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Janet Frame's Conceptualization of the Writing Process: From *The Lagoon* to Mirror City

Janet Frame's texts are permeated with references to authorship. As Lydia Wevers points out in a stimulating Heideggerian analysis of Frame's autobiography, "the question of being [...] resounds through all her work – what is the "self," what does it mean to be one, where is it to be found?"(59). I would argue that, paradoxically, for Frame the answers to these questions are ultimately relatively simple, although their realisation is by no means easy to attain. According to her texts, the overwhelming response would be that, from Frame's perspective, the question of being is almost exclusively a question of authorship. It follows that the self can only be a writer, and the challenge of what it means to be one entails almost entirely devoting one's whole life to writing. The question of where it is to be found is what I aim to explore in this essay.

There is a concern with configuring authorship right from the start of Frame's writing career. Her first book, *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951), not only contains three tales about the writing process, but was in itself a defining encouragement in the process of Frame becoming her authorial self. The book received the Hubert Church Memorial Award while she found herself in Seacliff Hospital for the second time, in an attempt to escape the "family anguish" that accompanied her mother's heart attack (*Angel* 108).¹ The prize notoriously saved Frame from a leucotomy. She reflects thirty-two years later in her autobiography: "it was [then] that writing came to my rescue. It is little wonder that I value writing as a way of life when it actually saved my life" (*Angel* 109).

The stories comprising *The Lagoon* were written while the twenty-one year old Frame was seeing John Money, the psychology lecturer at the University of Otago, for "talks" or counselling sessions in 1946.² This was after she had been misdiagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia, and, having survived her first stay at Seacliff, was out on probation. The stories could be defined as part of the therapeutic activity. When Money discovered that she was writing them, he asked her to bring them along, and admits, in a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Frame half a century later, that he

opted against the psychiatric dogma that perfervid imagination fuels the fires of insanity and followed instead the policy that creative imagination leads in the direction of healing, no matter how rock-strewn and cratered the pathway. *The Lagoon and Other Stories* thus came to be rescued, one by one, week by week. Some of them, crumpled up and thrown not into the waste basket, but back into my attic office as the writer fled, in virtual panic, through the doorway and down the steep narrow stairs. (Money 21)

He later showed her stories to Denis Glover of the Caxton Press, who expressed interest in publishing them. *The Lagoon* sketches out a lot of material that is expanded upon in the first two volumes of Frame's autobiography; notably accounts of the forming experiences in the construction of her self, such as her grief at her sister

1. *The Lagoon* was published by Caxton while Frame was in Auckland Mental Hospital in 1951. But by the time she won the award in 1952, she had once again been admitted to Seacliff.

2. John Money is the person who inspired the character of John Forrest in Frame's autobiography.

Myrtle's death, and her first internment at Seaciff. Apart from those, reflexive references to stories abound in the book – the title story is about oral storytelling – but my aim here is to concentrate on the three stories that are specifically about the writing process, and to determine how they link up with the complex metaphor of Mirror City, which represents Frame's mature conceptualization of her perspective on the writing process.

The stories come about three-quarters of the way through the book and show that, from the beginning, Frame wrote in a reflexive style, meta-fictively manifesting a desire to formulate her thoughts about the writing process. They are all written in the first person, hinting at the subjective, autobiographical nature of the stories. The first is entitled "Jan Godfrey," a name which combines the first syllable of Frame's own Christian name with her mother's maiden name, and which she sometimes uses as a pseudonym. In fact, Michael King tells us that the story was originally published in *Landfall* in 1947, under the title of "Alison Hendry" and signed "Jan Godfrey" (84-5).³ Denis Glover converted the pseudonym to the title when he republished it in *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, perhaps because he wanted to keep a reference to the pseudonym, thereby indicating indirectly that the story was not about Alison Hendry, but about Janet Frame.

