

IS THERE A STORY IN JANET FRAME'S THE LAGOON AND OTHER STORIES?

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Is there a Story in Janet Frame's *The Lagoon and Other Stories*?

This essay proposes to analyse the way Janet Frame defamiliarises the conventional modes of writing stories and questions the very foundations of story-telling in her collection *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, with a special focus on “Jan Godfrey” and “My Last Story.” Frame’s art is one of indirection, deferral and erasure so that the reader ends up wondering whether a story is actually being told or whether the main purpose of the narrators is in fact to suggest that it is no longer possible to write a story. The author’s self-reflexive process entails a wavering of ontological boundaries and raises questions relating to identity and the limits of the self, modes of perception of the inner and the outside worlds, as well as one’s relationship with language. Frame opens the way onto new modes of story-telling, which imply setting oneself free from ingrained habits of writing and reading.

Cet article propose d’analyser la manière dont Janet Frame défamiliarise les modes conventionnels d’écriture fictionnelle et remet en question les fondements de l’art de raconter des histoires dans son recueil The Lagoon and Other Stories, plus particulièrement dans “Jan Godfrey” et “My Last Story”. L’art de Frame est un art du détour, du report et de l’effacement si bien que le lecteur finit par se demander si les nouvelles racontent véritablement une histoire ou bien si le propos des narrateurs n’est pas précisément de suggérer qu’il n’est plus possible d’écrire des histoires. Le processus auto-réflexif mis en place par l’auteur implique un vacillement des frontières ontologiques et soulève des questions relatives à l’identité et aux limites du soi, aux modes de perception des mondes intérieur et extérieur, ainsi qu’au rapport au langage. Frame ouvre la voie à de nouveaux modes narratifs qui supposent de se libérer d’habitudes solidement ancrées d’écriture et de lecture.

In “The Lagoon,” the adult narrator who, as a child, has been told countless stories by her grandmother, asks her aunt: “Is there a story?” (4). One may be tempted to ask the same question when reading *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, especially minimalist pieces such as “On the Car,” “A Note on the Russian War,” “Summer” or “The Birds Began to Sing” which do not offer a conventional narrative and require one to reconsider one’s own conception of story-telling. Janet Frame’s work is characterised by its self-reflexivity, first of all because it is often grounded on autobiographical material, but also because the very art of story-telling is a recurrent

concern and source of questioning. Two short stories in *The Lagoon* are more particularly marked by this self-reflexive dimension: “Jan Godfrey” in which the narrator attempts to write about her roommate but keeps digressing into her own memories, and “My Last Story” where the narrator announces she will never write another story and yet opens windows onto individual lives. The purpose of this paper is to try and understand how one moves from the age-old formula “Grandma, tell me a story” (4) in “The Lagoon” and “I am wanting to write a story” (129) at the onset of “Jan Godfrey,” to “I’m never going to write another story” (181) in the last piece of the volume. The voyage from one to the other will provide an opportunity to explore what the simple terms “story” and “writing a story” mean to Janet Frame for whom that process was more “like chasing butterflies or mosquitoes than netting a swarm of words” (King 490). Her butterflies, far from being pinned on a mounting board and immobilised, are constantly flying in diverse directions and seem to be always escaping the prison of the net so that her stories are marked by a sense of ungraspability, an oscillation between presence and absence, inscription and erasure, construction and disintegration. In Frame’s fiction, the story (or non-story) which is told on the surface often crumbles and hides another story to which the reader can only have access by peeling the layers of the palimpsest and looking beyond or beneath the actual words. The defamiliarisation of conventional modes and the shifting of ontological boundaries eventually entail more than a reflection on story-telling: they raise questions relating to identity and the limits of the self, to modes of perception of the inner and the outside worlds, and to one’s relationship with language.

