a unitary position on race or war or colonisation. However the stories in *The Lagoon* develop a method by which the reader is forced to engage with ethical and political issues worked into familiar language. Frame’s use of ordinary language, even clichés, as much as her dense symbolism contains interpretive richness.

Extraordinary things happen every day
In our street only this morning
The ground opened at my feet
Without warning
Unless it was a cloud in the south
Balled like a swelling in the mouth.

And the air was fresh, being winter
Time when the ground broke
Disclosing a billion bodies burning
Under a thin smoke.

Allen Curnow, “Any Time Now” (1972)¹

In 2010 critic and biographer of Janet Frame, Patrick Evans, published a novel narrated from the viewpoint of New Zealand’s most influential fiction writer in the cultural nationalist style, Frank Sargeson. Seen as the “father” of New Zealand literature until well into the 1970s, Sargeson was also for just over a year in the mid-1950s host and mentor to a shy young woman recently released from almost a decade of psychiatric care who had already published a collection of stories, *The Lagoon*, in 1951. Evans’s novel is set in the period in which Frame lived in a shed in Sargeson’s garden writing *Owls Do Cry* (1957), and he catches with uncanny realism the puzzled consciousness of the older writer as he seeks first to offer guidance, then to understand, and finally to learn from his odd guest. In the process New Zealand fiction suffers a sea-change as Frame moves towards the linguistic densities of her major fiction and Sargeson slowly grasps that she has discovered how to write in a provincial world without that sense of limitation that informs his “classic” New Zealand stories. My subject here is not those changes in Sargeson’s fictional practice or in the reach of New Zealand modernism but the political implications of the linguistic techniques and strategies of reader involvement in the least complex of Frame’s fictions, the stories in *The Lagoon*.

At one point in Evans’s novel, Sargeson describes the reactions of his neighbours to his night-time activities as a writer; they had imagined him to be a baker “*tending the ovens*,” a phrase he thinks “worthy of Janet herself” (20). It is a redolent phrase in a post-war context where images of the liberation of the concentration camps are still

1. In Bornholdt et al., 410.

sharply present, and what is Framean about the phrase might well be connected to this awareness. Of course, the Holocaust is a very distant event from the New Zealand world of the 1950s and '60s, yet Frame would make it part of that world. The very outrageousness of connecting bread-making and exterminating people in the same phrase is a kind of oxymoron, a linguistic figure sympathetic to an author who specialises in colliding opposed orders of reality: tragedy and humour, New Zealand psychiatric care and Nazi-like persecution. Frame's fiction, certainly, upsets the manicured safety and benevolence of contemporary New Zealand by introducing apocalyptic echoes into its scenes of ordinary life. There is also a suggestion in the phrase Sargeson admiringly italicises of a sly humour produced by the unexpected and homely context in which so fearful a theme is so delicately evoked. Into a complacent suburban setting, it insinuates an atmosphere of atrocity that ought to belong elsewhere, but is at home; it also directs attention to the curious routes, comic as well as terrifying, between puzzlement and recognition that words, in Frame's fiction, will explore.

Evans focuses the literary implications of this double sense of language through his not-quite comprehending Sargeson, as he gathers knowledge about Frame's fictional practice which only began to accumulate for critics after the period described in the novel, that is, from the 1960s. The fictive Sargeson is a slow learner, a decided advantage in coming to terms with a writer who teases her readers by applying pressure to the synapses between words and what they signify, a technique which produces a rich excess of meaning once we learn the trick of patient and circuitous reading. The literary host and mentor gradually discovers calculated patterns of meaning in impenetrably gnomic phrases and method in the baffling departures from common sense of the written messages that his guest leaves around the house and garden for him to find. Thus he anticipates the hermeneutic diligence and openness which reading Frame would increasingly come to require.