The story starts abruptly in *medias res*, and insistently employs the present continuous tense, to confront us with the narrator's desire to write a story. Repetition of the verb "wanting" makes the desire seem urgent and immediate, but she is suffering from writer's block and manifests a crippling lack of confidence, expressed in the statement: "Perhaps I will be here for years and years and there will be no story" (*Lagoon* 82). This is a complex and paradoxical beginning for a story that turns out to be partly written about the failure to write.

The narrator then goes on to describe some constituents which are counted among the essential components of Frame's own writing process by the time this is conceptualized in the third volume of her autobiography, *The Envoy from Mirror City*. These comprise intertextuality, which is symbolised in the story by enumerating books that she values, and memory, which manifests itself as a recollection of the wallpaper in her childhood bedroom. However, the narrator considers these components a digression, and she decides firmly to write about another character, "the girl who sleeps in the room with me" (*Lagoon* 83). But then, abruptly contradicting this decision, she reverts to her own story, with a direct autobiographical reference to the unnamed John Money:

This story came last night. Everything is always a story, but the loveliest ones are those that get written and are not torn up and are taken to a friend as payment for listening, for putting a wise ear to the keyhole of my mind.

hell

me

me

me

I am writing a story about a girl who is not me. (83)

Given that the stories are handed over to Money, the second sentence serves as a direct acknowledgement of Frame's gratitude to him. In an unusual placement of

3. The story was initially published in *Landfall* 2 (June 1947), 116-120.

words that is certain to attract the reader's attention, she then upbraids herself for being so preoccupied with her self. Writing "hell" and "me" in the lower case equates the two words with one another and, in an attempt to escape from her self, her thoughts are directed to the newly invented character. She says her name is Alison Hendry, while at the same time confessing that she "cannot prove she is not me" (83). Alison Hendry, in fact, goes through the childhood experiences of being rejected by other children that Frame recounts in her autobiography and in *Owls Do Cry* (1957), and the two characters of Jan Godfrey and Alison Hendry become increasingly confused and conflated as the narrator remembers she was a school teacher once and gives an account of her stay in psychiatric institutions which prefigures Frame's second novel *Faces in the Water* (1961). She ends these accounts by asserting "I cannot prove it is Alison, nor can I prove it is me" (*Lagoon* 86). However, the rest of the story describes a character called Alison with convincing verisimilitude. She is initially evoked in the third person when the narrator says "Alison, I have told you, shares my room. She is sitting on the bed over there, tall and dark and quiet like a big mouse, and mouse-like, dressed in grey" (86). Then, all of a sudden, in a move that recalls Modernists like Virginia Woolf, or the opening page of *Owls Do Cry* by the later Frame, she dramatically changes perspective, and we are seeing the world from inside Alison's head with a series of poignant, unpunctuated remarks that are indicative of personal thought: "I am too tall what shall I do I am too tall my head pokes forward my shoulders hunch [...]" (86). Frame now goes on to make up a persuasive account of Alison's past, which can in no way be identified with Jan Godfrey's. She ends the story with the statement "My name is Alison Hendry" (87), totally contradicting the suggestion of the title, which indicates that the story is about Jan Godfrey. That this contradiction is manifestly a fictive strategy becomes clear when we realise that, in its original publication, the narrator's last statement must have been juxtaposed with the pseudonym. Even though we know that the story was entitled "Alison Hendry" by Frame herself, and that the new title was chosen by Denis Glover, the confusion between Alison Hendry and Jan Godfrey remains.