While “The Lagoon” evokes the long-gone days of traditional oral story-telling, both “Jan Godfrey” and “My Last Story” deal with the inability of the narrators to write the story they think they should or would like to write, and with their final decision to go down a different road. The narrator of “Jan Godfrey” is “typing words that are not a story” and fears she might be staying in her room for years and that “there will be no story” (129), thereby echoing the child’s frustration in “The Lagoon” about the fact that “the lagoon never had a proper story” (4). The negations, which may forebode the resolution in the last piece of the collection never to write a story again, are powerful enough to induce the reader to wonder what story the narrator is aiming to write, what words she is typing that are not a story. One also wonders whether these words may not constitute a story in their own right, though maybe not in the conventional meaning of the term, aided by the familiar props of plot, character, definite time and place. Frame’s art of concealment consists in never letting us know what these words are, though we can guess they might be the very ones we are reading right now. The narrator’s mind then immediately turns to the scribbles on the wall made by a little girl, scribbles that might also tell a story though in an unconventional way, but whose content will never be revealed.

Right from the first page, the narrator thus plays with the oscillation between presence and absence, inscription and withdrawal, taunting the reader with the germs of potential stories but immediately retracting because the words or scribbles do not fit within the boundaries and “picket-fences” (176) of conventional story-telling. Later on, when she lets her mind flow freely and brings back memories of her childhood and of her time in mental institutions, she checks herself, self-consciously commenting on her lapses—“I have wandered from my story” (130), “I have wandered again” (132, 133)—and attempts to draw anew the contours of the story she wants to tell, in the way sand castles are progressively washed away by the tide and built again when the water recedes. In “A Beautiful Nature,” the narrator starts giving glimpses into the lives of other boarders and lets free indirect style flow in a long paragraph until she puts an abrupt stop to it and self-consciously redirects the narrative focus in one isolated sentence: “But my real story is about Edgar” (110). In “Miss Gibson-And the Lumber-Room,” in her letter to her former school-teacher, J. is tempted to follow several alternative story-lines but insistently forces herself back to the main narrative: “I’m forgetting that it’s the lumber-room I’m writing about, I’ll tell you the story of the concert another time” (144-45), “I’m writing to you about the lumber-room” (145). Such metafictional remarks draw attention to the myriad of untold stories lingering in the background and lay bare the process of story-telling itself.

In “Jan Godfrey,” the narrator’s constant reminders of what she intends to do (with the recurrent words “I,” “write” and “story”) are meant to put her narrative back on track and provide a secure and watertight structure, maybe echoing the various rooms (both literal and metaphorical) she has been enclosed in since her childhood, which aimed at containing her individuality within controlled bounds. The solid and stable syntax could be likened to straight architectural lines that delimit the frame within which the narrator wants to tell a story and from which she should not stray:

I am wanting to write a story today. (129)

I will write about the girl who sleeps in the room with me. (130)

I am writing a story about a girl who is not me. (131)

I am really writing my story of Alison Hendry. (133)

The slight variations in tenses and articles are meaningful in that they chart the evolution from wish and intention (“am wanting,” “will”) to the actualized event (“I am writing,” “I am really writing”), but also from an indefinite topic (“a story”) to greater precision (“the girl,” “Alison Hendry”), and from a clear distinction between two characters (“I ... the girl ... with me,” “I ... a girl ... not me”) to an identification of the subject (“Alison Hendry”) which should clearly distinguish the two girls but actually blurs the lines between the supposedly separate selves. For the narrator’s assertive and insistent statements cannot hide the fissures and cracks: the ship that takes her “from port to port” (132) or from one narrative thread to another, suffers leaks so that past and present intertwine, stories

overlap, personal pronouns lose their anchor and identities waver. This ebb and flow movement which destabilizes the structure the narrator is trying to preserve could be viewed in the light of what Andrew Gibson calls the ethical condition, “an interminable oscillation or complex poisoning between composition and fission, the resumption and repeated loss of frames” (94). Gibson argues that the philosophers’ “dream of a return to or knowledge of the unity of the One has lost its power” (87) and that “the modern artist’s imagination works to return us to a sense of prior multiplicity precisely in its dissolution of the comparatively stable forms of perception” (88). In “Jan Godfrey,” perception is indeed destabilised and the limits of the self become uncertain so that the narrator is unable to prove that she and Alison Hendry are two distinct persons—“I cannot prove she is not me” (131), “I cannot prove it is Alison, nor can I prove it is me” (133)—even by hammering out the first person pronoun both as complement and subject:

hell
me
me
me

I am writing a story about a girl who is not me. I cannot prove she is not me.
I can only tell you that her name is Alison Hendry. (131)