Looking back now to the stories in *The Lagoon*, we find there techniques of discomposure – the juxtaposing of the grave and ordinary and the compacting of different kinds of sense and suggestion in a word or phrase – which we associate with the “difficult” novelist, Janet Frame. At times a turn of phrase anticipates the later style, as when the woman in “The Day of the Sheep,” who “cannot construe having no grammar of journeys,” looks forward to Istina Mavet in *Faces in the Water* (1961), who learns “to construe as miracle the hieroglyphic commonplace” (69; 251). But our passage through the texts is less tortuous than in the later novels. Narrators do not multiply; magical events do not occur; we do not have to work through passages of dense philosophical thought. Hence we are able to attend more closely to what is crucial to Frame's involvement of a wider range of readers than her academic ones: the satirical use of common speech. By “satirical” I mean something akin to the kind of mockery that Patrick White directs at his suburban housewives, Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley, in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). White uses the malicious banality of their speech to expose what he sees as a general banality in the culture that they represent and the cruelty and indifference that lie within its righteousness. Frame pushes this technique further. The reader is not able to distance herself so easily from the satire, as with White's suburban housewives, because it is vested less in character – or caricature – than in language. Encoded in the familiar language of middle New Zealand are

intimations of the larger patterns of violence and alienation that govern all social beings, not a particular class or social group or nation, or even just unpleasant individuals.

Here we may find the basis of a Framean politics, provided that we identify that “politics” not with an extractable set of authorial positions about injustice or war or even shock treatment but rather with the reader’s mobile engagement with the language of Frame’s fiction. By mobile I mean that we are required, like Evans’s Sargeson trying to decipher his guest’s enigmatic messages, to engage with situations of language in their specific contexts.

Frame’s early fiction – *The Lagoon*, *Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water* – is especially significant in terms of the identification of the structures of social thought that both produce and conceal distress. More confined by their New Zealand setting than the later fiction, they draw attention to a question put by Marc Delrez in an essay on “aesthetic and political violence” focused on the 1968 novel, *The Rainbirds*: “what difference is made by the centrality of the war novel in the economy of a novel otherwise set in an environment [New Zealand] best described as politically innocuous?” (145). That innocuousness – and the language in which it presents itself – is key to the working in Frame’s early fiction of a politics of discomposure. In that fiction, preoccupied with psychiatric “care” in her native country, and perhaps not yet consciously addressing an international audience, Frame establishes a method of implicating the reader in the general pattern of not noticing the hidden engines of violence driving the ordinary interactions of social life. The egregious exclusion of violence from the social picture in 1950s New Zealand makes it an exemplary test-case of these workings. At the same time the psychiatric theme is already being extended by the often indirect introjection into the texts of a number of ethical issues that readers, especially New Zealand ones, prefer to locate elsewhere; violence, racism, war and poverty, in a persistent settler myth, occur in Europe or Asia.

Frame’s early fiction directs a potent attack on New Zealand exceptionalism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the language that reflects the conviction among Pakeha New Zealanders of their advantage over the rest of the world in respect of peace, plenty and safety, themes initiated in the effusive language of pastoral promise in the promotional campaigns of the New Zealand Company in the 1840s. The inheritance of this language is rendered in Frame’s fiction of the 1950s as ossified truisms, clichés and national boasts. The narrator of “My Cousins Who Could Eat Cooked Turnips” recalls from her childhood the insistence on New Zealand’s advantage in terms of food production and consumption:

There were always people starving in Europe. Sometimes people came to school, thin women with pamphlets, and told us about Europe, and then after the talk we put our names down for a society where we went and sat on a long form and had a feast once a term. (44)

The problem, then, is not the “innocuousness” of New Zealand but the perception of its relative harmony employed in the fashioning of a national imagery aimed first at enticing English settlers to migrate to New Zealand and later at enticing English citizens to eat New Zealand’s pastoral exports. This perception, recorded in the instances in Frame’s fiction where children are sternly reminded by their parents of their obligation in a land of plenty to eat the food others lack, became an article of

national faith in the period of prosperity that followed the Second World War. Even in poor families, this sense of privileged difference as New Zealanders is entrenched.

For Frame, having spent almost a decade in New Zealand psychiatric institutions, there is no inverse ratio between local placidity and violence elsewhere. Her early fiction discovers florid violence not only in the medical treatment of the mad or the harsh norms of a settler society but also in the most emollient aspect of a seemingly calm society: pastoral New Zealand. The story in *The Lagoon* that deals most curiously and evocatively with that theme is the oddly titled "The Day of the Sheep," perhaps referring to Nathanael West's apocalyptic 1939 novel, *The Day of the Locust*, in order ironically to reinforce the stereotypical association of New Zealand with the pastoral and a lack of metropolitan excitement. The story anticipates that mixture of narrative oddness and the suggestion of buried ethical implication that we find in the later fiction. There is a disturbing quality that derives from taking the most familiar image of national life, sheep production, and introducing it within domestic life. Statements of the obvious – "you never see sheep in the street, only people" – have a curious disorienting effect because of what lies behind their obviousness: the massive project of raising, slaughtering, freezing and exporting animals and the utter normalising of that project (70).