This brings us to another aspect of Frame's writing, which is that it is likely to contain, not one, but several conundrums. They are based, in part, on the fact that Frame's work is full of blatant contradictions. As Jan Cronin remarks: "Few people would dispute that Janet Frame's work tends towards the enigmatic in the general sense – that her writing is elusive, ambiguous and at times downright baffling" (Cronin 4). But it is striking to find this embodied in such an early work, where the use of simple vocabulary is misleading and hides an astonishing density. The option to have more than one self, which seems to be a natural perspective for Frame, enhances her "enigmatic" quality. The invention of two selves is the basis for the conundrum in "Jan Godfrey." It is a technique that Frame learns to perfect.⁴ "How curiously events and people and places and names moved between fiction and fact!" she exclaims in her autobiography (*Angel* 68). As she advances in her writing career, she becomes increasingly confident in making the exploitation of projecting multiple selves an obvious fictive strategy, and it is carried out to its fullest extent in novels such as *Living*

4. "Jan Godfrey" may mark the beginning of Frame's tendency to invent multiple selves, although there is an earlier account of Frame inventing an imaginary friend in an eponymous story called "Dossy" (*The Lagoon* 37), which uses a similar confusion between the two protagonists.

in *the Maniototo* (1979) and *The Carpathians* (1988). It almost amounts to a perspective on life, although it is useful to keep in mind that the stories were written for John Money, that they had a therapeutic function and that, to a certain extent they formed part of a “performance” especially directed at him. We must also remember that Frame had only recently been diagnosed as schizophrenic. Though highly ambivalent about accepting this verdict, she firmly resolved to exploit it and tried to resemble “a textbook schizophrenic” as much as possible, so that we might assume that “Jan Godfrey” is an account of the narrator playing what she conceived of as being her schizophrenic role (*Angel* 84).

“Jan Godfrey” is carefully structured. The first third is devoted to delineating the character indicated in the title and this is balanced by the last third which evokes the Alison Hendry of the last line. So the last line finds its correlative in the title “Jan Godfrey” and points to the middle of the story, which confuses the two protagonists, carefully patterned by the repetition of “Alison Hendry, Margaret Burt, Nancy Smith.” This enumeration of invented characters, evoking their isolated childhood, begins and ends the ambiguous central passage. The careful structure and the confusion of selves demonstrate the techniques used by Frame to manipulate her readers even at this early stage.

A totally different approach to formulating her thoughts about the writing process is taken by her in “Miss Gibson – And the Lumber-Room” (90). It is set out in epistolary form, and begins with the formal address, “Dear Miss Gibson.” There is no signature, but, from a comment which Miss Gibson is reported to have made in class, it can be surmised that the sender is probably represented by the initial J. As we know from the autobiography, Miss Gibson was Frame’s fourth-form teacher at Waitaki High School. Her one mentioned crime is misreading and, with her moralising tone, spoiling the magic of *The Ancient Mariner* (*Is-Land* 177, 182). In the letter, by contrast, Miss Gibson is accused of teaching composition in an uninspired manner and making her pupils write not only hackneyed phrases but hypocritical essays in imitation of English models, telling them to “mind [their] ands and buts and [their] paragraphing” (*Lagoon* 90). The narrator recounts an example of a model essay read by Miss Gibson from a little blue textbook, about a man who visits a lumber room and cannot control his emotions at the sight of the belongings from his childhood. The narrator intimates that by setting the exercise of imitating this essay Miss Gibson forces her to lie. The affirmation by the narrator that she “was an awful liar” is repeated three times and serves to divide the letter into three parts. The first confession introduces a summary of the model essay. In the second part she writes a parody of the essay. She pretends to come from a wealthy home, where the lumber-room has elaborate stained-glass windows with angels blowing trumpets, and the sight of her childhood belongings causes the same upsurge of emotions that the man in the model essay felt. She uses hyperbole when describing the scene and listing her belongings, culminating in the claim that she “found the copy of Shakespeare that [she] read when [she] was six years old” and “the violin that [her] father gave [her], a Stradivari, [she] used to play Bach at an early age” (92). Miss Gibson is not taken in by the hyperbole, but does not seem to realise the irony and mockery directed at her by the narrator’s skilful use of parody. She gives her quite a decent mark – fourteen out of twenty – and comments “highly improbable watch your writing” (93). The narrator shows her lack of respect for Miss

Gibson's knowledge of composition and her judgement by leaving the phrases totally unpunctuated. In the third part she denies everything she has written in her parody of the essay about the lumber-room and instead writes about her life as it was and adds, not minding her "ands and buts and [her] paragraphing," that she "liked being alive and [...] didn't care twopence about the past it was the present that mattered" (93). The whole story is a skilful mixture of fiction and non-fiction, another characteristic of the writing process that Frame retains throughout her work, and the ending effectively demonstrates that the narrator has learned to write in a more innovative and truthful manner than the lessons of Miss Gibson could have ever shown her.