The issue of the construction of an identity is evidently crucial as suggested by the repetitions and the layout of the words on the page. The shift from the complement form “me” (the default form of the pronoun) and the subject form “I” tends to create an effect of dissociation, reinforced by the construction of the next sentences (“I ... not me”). The narrator is still intent on building up the walls of her story and of her self as strictly separated from the Other: the verticality of the first four lines followed by a horizontal plane could be seen as the two sides of a frame that is being drawn, forming the letter “L” which, in turn, echoes the “hell” of her private self as suggested by the paradigmatic axis (“hell” is substituted by “me”), but also points to the hellish world of mental institutions, “hell/me” maybe calling for the paronomasia of “help/me.” The vertical reading initiated by the position of the words and the obvious obsession with identity may also induce the reader to isolate “I am” just beneath “me” and look for a complement at the other end of the sentence (momentarily reading the verb BE not as the mere auxiliary of the progressive aspect, but as a link verb with an identificational value). One might thus be tempted to move from “I am ... not me” to “I am ... Alison Hendry” and anticipate the last sentence of the story: “My name is Alison Hendry” (135), a slight (but essential) linguistic variation from “her name is Alison Hendry” (131).

The very foundations of the story are being rocked by the indeterminacy as to character and narrator identity and name, made even more confusing by the shifting use of the pronouns “I” and “she” in the second part of the story. The narrator stealthily moves from stable descriptive narration—“She is sitting on the bed over there, tall and dark” (133-34)—to volatile

free direct speech with no sign of punctuation—"I am too tall what shall I do" (134)—until the reader no longer knows who "she" and "I" refer to, and whose story is actually being told. Alison's preoccupation with her height recalls Alice's own anxiety in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (all the more since the two girls' names echo through paronomasia) when she suddenly grows very tall and is no longer sure of her identity. She fears she might have been turned into one of her friends and desperately tries to reassure herself as to the stability of self boundaries and linguistic markers: "*she's* she, and *I'm I*" (15). The issue of the pronouns is evidently crucial when it comes to drawing the contours of the self and identifying the origin of the voice. In her autobiography, Frame notes that on her admission to a psychiatric hospital, she "became an instant third person" (191) and was later treated by her family as "a third person" (215). In her second novel *Faces in the Water*, when the main character leaves the mental institution to live with her sister, she experiences a similar sense of loss: "I did not know my own identity" (65). Frame said that she wrote her autobiographies because of her desire "to make myself a first person" (Alley 40). In "Jan Godfrey," the shift from first and third person pronouns to only first person in the last pages may be the sign that the narrator has to a certain extent recovered a sense of her shattered self by accepting her protean identity.

The emphasis on the proper name is also in keeping with the questioning of identity as the narrator hopes to ensure some stability by abiding by the convention of naming and thus persuade herself and the reader that she is really writing about her roommate: "Alison Hendry. Margaret Burt. Nancy Smith. We cling to our names because we think they emphasise our separateness and completeness and importance" (131). In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes explains that a proper name "acts as a magnetic field for the semes" and this "semic configuration" (67) gives the character a biographical duration. In the context of mental hospitals where the patients sometimes suffer from a splintering of identity, a creviced "I" or a fading out of their "I-land" because of their pathologies but also due to the electric shock treatments they have to endure and the conditions they are submitted to, a name is something to hold on to in order to try and preserve one's identity. In her autobiography, Frame explains that many patients in Seacliff hospital had "no name, only a nickname" (194). In "Snap-Dragons," when Ruth says goodbye to other patients on leaving the institution, she insists on calling them by their names: "Goodbye, Leda, goodbye, Marion, goodbye, Miss Clark" (98), thereby acknowledging their separate identity and reassuring herself as to her own. In "Swans," the two little girls' attention is drawn to the knitting bags with "a big red initial, to show that you were you and not the somebody else you feared you might be" (60).