Frame uses a cliché of New Zealand farming life in the story, "a powerful father crying Way Back Out Way Back Out" (74). The capitalised phrase is used by farmers to send their dogs out to control and direct sheep, an activity so deeply embedded in the national consciousness that television series have been devoted to it. Here it is attached to the voice of a powerful father, a controlling voice in a society where enormous value derived from sheep filled pastures, killing chains and mass exports. It is useful to think of another "powerful father" here, Alan Mulgan, father of the novelist John, who represented the colonial image of New Zealand to his son's generation. Mulgan's picture of successful settler enterprise written for readers in England is expressed in his *Pastoral New Zealand*, published in 1946, the year when Frame first entered the psychiatric system:²

New Zealand is unique in that it has built up its agriculture almost entirely on the basis of what might be termed grass-land farming. It has utilised its natural conditions of soil and climate in a manner not equalled throughout the agricultural world. Apart from the comparatively few acres of root and other crops, the production of New Zealand comes from grass. As an arable farmer, the New Zealander cannot compare with his cousin in Britain, who, to save his country by growing more food, used the plough with such magnificent success in two recent wars. The simple reason is that the New Zealander does not need to cultivate the land to anything like that extent. His conditions, by way of equable climate, especially ample and even rainfall, simplify his operations. Also, circumstances have given him a great share in markets for goods that can be produced from grass. (20-21)

Mulgan's New Zealand is "pastoral" in celebration of the colonial effort to make the land productive, while retaining the traditional values of the English "Home," a word with deep personal resonance for him. The industrial aspects of its farms are recognised in terms of the processes of adapting European food-production to local conditions and by the bumper figures that signify wealth. But Mulgan's pastoral world

2. See Stafford and Williams, "Janet Frame's Peopled Pastures," 25-27.

has no victims; its processes of land alienation are concealed in the making of a seamless image of prosperity. Moreover, *all* New Zealanders are beneficiaries of this extravagant herbivorous fortune. Yet New Zealand's farming success was based firstly on the imposition of colonial rule, secondly on the application of industrial technologies to the processing and exporting of animals, and thirdly on the cultivation of a compensating image for this excess of modernity by way of the convention of pastoral wholeness.

Unlike his Marxist son, John, author of *Man Alone* (1939), Alan Mulgan's pastoral success story takes little account of either the original Maori owners of that arable land (who appear in his book as cheerful farm workers) or urban working people (who are absent). For working-class New Zealanders of Frame's age, entry into the labour force was typically by way of pastoral industries, and having to work at the woollen mill is a source of terror in Frame's early fiction as vivid as that of Dickens' blacking factory. Frame is writing in a *complicated* pastoral context, not pastoral in the sense that the world described represents a retreat from modernity, industrialism or capitalism, but in the sense that a pastoral image so compelling has been manufactured that it has fooled its manufacturers.³ This unearthing of a political context to New Zealand's favoured self-imagery does not mean that the texts urge the readers towards the adoption of an anti-colonial stance. Rather, steeped in the platitudes of this manufactured world of pastoral advantage, the stories in *The Lagoon* make its absolute confidence strange and, embracing what we might call a politics of the uncanny, unnerve the reader.

In "The Day of the Sheep," the sheep itself has somehow leapt out of the pastoral context into a domestic one. Behind its dumb presence in the story one detects the weight of that pastoral imagery and the language of successful settlerdom, but not oppressively. Frame's deployment of the sheep is not political in the sense that it anticipates the cause of "animal rights"; she is concerned with primitive human consciousness, not animal welfare. Nevertheless, the story provides a disturbing and enigmatic image surrounded by the vernacular language of New Zealand that prompts readers to look through the pastoral image to the unblessed conditions it conceals. At the same time, the exchange between animal and the focal character, Nance, introduces a central question: what is it that constitutes the human? What is the mark of superior difference of humans to the lives of animals? This is a question pursued in *Faces in the Water* with its insistent reference to the animal world, especially the lives of farmed animals. If there is some special status attached to being human, it is hard to discern within the world of the psychiatric institution.