In his thorough, almost line-by-line analysis of the story, Ian Richards suggests that the lumber-room stands for tradition, and that the story is about getting rid of "cultural baggage." Taking a postcolonial perspective, he remarks that "Miss Gibson – And the Lumber-Room" is "the type of story a writer has to write in order to be free of the corrupting influence of the cultural baggage that accompanies forms of literature borrowed from the European metropolises" (Richards 18). But according to avowals in her autobiography, Frame was enchanted by this "cultural baggage" and there is plenty of textual evidence that she did not want to get rid of it, she simply transformed it so that she could apply it to her own circumstances and use it for her own work. Rather than rejecting Eurocentric literature in favour of New Zealand literature, she was at the time only just becoming aware that there was such a thing as New Zealand literature. "None of our English studies" she writes, "even supposed that a New Zealand writer or New Zealand existed" (*Is-Land* 230). In "Miss Gibson – And the Lumber-Room," as Richards himself points out, Frame uses the intertextuality that many critics consider to be a characteristic of her writing.⁵ She quotes "there was a time when meadow grove and stream" (*Lagoon* 92), from Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," in an ironic parody of her own attempt at the enforced imitation, and quotes Tennyson about tears to point out to Miss Gibson that there is no place for hypocritical emotions in a school essay. It is true that she is lying when she claims to have read all of Shakespeare by the age of six, but this does not in the least detract from her admiration of Shakespeare and the Shakespearean references that abound in her work.

So to read "Miss Gibson – And the Lumber-Room" "allegorically as a literary manifesto," as Richards purports to do, is somewhat of an exaggeration (Richards 1-19). There is no doubt that the story is about disregarding Eurocentric ways of teaching and writing composition, and it does recommend, by way of example, an innovative, freer, easier and more authentic way of expressing emotions. The use of the epistolary form also suggests it may be a way of getting back at a teacher that Frame did not like, as she gets back at Miss Richardson in the story "Child," or unacceptable members of hospital staff in both *Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water*. As a "manifesto," however, it in no way accounts for the complexity and originality of Frame's subsequent writing. It merely covers part of a conceptualization that was, in

5. For instance, Valérie Baisnée writes: "Literary quotations, poems inserted within a narrative, and folk-rhymes create an intertextual web of cultural references that run throughout her work and acts as original viewpoints in her fiction" (90).

1946, the beginning of work in progress. She barely realised at the time what New Zealand had to offer, apart from condemning her as schizophrenic.

By her own account, it is not until 1963, after living for seven years in Europe and England, that the contemplation of going back to New Zealand makes her realise the benefits for the imagination that living there will bring. The immediate cause was the death of her father, but she admits in *The Envoy from Mirror City* that her "reason for returning was literary." And she elaborates in a manner that is now more in line with postcolonial theory:

the prospect of exploring a new country with not so many layers of mapmakers, particularly the country where one first saw daylight and the sun and the dark, was too tantalizing to resist. Also, the first layer of imagination mapped by the early inhabitants leaves those who follow an access or passageway to the bone. Living in New Zealand would be for me, like living in an age of mythmakers; with a freedom of imagination among all the artists because it is possible to begin at the beginning and to know the unformed places and to help to form them, to be a mapmaker for those who will follow nourished by this generation's layers of the dead. (*Mirror City* 151)

Whereas her departure was marked by a colonial desire to learn from and be admired in England, her return signified new confidence and the possibility of a new beginning, anchored in her native land.