In "Jan Godfrey" however, the self-reflexive passage on names defamiliarises the process of naming and lays bare the artificiality of the device so that the legal name turns out to be an empty signifier and fails to provide a stable sense of identity. Alison Hendry ends up having to abjure her belief in an autonomous self: "I am neither separate nor complete nor important"

(135). The situation is further complicated by the title of the short story, “Jan Godfrey,” “Jan” being the name by which Frame’s father called his daughter and Godfrey the maiden name of her mother. One might be tempted to conclude that the first person narrator is “Jan Godfrey,” an alter ego of Janet Frame, all the more since the story includes details from her real life (a description of her room in the boarding house where she lived at the time and memories of Arthur Street School where she taught, and of Dunedin Public Hospital and Seacliff mental institution where she was a patient). However, when the story was originally published in the magazine *Landfall* in June 1947, “Jan Godfrey” was the pseudonym under which she signed her piece and the title was actually “Alison Hendry” (Mercer 20; King 84-85). When it was collected in *The Lagoon*, editor Denis Glover chose Frame’s pseudonym for the title, which, as biographer Michael King remarks, “made no sense in the context of the story” (534).

Janet Frame who, in 1958, changed her legal identity by deed poll to Janet Clutha and kept her own name only for publications, often plays with the convention of names in her short stories and novels, blurring the boundaries between the diegetic and extradiegetic levels, between autobiography and fiction, making the reader wonder about the ontological status of her stories and her characters. Thus, several characters bear the name of “Jan” in the collection and in “The Secret,” the narrator is called “Nini” (Frame’s nickname at home) while her elder sister, Myrtle, who is diagnosed with a heart defect, recalls Frame’s own sister Myrtle who drowned in the town baths in Oamaru in 1937 due to a heart deficiency. This operation of duplication, doubling or schism which may conceal a unique self (the real Myrtle and the fictional one, the real Nini and the fictional one, but also Alison Hendry and the narrator) finds an echo in “Dossy” in which a motherless little girl imagines that she is playing ball with a bigger girl. A shift of perspective to the nuns reveals “a little girl playing ball by herself” (53), thus suggesting that the big girl was only a projection of Dossy’s inner world, just as in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, Vera branches into three people or a “trichotomy” (80), imagining she has a husband and a daughter, and in *Living in the Maniototo* and *The Carpathians*, the various narrators divide up into several people.

This proliferation of selves can be interpreted as a fragmentation of identity and the sign of a schizophrenic mind in a pathological context but may also be seen as the token of an enhanced perception and rich imagination. Alice Braun argues that such an opening to irruptions into one’s identity constitutes “the true condition of creativity” (99). It may also be read as a deconstruction of the figures of the character and the narrator as unique and stable entities. Echoing the poststructuralist dismissal of the humanist concept of the subject as a unified whole, Frame challenges the realist convention of “an unproblematically constituted, individual ‘subject’ who is the prime mover of events, and from whom essential meaning emanates” (Lee 55). The writer blows away this exhausted convention, substituting characters with multifarious selves and voices. As Casertano argues, “the

subject's monadism [the belief in a self that is separate and complete] is replaced by a multiplicity of interconnected selves" (353). This multiplicity may also be viewed in the context of Levinas' ethics of alterity as an ethical impulse towards the Other as both the narrator of "Jan Godfrey" and the little girl Dossy conjure up an imaginary Other that releases them from the confines of the self. The self is no longer one and separate but always placed in a dialectical relationship with the Other.