In *Faces*, Frame attaches the animal theme extensively to the great human tragedy of the mid-twentieth century, the Holocaust. At the corrupt heart of the hospital system in the novel is the slaughter house as a dark secret meaning which shows what the whole system of social organisation is based on. Humans are reduced to animals in a country that reduces animals to things. It is hard not to see Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (1947), which appeared in English translation in 1958, as the ghost in Frame's novel published three years later. Levi catches the sense not just of abjection that such

3. Allen Curnow's 1941 poem, "The Unhistoric Story," brilliantly deflates the pastoral dream with its "chemical farmers," Bornholdt et al., 400.

suffering produces but also the fragility of “the ordinary moral world,” the reduction to silence of “social habits and instincts” in the face of the dire physical necessity imposed in the camps (92-93). The question put by Levi’s account of the camps, is not where was God at Auschwitz, but where was Man? In other words, Auschwitz shattered the faith in the human as a condition connected by values and the capacity to empathise with others. The problem is not that the doctors and nurses in *Faces in the Water* are evil, or even that the system designed by a supposedly benevolent medical system and state enacts such violence. Violence here is not confined to the oppressors; it is practised by the victims themselves against one another. The narrator sprays a dying woman with DDT (121). Suffering does not ennoble in Frame’s book any more than it does in Levi’s, who observes the condition of “rivalry and hatred among the subjected” (97).

Faces in the Water appeared in the same year as Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot*. The latter novel transports the scene of Nazi actions against Jews to a Sydney factory yard where the workers crucify the immigrant, Mordecai Himmelfarb. Frame’s novel is not as graphic or allegorical; the Holocaust is present by association in the ECT machines, the doctors dispensing torture from their God-like stations, the nurses as the intermediaries who become the agents of repression. It is there above all in the imagery. The two old men pulling the coal cart in *Faces* (133) offer as vivid an image of suffering and indifference as the terribly similar events recorded in *If This Is a Man*.

In *The Lagoon* terror and the ordinary co-exist but have not yet learned the rules of their transactions with the larger world of historical suffering. Frame will later write directly of twentieth-century horrors such as the use of napalm in Vietnam,⁴ but *The Lagoon* stories concentrate on New Zealand experience. Two especially fine and often anthologised stories in the collection, “Keel and Kool” and “Swans,” deal with the familiar sense of what lies under the calm surfaces of settled life. The language of the stories ranges from consolatory cliché – “But it’s all for the best...” (23) – to the harsh alien cry of the gull in “Keel and Kool.” The former opens onto a poverty of social and religious meaning, while the obdurately untranslatable call of the gull has private significance for the character, Winnie, yet both are rich in potential meaning. Indeed, the very emptiness of the former kind of language use is its source of meaning, as when the language of comfort in “The Bedjacket” extends to the mad, “they’re people like you and me, remember,” although the narrator knows “they weren’t at all” (33). What minor, imperceptive, and even inarticulate, characters in Frame’s fiction say is as worthy of attention as those break-out quotes of intense narrative perception that critics prefer to concentrate on.

We might measure the distance in method between *The Lagoon* stories and *Faces in the Water* by the train rides in the two works. In “Swans,” trains are associated with the father figure who is a railway worker and provides the family with holiday transportation to a familiar beach. But the family, without the father, reaches the wrong beach, while in their home a beloved cat is dying. In the latter novel train journeys recall not just Seacliff Hospital station where “the loonies” can be viewed but also concentration camp representation with its insistent emphasis on trains as the

4. Frame, “Instructions for Bombing with Napalm,” *The Pocket Mirror*, 153.

speakable journey towards an unspeakable destination.⁵ Frame takes over the sense in such literature among the condemned of being observed by those not condemned and of feeling ashamed. The use of State power and modern technology in New Zealand psychiatric institutions to torment those deemed irretrievably other has been deepened by association with the concentration camps.