The final story about writing that I want to examine does not add much to the conceptualization of Frame's writing process which I have been discussing so far, but it shows how much this writing process was threatened. In a way, the story is a continuation of "Jan Godfrey," but instead of suffering from writer's block, the narrator is totally disillusioned and calls it "My Last Story." It is, in fact, the last story in the book. Starting with the statement that the narrator is "never going to write another story," it then proceeds to tell the reader why (*Lagoon* 110). In a long Joycean sentence which incorporates other people's thoughts and speech, she lists the things she does not like about writing stories by announcing what she is not going to write about, thereby paradoxically writing about them. That is her main technique, and the story is almost entirely a list of topics she says she is not going to write about.

First, it results in a thumbnail sketch of life in one of the poorer suburbs of South Dunedin. In claiming not to like writing about what "he said she said he did she did" she promptly goes and tells us what "a small dark woman" said and "the Hillside men" did (110). She bears witness to the Dunedin of a past era; the time when there were trams running through George and Princess streets, and when Hillside, the name of the railway works, was flourishing. And she adumbrates the lives of the people by depicting them in two or three lines, tantalising the reader with a desire to hear more, only to disappoint them with the constant refrain of "I'm not going to write about..." The second half of the story is about her family in Oamaru. There is a reference to herself in the third person, depicted as "my other sister who teaches and doesn't like teaching though why on earth if you don't like it, they say," which gives a hint of potential depression (111). The running together of narrative prose and direct speech, without the punctuation to indicate where one stops and the other starts, and punctuated by "I'm not going to write any more," skillfully evokes the nature of obsessive, circular thought with no outcome. After a final "This is my last story," there is a contradictory moment of hope in the following lines: "I'm going to put

three dots with my typewriter, impressively, and then I'm going to begin..." (112), but the moment of hope is ephemeral. The subsequent lines are the most heart-rending ones in the whole book, and put an end to any notion of resurgence. The narrator says: "I think I must be frozen inside with no heart to speak of. I think I've got the wrong way of looking at Life" (112).

As far as we know, it will be ten years before Frame begins to write again, in any case, at least ten years before she starts on her first published novel *Owls do Cry*. That renders these last lines of *The Lagoon and Other Stories* particularly poignant and makes us realise how precarious her notion of her self as an author was. And although she obviously gave much thought to the writing process in 1946, as the three stories about writing in her first book testify, she does not broach full conceptualization until nearly forty years later, with the publication of *An Envoy from Mirror City*. It is therefore useful to remember that *The Lagoon* is only the starting point of Frame's prose fiction, and that by the time she writes her autobiography, the conceptualization of her writing process has undergone a sophisticated rhetorical development.

Mirror City is the complex and variable conceit which dominates the third volume of Frame's autobiography. It designates a fictional home, the place out of which the character, Janet, writes. By the end of the autobiography she calls it "my true home" and feels that she "had found [her] true 'place' at a deeper level than any landscape of any country would provide" (*Mirror City* 153). Keeping in mind that "place" is itself a metaphor, it is nevertheless worth pointing out that Mirror City has its roots, in more ways than one, in the Mediterranean island of Ibiza. As Isabel Michell remarks: "Arrival in a new country is actually a process of subjectivity: a subject-in-process and the term *place* stands, ultimately, to mean *mode of being*" (112).

The first volume of the autobiography, *To the Is-Land*, already points in the direction of Mirror City. Frame exploits and extends her title's multiple meanings by adding a hyphen to separate the two syllables of island, transforming it into shorthand for Frame's main concerns, and mapping out the journey, both literal and figurative, that Janet will make. Pronounced normally, the first syllable of "island" suggests the connotations of its homophones, that is, the first person pronoun "I," and the organ of visual perception, the "eye." The introduction of the hyphen, however, breaks the boundaries of the word and changes the pronunciation to "is," placing the emphasis on being. So the title could be read as indicating a voyage to the land of the self, to the land of vision and to the land of being, all intimately connected with the land of fiction that Janet calls Mirror City. Moreover, the phrase also prefigures her literal journey to Ibiza, in the winter of 1956-57.