In "My Last Story," though the narrator uses the art of praeteritio or paralepsis to list all the people she will not write about, her naming them also amounts to the first steps of an encounter with the Other, the first threads of a story. One may wonder however what type of story the narrator is writing or, actually, not writing, and ask again the question that is raised in "The Lagoon": "is there a story?" (6). In "Jan Godfrey," the narrator who wanted to write a story about her roommate ended up offering impressions, glimpses or snatches about herself rather than a straightforward narrative about a third person. In "My Beautiful Nature," the "real story" (110) the narrator proposes to tell about Edgar does not amount to much more than a sketch and coexists with shreds of stories about the other boarders. The very short "On the Car" offers brief snapshots of a drunk man, a young girl and a fat man who find themselves together on a tramcar (117-18), with no actual "story." In "My Last Story," the anaphora of "I'm not going to write about" paradoxically opens the door on a myriad of embryonic stories, glimpsed in a few meaningful lines and striking images, but the narrator immediately shuts the door, refusing to let the reader catch more than a few hints. This last story can be seen as the inverted mirror of the first story "The Lagoon" in which the narrator's grandmother tells her endless tales "About the Maori Pa. About the old man. ...About the lagoon" (4). Despite the assertive mode (as opposed to the negations in the last story), the reader is not offered more than these snatches of stories and probably ends up with the same frustration as when reading "My Last Story." However, in "The Lagoon," a story is finally being told, though hurriedly, and provides one with the ingredients one might expect from a juicy story (a murder, passion, jealousy), but the narrator remains unmoved by this example of sensational and violent drama that could have found its place in the local tabloid: "the moment wasn't emotional" (7). She chooses instead to make a loop and revert back to the beginning of the piece, repeating the words she had used previously to describe the lagoon, the construction of sand castles and children taking refuge in comforting imaginary lives, as though going back to the origin of stories as well as to stories about origins: "This is my castle, we said, you be Father I'll be Mother and we'll live here and catch crabs and tiddlers for ever" (4, 7). All these different types of stories or non-stories also self-reflexively point to the countless tales of past literature whose overwhelming heritage can lead writers to wonder if there is still a story to tell or if everything has not been told already. Like Erlene in *Scented Gardens for*

the Blind, they might be tempted to conclude that “there was nothing to say, and no words to say it” (31).

In “My Last Story,” when the narrator points out: “I’m never going to write another story after this one. This is my last story” (182), “this one” and the pronoun “this” both point to a referent, whose existence is thereby asserted (“this is a story”), yet the whole text is actually a *praeteritio*, a self-reflexive disquisition on what the narrator will not write about, and therefore “not a story.” Such a metafictional piece forces the reader to reconsider the definition of a story as it contains none of the features and devices usually associated with stories. In fact, the multiplicity of story-lines which are aborted as soon as they are conceived draws the reader’s attention to the components of a story that are both there and not there: characters which are only briefly sketched, scanty plots, fragmentary narratives, missing links. The story which is not told or only partially told about “the Hillside men who get into the tram at four forty-five . . . and you never know what they’re thinking” (181) or about “the little girl who bangs her head against the wall and can’t talk” (182), is enticing for what it does not say, for what is hidden beneath the surface, in the blanks between words. It is meaningful that the narrator should draw attention to the men’s irretrievable thoughts and to the girl’s muteness for they point to another world that is not directly accessible and bears similarities to what Frame, in “Beginnings,” called “that” world as opposed to “this” world (45), i.e. the “Mirror City” (1991, 405) of imagination and private insight, as distinct from the everyday world where one needs to adapt and conform (one of Frame’s novels is called *The Adaptable Man*). In *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, Vera’s daughter Erlene has stopped speaking, which worries her parents and the doctors, but she has created her own inner world where she holds conversations with the black beetle who lives on her windowsill, wears a black apron and builds coffins for beans. Like Dossy Park, Jan in “Tiger, Tiger,” J. in “Miss Gibson—And the Lumber Room,” the little boy in “Treasure,” Winnie in “Keel and Kool” and the inmates of mental institutions who create a parallel inner world, Erlene uses her imaginative mind to initiate personal modes of perceiving which are not dependent on dominant conventional patterns.

Frame therefore encourages one to “undeceive the sight” and look for what is “not perceived by the naked eye” (1967, 62), to “clean a dusty way of looking” (1966, 9), “explore beyond the object, beyond its shadow” (1966, 239) and enter “the room two inches behind the eye” (1966, 8). What lies in that room need not necessarily be “captured and named” (1966, 9), but should neither remain locked and ignored. In her stories, Frame opens the door to that other room, the imaginary world through the looking-glass, which is only accessible to those with the proper insight: children, artists, people who have not yielded to conformity and the world of pretence and stereotypes. What Frame’s narrators are aiming for is not the surface of things, the slick veneer of conformist society, “the obvious, the visible, the tangible, the immediately perceived” (1966, 71), but the