Delrez sees the colonial past of a settler society as one point where war enters into Frame's fiction. Certainly, that past figures in "The Lagoon," but Delrez's observation that "the settler colonies provide a context where historical violence tends to be naturalised or at least downplayed as part of a colonial history" (136) only carries us so far into the curious and divagatory way the Maori past, and Pakeha relations to that past, are conveyed. The titular story of *The Lagoon* presents us with a fragile idyll under which lies a macabre racialised murder. The narrator returns to the small town of Picton she knew as a child. Intense memories are prompted by this return, but their reliability is unclear. She recalls her grandmother and her great-grandmother, the latter of whom is described as a "Maori princess" who appears in an old photograph as a somewhat theatrical figure in a lace dress. An aunt, who serves as a mediating figure, between the present and the past, informs her that this Maori ancestor had murdered her husband by drowning him in the lagoon.

The story has tempting literary and biographical references. It carries us back to Katherine Mansfield's Picton, visited as a child and represented in "The Voyage," where her father had lived (and eaten the beloved native bird, the tui), and to the vanishing of the "old Maori" world, whose passing Pakeha people of Mansfield's father's generation observed sentimentally even as their actions hastened that demise. A lurid version of the story of a Maori woman who kills her, presumably, Pakeha husband or lover, occurs in the 1905 "Maoriland" story of A.A. Grace, "Hira," where it dramatises the Pakeha sense of Maori as between two worlds: losing contact with the traditions of the past yet not quite civilised, hence subject to savage recidivism.⁶

In "The Lagoon" Frame is more concerned with familiar representations of Maori in Pakeha consciousness, registered through stock phrases and a mournful tone, than in actual history or biography. There is a moment in the story when personal history and collective myth are run together in the narrator's oddly detached presentation of memory: "When my grandmother died all the Maoris at the Pa came to her funeral, for she was a friend of the Maoris and her mother had been a Maori princess, very beautiful they said, with fierce ways of loving and hating" (3). Here the cloying phrase "she was a friend of the Maoris" looks back to the beauty, savagery, uncontrolled emotionality that Maori possessed for the romantic writers of "Maoriland," like A.A. Grace or Katherine Mansfield on her Urewera camping trip, at the same time evoking the treacly expressions of benign ownership Pakeha continued to employ when describing Maori into the 1960s (notably in Prime Minister Keith Holyoake's phrase, "Our Maoris").

Frame was certainly aware of the language of sentimentality in popular New Zealand writing about children and Maori by way of her mother's writing of

5. For example, Jorge Semprun's *The Long Voyage*, first published in 1963 by Gallimard, narrates one man's train journey to Buchenwald.

6. Stafford and Williams, *Maoriland*, 117-118.

sentimental poems for the local newspaper, in which she herself participated as a child. Attention to this popular literary legacy has run parallel to the study of Frame as a highbrow writer without the lines of critical inquiry – high and low – actually touching. Yet Frame carries both lines into her fiction, and the sentimental one provides an important linguistic avenue into stories like “The Lagoon.” In “Swans” the anxieties about and disappointments of homecoming are couched in childish phrases replete with premonitions of adult fears “finding shells galore and making castles and getting buried and unburied, going dead and coming alive like the people in the Bible” (63). The double consciousness of the narrative – childish and adult – here recalls Mansfield who published sentimental sketches of childhood in her teens, along with the more risky and advanced material, not abandoning the former in the interests of the latter, but working both into a narrative method in which the styles are run together. But the edginess of this technique is pushed further by Frame because what lies behind the innocent language has more weight than in, say, “At the Bay” when the children’s talk mirrors the snobberies of their parents.” In “Keel and Kool” we read words of trite religious comfort offered to a mother for a dead daughter in reported speech: “A sad blow, people said, to lose your first, just when she was growing up to be help to you. But it’s all for the best and you have Wonderful Faith Mrs Todd, she’s happier in another sphere” (23). Here the comforting phrases offered to a bereaved parent have the same cheery emptiness as the phrases which record New Zealand’s exceptional and blessed state.

To read Frame, then, we need to attend not only to the convoluted passages of philosophising or the heightened prose of existential insight, or the gothic moments of threat, or to the sometimes heavy-handed satire directed at conventional cruelties. We must listen as well to the voices within the language of the familiar and ordinary, and we should notice the amused but sharply satirical use of favourite New Zealand themes, especially Pakeha ones such as the Maori Princess in “The Lagoon.” The Princess as an ancestor was a favourite Pakeha fantasy in this period indicating both the colonial-romantic fixation with miscegenation and a desire to maintain a distance from actual Maori in their unidealised present condition as distinct from the noble face they presented in staged portraits of the past. Here the language of colonial possession exists within almost invisible quotation marks. The laudatory words have been faintly exaggerated, made strange, so that the alert reader may recognise their inner workings.