Ibiza initially attracted her because it had the reputation of being cheap – living there cost about three or four pounds a month – and the Anglocentric education to which New Zealanders were subjected in the 1940s made her long to see the English poetic depictions of the Mediterranean in reality. She spends about five months in Ibiza "in search of an identity beyond [her] country" and finds that she "had never felt so much at home" (*Mirror City* 56). For the first time she is unconditionally seen, accepted and described by everyone as a writer. It is on her first day on Ibiza that she encounters the image of what is to become her permanent home, Mirror City. She writes: "I looked down on the harbour and the buildings across the harbour, perfectly mirrored in the clear tideless ocean" (43). When she finds a place to live she discovers

that her bedroom has a similar view, featuring “a wide window overlooking the harbour and the distant shore where the buildings lay like those of another city, a sea or mirror city reflected in the clear water. I arranged a table and a chair for writing” (46). She does not yet capitalise mirror city in this quote, and appropriately does not do so until she has left Ibiza and it has been transformed by memory, but she is quick to realise the importance of that daily view accompanying her as she writes, for she notes on the following page that the crowning marvel of Ibiza was “the receptiveness of the tideless ocean admitting to its depths the entire world standing on its shores, creating a mirror city that I looked upon each day” (47).

The importance of this image is emphasized by the title of the third volume of the autobiography, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, and the first mention of it in the text allies it with Plato. Frame intertwines mirror city with a reference to the myth of the cave from Book VII in Plato’s *Republic* (*Mirror City* 10), and it is worth examining that myth in more detail. Plato makes Socrates use the myth of the cave to explain the role of education in the ideal city that he is verbally constructing. Socrates postulates a number of prisoners, all with their back to the entrance of the cave, and chained by the feet and neck, so that they are forced to look in one direction only. Behind the prisoners there is a fire and in between the fire and the prisoners, a road is situated, along which people are moving, carrying objects on their heads. The objects range from realistic statues in the form of humans and animals to a variety of articles used in daily life. The road is flanked by a high wall, so that only the objects are visible, and these cast shadows on the wall which the prisoners are facing. The only reality the prisoners have known since birth is represented by these shadows on the wall. But one prisoner is freed and climbs up the slope to the mouth of the cave. At first he is blinded by the light of the sun, but after a while he adjusts and is able to observe and get to know the real world. When he returns to the cave, he is able to guide the other prisoners with his superior knowledge of the objects that cast the shadows on the wall. In Plato’s world the unbound prisoner represents the philosopher, and he is the only one considered suitable to rule over the ideal city.

The myth is all about the relationship between vision and reality and Frame uses it as an analogy to elucidate her initial conception of mirror city. “In every event,” she states, “lay a reflection reached only through the imagination and its various servant languages, as if, like the shadows in Plato’s cave, our lives and the world contain mirror cities revealed to us by our imagination, the Envoy” (*Mirror City* 10). Frame’s use of the simile, in fact, subverts Plato by turning a negative version of reality – shadows and mirrors, which, according to Plato, do not amount to true vision – into a positive one. She makes use of three elements that form part of Plato’s text, namely: 1) the hypothetical ideal city, 2) the concept of reflection or mirroring, and 3) Socrates’ unbound prisoner, who parallels her own use of the envoy. All these are turned upside down. The hypothetical city is fused with Plato’s references to mirrors, and, instead of the philosopher, Frame makes the author the one who sees truly. Which could well make Plato turn in his grave, given his distrust of writing and writers.