deeper layers of inner lives, the story that is not directly perceptible, that escapes, the world that is not there, “the invisible, the intangible” which she paradoxically also calls “the real” (1966, 70). In an interview, Frame said: “I’m not sure that I see life at all. What I do see is life within” (Henderson 13). In *A Stage of Siege*, Manfred Signal observes the scenes she has painted over the years and realizes that “the true images were in her mind” (1966, 10), just as the black and shining swans in “Swans” are not only resting and moving on the water but are also “inside you,” and a secret sea has “crept inside your head for ever” (1951, 65). In “The Park,” the narrator describes the park where the patients of a mental institution walk every day until she reveals: “There was no park, really. There were no trees, nor any grass. Helen was walking up and down inside her own mind. ... We were all walking inside ourselves ... touching the picket-fences of our minds” (176). The inmates have invented their own park with smooth green grass and cherry trees covered with pink blossom, just as for the mother in “A Note on the Russian War,” the sunflower growing in the garden means her family is Russian and living on the Steppes, even if “There are no lands outside, they are fenced inside us” (152).

A recurrent device in Frame’s fiction consists in building up a world or a story with recognizable components such as characters, place and action (two girls playing ball, patients walking around a park, a girl living in a large house with servants, a boy sprouting pearls, rubies and diamonds, two girls sharing a room in a boarding-house...) and eventually exposing the artefact by taking that world away, erasing it, “decreating” it and revealing it only existed in the minds of the characters or the narrators. In *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, it will turn out that Erlene (but also her father) is a creation of Vera’s imagination and that it is Vera herself who is mute and has been in a mental hospital for thirty years. In this novel and in the stories, the reader who had momentarily suspended his or her disbelief is caught off-guard and has to re-adjust to the new ontological plane. The shattering of the illusion, or what Patrick Evans calls “ficticides” (375), has secondary after-effects however as the reader is also made aware of the fictional dimension of the embedding stories. In “Miss Gibson—And the Lumber Room,” J. writes a letter to her former school-teacher to unravel her lies and deceptions in an essay she wrote when she was a child. When she repeats “I was an awful liar” (143, 145, 146), she defines the essential feature of any story-teller, and the reader may wonder whether the “true” story she is now telling about her life is not as fictional as the embedded one.

Through such defamiliarising devices, Janet Frame draws attention to the very essence of story-telling so that the ontological structure wavers and the reader ends up questioning the very existence of a story as well as what constitutes the essence of a story. One of its defining features might precisely be the oscillation between presence and absence, which goes back to one of the ancient story-tellers’ formula “it is and it is not,” “Aixo era y no era” to quote Jakobson (239). This also partly recalls Derrida’s practice

of placing some words “under erasure” so that they are cancelled but also still legible beneath the crossing out. In a similar way, the imaginary worlds invented by Frame’s narrators are both there and not there, conjured up and then briskly taken away, as in “My Last Story” where the narrator introduces potential characters and stories only to deny them any existence. Brian McHale calls the texts that perform this double movement of inscription and deletion “self-consuming artefacts”: the erasure of what has just been created exposes “the processes by which readers, in collaboration with texts, construct fictional objects and worlds” (100). Frame acknowledges the heritage of story-telling and writes stories herself but she can no longer subscribe to their premises and conventional codes so that she presents her stories as traces of what used to be called a story. To paraphrase Spivak writing about Derrida’s concept of erasure, the word “story” is inaccurate to refer to Frame’s creations but it is necessary because it is the sign that language offers (xiv).

This new mode of perceiving the fictional world also entails a different way of writing, hence the fact that the narrator of “My Last Story” does not want to “write any more stories *like that*” (181, my emphasis). While the narrator of “Jan Godfrey” was straining to write a clear-cut story within a neat frame (and failed to do so), the narrator of “My Last Story” refuses to abide by the rules of conformity and to rely on conventional and exhausted narrative props: “I don’t like writing stories. I don’t like putting he said she said he did she did, and telling about people” (181), a mode of writing that can partially be found in “Keel and Kool” and “Child” for instance, but also in an ironical way at the beginning of “A Beautiful Nature” (110). In “My Last Story,” the narrator discards such basic components of story-telling and traditional mimesis as dialogue, plot and characterisation, and backs down as soon as she is tempted to fall back on old tricks: “is it love it must be love because we were standing on the bridge he said. He said she said, I’m not going to write any more stories about that” (182). The narrator exposes the shallowness of such conversations and the exhaustion of traditional realism by drawing attention to the narrative conventions, using them and then immediately putting them under erasure.