Certainly, there is more than cultural record or political message in the presence of the Maori past in “The Lagoon.” The personal allusions in the story seem significant as they register the oppression of otherness in the most familiar Framean sense, aside from that of psychiatric distress: that of class and the shame of poverty. Frame’s mother was a servant in the Picton home of the young Harold Beauchamp, Katherine Mansfield’s father. Frame’s Picton is not that of Mansfield’s familiar renditions of a New Zealand childhood. The details are awry: the bush has lost its fearfulness and got mixed up with gorse; the noble dying Maori has been run together with the savage one. The Maori world of old has somehow insinuated its way into the narrator’s ancestry, yet it lacks allure in the story, it is a mediated world. Mansfield herself was disappointed in her own experience of Maori in her Urewera camping trip to encounter Maori who did not behave in the old ways. But here the narrator’s

disappointment that “the Maoris [...] didn’t sing the real Maori songs, they sang You are my sunshine and South of the Border” signals the fictional persona’s imprisonment within myth rather than the author’s submission to that myth (5).

How is this political? It is true that the story has particular and potent New Zealand resonances that are deeply embedded in the complacencies, evasions and anxieties of settler consciousness. Frame invokes the place of Maori in New Zealand literature and Pakeha mythologising. In a narrative that turns on unreliable memory and that features Maori, it is difficult not to feel nudged towards the larger issue of Pakeha memory of the colonial past. Nevertheless, the connection to the colonial treatment of Maori seems unnecessarily tenuous. It is as though in reaching back to the colonial world the narrator finds only other narratives, invented by herself and her family. She cannot distinguish among the narrative voices of aunt, grandmother and great-grandmother. The depiction of the Maori figure in the story draws attention to an imaginative status that is not just in the mind of the narrator, but is a function of the layers of settler myth between the corrupt present and a past which mixes contradictory stories about Maori. Maori here are part of what Grace, the central character in the 1963 novel *Towards Another Summer* published posthumously in 2007, calls “the code which everyone understood, which held no surprises”: that of the Maoriland world of ferns, bellbirds, tuis, kowhai blossoms, which she recognises as an antipodean fairyland (194).

The murderous great-grandmother exists within a spectrum of representations of Maori in Frame’s fiction. To see Frame as reminding Pakeha of their violent past is to limit the range of reference and the particularity of the contexts in which they appear. Frame is remarkably prescient in her tracing in the 1960s of the idea that Pakeha are envious of Maori originality, an idea articulated expressly in the postmodern 1980s. And she is aware of the specifically Pakeha resonances of that generalised settler attitude towards indigenous people that empire encouraged. Pakeha concealment of their military displacement of Maori may be implied, but the texts also note the desire for special insight that accompanies Pakeha interest in Maori. Lettice Bradley in *A State of Siege* (1966) has a seemingly innate empathy with indigenous vision, envied by the narrator. In *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) Maori words are granted an authentic relation to place lacking in English ones: “The Maori names – Wanganui, Waikato, Tuatapere, Taranaki – were more powerful because they were welded to the place by the first unifying act of poetry and not stuck on like a grocery label” (96-97).

Should we assume that Frame herself agrees with the rather romantic position advanced here? In “The Lagoon” the experience of Maori culture available to Pakeha is felt to be unconvincing and disappointing, without the glamour of the ancient world or the signs of that true belonging Maori ought to display. It is as though, under the influence of cultural nationalists like Sargeson, Curnow and Charles Brasch who helped induct Frame into serious literature, the young author must dispel her mother’s attachment to the sentimentalised Maori of “Old New Zealand” they so despised. As tempting as it is to convert the continual probing at power, economic difference and race in Frame’s fiction into a coherent, unitary political viewpoint, it is important to resist the urge to arrive at the destination of stable meaning.