Although *Mirror City* implies an adherence to the mimetic theory of art, the city turns out to be neither a mirror, nor an imitation of reality. Frame thereby inverts Platonic theory. Instead of art copying an external world that is itself a copy of the

ideal forms, which according to Plato, only philosophers are wise enough to apprehend, Frame posits that art is the ideal form. This, constituted of materials taken from the external world and transformed by the imagination, is capable of revealing truths otherwise unavailable in the external world.

It is not surprising then, to find the real city of Ibiza absent from the text. Janet claims to know it only as “the city of the sea” (*Mirror City* 56). Her attempt to explore it fails, and she describes it as “trying to walk behind a mirror” (56). She thus imposes her internal reality upon external reality and moves the boundary of the “real” to such an extent that the “real” ceases to exist even as she is moving through it. “I knew,” Janet confesses, “that whatever the outward phenomenon of light, city, and sea, the real mirror lay within me as the city of the imagination” (56).

Even though *Mirror City* is inspired by the vision of a Mediterranean city, its foundations are constructed by means of intertextuality. In addition to her use of Plato, Frame is predominantly influenced by the Romantics, whom she takes aboard in a more wholesale fashion. The vision of a city is also a recurrent image in Romantic poetry.⁶ It can be a positive vision, as in Shelley’s frequently quoted *Ode to the West Wind*, or as in Wordsworth’s final lines of the second Book of *The Excursion*, which describes the city as a “marvellous array/Of temple, palace, citadel, and huge/Fantastic pomp of structure without name” (857-859). But the vision, like De Quincey’s city of sepulchres in *The English Mail Coach*, can also be negative. Janet uses elements of both in her construction of *Mirror City*. The city contains palaces, the foundations of which are constituted by the writer’s experiences, but it also has a graveyard, factories and “harsh lonely places” (*Mirror City* 155). Talking about the artists whose joint efforts were responsible for the establishment of *Mirror City*, Janet says “though some might be lost there and never return there were always those who struggled home to create works of art” (144). On the other hand, graveyards, for Janet, tend to be positive places which allow her to escape from the world, to be on her own and to write poetry. In *Mirror City* the “only graveyard” is a place of transformation, it is “the graveyard of memories that are resurrected, reclothed with reflection and change, their essence untouched” (153). As in metempsychosis, the essence of memories, like Plato’s concept of the human soul, survives death, allowing said memories to be reborn or recreated by the writer and put into another form. That Janet considers this to be a foundational aspect of her art is indicated by her description of the soil of *Mirror City* as being composed of the leaves of memory. The lack of other graveyards, moreover, suggests the immortality of its inhabitants.

The factories symbolize the hard work involved in being a writer. The “hours and years” spent there, as well as in the “streets and cathedrals” of *Mirror City*, enables the writer to learn its “unique functioning” (141). Janet elucidates the enormity and difficulty of this task, while simultaneously attempting to give her city of the imagination some verisimilitude, by comparing it to London. “The effect of London as a vast city gives only a hint of the complexity of *Mirror City*” she writes, underlining the disparity in size by incorporating London, through the processes of memory, in the “rich earth of *Mirror City*” (156). The “huge, fantastic pomp of structure” (Wordsworth 259) that Janet constructs is presented as a world which

6. For a discussion of city imagery in Romantic poetry see Alethea Hayter.

forms an alternative world to external reality. It contains its own civilizations, and its occupants, the equivalent of Wordsworth's "Spirits in beatitude" (874), are the great artists who built the city, and whose presence allows it to thrive. Janet, who, throughout the autobiography, is described in one way or another as having "no place" (*Is-Land* 70) and asking, "where was my place?" (236), finds a home here, a dwelling place, as she becomes a "citizen of Mirror City" (*Mirror City* 140). And part two of the third volume is significantly called "At Home in the City."