The narrator is particularly wary of worn-out cliché expressions such as “every cloud has a silver lining” (181) or “My sister has a heart of gold” (183), which testify to imprisonment in standardised language and sterile imagination. This reliance on stereotyped modes of seeing, thinking and speaking is a recurrent concern of Frame’s and she keeps exposing the hollowness of such conformist practices as, for instance, in “Keel and Kool” when people tell the bereaved mother “A sad blow. ... But it’s all for the best and you have Wonderful Faith” (23), the capital letters emphasizing further the ritualised response and avoidance strategy. In *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, the main character wonders whether speech is anything “more than a comfortable, satisfying habit” (152) with no depth to it, and knows “that the air is full of voices speaking to us, uttering platitudes and wise sayings” (156). For her part, as Peter Gibbons explains, Frame gives

precedence to the individual “parole” with its specific associations over the common and familiar “langue” shared by everyone (98). Thus, in “My Last Story,” when the narrator writes “This is my last story” (182, 183) and says she is not going to write any more stories “like that,” one may infer that she refers to the type of stories that follow hackneyed lines, stay on the polished surface of things and rely on stilted clichés which “fossilize language” as Claire Bazin suggests (22).

Her intention is to start anew with fresh words which have not been worn down by artificial use: “I’m going to put three dots with my typewriter, impressively, and then I’m going to begin . . .” (183). The dots and pause following “begin” are the sign of a new departure and not of a closure, even if the collection ends two lines later and the narrator’s supposedly “wrong way of looking at Life” (183) could actually be her right way of writing stories. Frame is indeed doing away with exhausted forms of story-telling and stilted language, and is offering a new outlook on words, as though one were rediscovering them, or replacing “the derelict words washed up on barren islands of the mind and sprouting rank poisonous growths of time and use” (1964, 202). This is what Daphne advocates at the end of *Owls Do Cry* when she asks her father to repeat the names of the members of her family not “as if he had learned them” but as though they were new: “Say the names, she said, as if you don’t know them. Say them new and just born” (168), an injunction which will be repeated in *The Adaptable Man* to initiate a return to the origins of language: “Say the names again and again” (10). To borrow the title of one of Frame’s novels, the writer induces one to move to the “edge of the alphabet” (1962, 3) and experiment with new modes of speech, a “new language” to quote from *The Carpathians* (119).

In “My Last Story,” the reader would be at pains to draw the contours of that ultimate story which is being told as the whole piece is based on stories under erasure, stories that, precisely, will not be told. Remembering René Magritte’s paintings “This is not a pipe” and “This is not an apple,” the reader may be tempted to state “This is not a story,” and in answer to the original question “is there a story?,” he or she might answer “there is no story,” just as there is “no lagoon” (3), “no park” (176), “no lands outside” (152), “no sea” (62), “no nothing” (62), or at least none until you use your imaginative insight and invent them. Once you do, an alternative world opens up, “that” world, the Mirror City of imagination, in which stories develop according to their own momentum and in their own idiosyncratic form, unheeding of set patterns, accepted literary conventions and familiar codes. In *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, Janet Frame repeatedly steps out of well-known and comforting boundaries, be they the limits of the self, the world, language, narrative or literary genre, and opens the door to new ways of writing and reading stories, encouraging the reader to let go of preconceived ideas and habits, “leave the cocoon of a deceptive security” (Delbaere 21) and put “a wise ear to the keyhole” of the

writer's mind (Frame 1951, 131). By redefining the contours and features of story-telling, by moving away from the safe but imprisoning protection of "the world that is named and labelled and parcelled," Frame suggests that "Everything is always a story" (133, 131).

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