The private person Janet Frame may indeed, like the poet James K. Baxter, have viewed New Zealand society as repressive, antagonistic to difference and indifferent

to the imagination. The connection to Baxter is enticing. They were friends, especially in Dunedin where they were consecutive Burns fellows at Otago University,⁷ and both seem to share a profound aversion to mainstream New Zealand life. Like her, Baxter likes to insert apocalyptic possibilities into the familiar suburban world.⁸ But that connection is also misleading because Frame's literary production does not have a politics in the way Baxter's does – which is not to say that Frame herself did not. Her political sympathies are indicated when she observed in 2003 that, were she to win the Nobel Prize, as it was suggested she might, she would buy back the New Zealand railways (Manson 3). But even here, does this indicate political antagonism to the privatisation of the railways in the 1980s or nostalgia for a railways childhood, or a joke; how are we to take such a reported comment without considering the tone in which it was delivered? Resisting Baxter's politics becomes more necessary the more prophetic their expression in the poetry. Baxter's persuasive power diminishes not because his species of Catholicism and his utopianism look more and more dated and unappealing but because they are so overtly present in the writing – so ready to be consumed. By not determining the ethical or political outcomes of her readers, Frame gives interpretive power to the reader in the same measure that Baxter takes it away. We are in no danger of having to agree or disagree with her religious position because supposed references to religion ranging from Buddhism to Christadelphianism lead us to no revelation. Similarly, the "politics" of her fiction do not cohere into a singular position.

Hence, the need to focus on language situations in Frame. We might consider here a term associated with science that has been borrowed for literary purposes, allotropism, denoting the ability of the same element to have different chemical characteristics. D.H. Lawrence uses it to describe his understanding of a new sort of character in the modern novel:

You mustn't look in my novel [*The Rainbow*] for the old stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same radically-unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure element of carbon). (qtd. in Zytaruk and Boulton 183)

Confronting the plethora of distinct interpretive approaches that have been imposed on Janet Frame's fiction, we might bear Lawrence's analogy in mind. The trick is not to approach each moment of textual engagement in terms of some overarching interpretive position that resolves all the recalcitrant parts, but rather to submit to the layers of different kinds of meaning, different forms of response, that exist simultaneously at the most immediate level of reading *within* each of those parts – in a sentence, phrase or even a word that draws us inside itself.

Frame's strategy of bringing the forgotten violences of colonisation to notice is too fluid, and in a sense too disengaged, to be attached to any express politics. Her fictions do not possess a unified body of moral ideas about power; they work around political and ethical problems – just as they do religious and epistemological ones – without

7. Frame in 1965; Baxter in 1966 and 1967.

8. See, for example, Baxter's 1960 poem, "Ballad of Calvary Street," in Bornholdt et al., 352-353.

resolving them into any discernible position or allowing the reader to suppose that their own sympathy for the subjects of violence might alter the ubiquitous patterns of violence that govern social reality. This does not make the work *apolitical*, but it means that, in Harold Pinter's famous lines on Samuel Beckett, another writer deeply concerned with power, her fiction offers us no "philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, *nothing from the bargain basement*" (Pinter 58). When C.K. Stead observed that he found something "black and negative deeply ingrained in [the] imaginative fabric" (107) of *the bone people*, perhaps what he alluded to is the novel's capacity to confront us with terrible social violence while offering inadequate or fairyland solutions. The difference between Hulme, in this reading, and Frame is that the "blackness" that resides in the work is a function of holding the reader's gaze on such violence and not letting them escape by recourse to any system of explanation or relief.

Frank Sargeson made realism the dominant mode of mid-twentieth-century New Zealand fiction, where stylistic simplicity and colloquial directness were the approved means of cajoling New Zealand's dispiritingly few readers into a local discovery of self and world. Frame's earliest stories insist that writers, by attending to the characteristic language of the tribe, take us on adventures in search not of the geographical markers of national reality or even of the unsuspected realities lying behind its surfaces, but of the continual processes of invention and evasion that produce a nation. In the rich linguistic habitus of the later novels the examination of power will be universalised and extended; in *The Lagoon* stories it is less opaque, more attached to New Zealand in the early- to mid-twentieth century. But the required acts of linguistic engagement are the same in the early and later work: familiar habits of using language, even clichés, as much as dense symbolism contain the possibility not only of interpretive richness but also that ovens burning in suburban gardens may open onto nightmare vistas ●

Mark WILLIAMS, Victoria University of Wellington

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