From her inaccessible, imaginary home she can observe the external world without being herself observed, and she can cross the boundaries between the two at will with the help of another rhetorical figure, namely the Envoy of the title. However, the presence of the latter is marked by ambiguity, partly because the image of the Envoy, as it unfolds in the text, oscillates between being presented as an independent entity and representing Janet's "watching self" or her imagination (*Mirror City* 168). It first appears in a chapter about Dr Cawley, the psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in London, who helps Janet to uncover her "'secret, true' self" (99), thereby finding a way of surviving "in spite of the bankruptcy imposed during [her] long stay in hospital, and her existence since then on unreal notions of [her]self, fed to [her] by [her] self and others" (113). Dr Cawley assures her that she is (and always was) capable of existing in the "real world" "unless that existence also deprived [her] of [her] 'own world,' the journeys to and from Mirror City, either by *the Envoy who is forever present*, or by [her] self" (113, italics mine). In the preceding chapter Janet had voiced the fear that "perhaps the desire to journey back and forth to Mirror City was merely an abnormality after all" (110) and it is ironic that she needs psychiatric discourse to endorse her involvement with Mirror City and its Envoy. We know from the title that the Envoy comes from Mirror City, and that this ungended figure is presented as an agent sent by the world of the imagination, presumably to transact diplomatic business with the "real world." Janet thus presents herself as continuously solicited by the world of the imagination. This overlaps with her vision of herself (and all artists) as representatives, sent by the human race, to explore Mirror City, so that she also styles herself as an envoy.

What does emerge clearly is that Janet shares the Romantics' faith in the light of the imagination and particularly Coleridge's belief in its creative and esemplastic power, a power that takes on cosmic proportions.⁷ She says that she learns much about its composition from Coleridge, and her descriptions of the way it works in Mirror City is reminiscent of Coleridge's list of the activities of the secondary imagination: "it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate," whilst the construction itself of Mirror City is an example of the imagination in action (*Angel* 31).⁸ It is above all in terms of what it does that the imagination is defined. By using a spatial image to evoke it, by describing it as a place to which the writer makes "hazardous" journeys and in which she lives, the imagination is externalised and given the status of another independent world, thereby displacing and obscuring its location

7. The association between light and the imagination is an ancient one. In his seminal discussion of the imagination as a movement generated by the activity of sense perception in *De Anima*, Aristotle states: "it is from light, without which seeing is impossible, that imagination takes its name" (200).

8. Frame quotes Coleridge extensively in the third chapter of *An Angel at My Table*, 31.

in the inner world of Janet's mind; but it is nevertheless with the workings of this inner world that we are confronted.

Comparing the trope of Mirror City to the early stories of *The Lagoon* shows how complex Frame's conceptualization of the writing process becomes. But an examination of the stories also demonstrates that all of Frame's fictive strategies were incipient. As we have seen, the stories have the following characteristics: they are a mixture of fiction and non-fiction, they are reflexive, and partly autobiographical, with dramatic changes of perspective combined with an intertextuality that indicate a modernist style, but serve her equally well in the late, more post-modernist novels. Memory and imagination play an important role in all of them. Her mastery of language is evident and sophisticated attention is paid to the way the stories are structured. On the other hand, the conceptualization of the writing process as figured by the Envoy and Mirror City demonstrates an increase in the complex use of rhetorical figures, and the ambiguous relationship between them shows that her love of conundrums persists, as does her impulse to manipulate her readers. She refines and develops all these techniques, and the most important difference between her earliest and later fiction is that the latter shows much more confidence in herself as an author.

Mirror City is the trope that permits the transition from the non-identity imposed on Janet in the New Zealand psychiatric hospitals to becoming an internationally known author. In the jargon of postcolonialism, Frame went from the utmost margins of a colonial society to the centre of Western culture. Her move from an island in the Pacific to an island in the Mediterranean was to furnish her with an experience that was to sustain her for the rest of her writing life. The real island, Ibiza, became the point where the land of self, the land of vision and the land of fiction coincided: Janet's Is-Land, her land of being, is partly responsible for the mythopoeic quality of her final vision of the writing process ●

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