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The Author at Work – Two Short Stories by Janet Frame

This paper deals with two short stories written by the New Zealand born writer Janet Frame both of which represent the figure of the author, grappling with her own failure. The author figure takes us behind the scenes of the writing process, into the workshop of her fiction, therefore transforming us readers into voyeurs, and possibly intruders into her very own home, that of fiction – a home within/behind the home.

The two short stories studied in this paper are taken from two different collections that were written more than a decade apart. "Jan Godfrey" comes from Janet Frame's first ever short story collection, *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, published in 1951, whereas "Flu and Eye Trouble" is taken from *The Reservoir: Stories and Sketches*, published in 1963.[1] The two stories were written in different circumstances, but still bear some striking resemblances. In both, the reader is presented with an I-narrator suffering from a particularly bad case of writer's block, although paradoxically, in the end, a story does indeed get written. By way of this metafictional plot, we are let behind the scenes of literary creation, and the author-figures seem to allow us into their workshops, as it were. This highlights another feature common to the two stories: both take place in the narrators' bedrooms, which obviously work as metaphors for the intimate recesses of their imagination. The bedroom is the space where reverie takes place, where the imagination can wander around as it pleases, as well as the locus of identity itself, an issue that is central to both stories. It is true that in Janet Frame's work, a female post-colonial writer who was institutionalized on many occasions, home and identity are two extremely problematic and fragile concepts. This is the reason why the reader gets the feeling, in both stories, that creation is anything but a seamless, fluid process – on the contrary, it is always on the verge of jeopardy because of alien forces that always threaten to break in through the fabric of the text, whether they come from the inside or the outside. The distinction between the inside and the outside of the text is indeed rendered very fragile by the autobiographical references which create a to-and-fro movement from reality to fiction and vice versa. The purpose of this paper is to show how Janet Frame presents literary creation as a constant effort to fight alienation. The word 'alienation'

[1] Any future reference will be made to either "JG" ("Jan Godfrey") or "FET" ("Flu and Eye Trouble").

is key here, as it binds together the different threads that constitute my analysis. From a psychiatric point of view, alienation describes the growing sense of estrangement from the self and the world that is typical of schizophrenia, a disease Frame herself had for a time believed she was suffering from. From a feminist perspective, this form of alienation from the self is the result of a certain male domination, and the double bind it imposes on women and their bodies. This thesis was brilliantly sustained by Elizabeth Abel in her article on Jean Rhys, a writer whose work often depicts women with no fixed sense of home and condemned to drift from one boarding house to the next. The fact that these two writers should be concerned with the issue of post-colonial identity brings us to a third meaning of the word 'alienation' which refers to the transfer of property rights, and is more generally related to the issue of territoriality and national identity. All these perspectives are not only relevant to the stories themselves, but also to Janet Frame's life, to some extent, or at least what we know about it from her autobiography. By depicting an alienated outside, an alien inside and a house of fiction, Janet Frame's two short stories give a picture of what goes on behind the scenes of literary creation – mainly the struggle to establish one's sense of home.

The Alien(ated) Outside

The beginnings of both stories are strikingly similar, as they give very precise accounts of the author-figures' surroundings:

> I am wanting to write a story today. I am wanting more than anything to write a story. I am sitting on my bed with my typewriter, typing words that are not a story. I have my new slippers on, the ones my landlady gave me for a present, red and blue, with butterflies on the toes, and I am wearing my new watch which says ten past two. ("JG," 129)

> It is ten minutes to ten in the morning. Although I got up at half-past six and meant to begin work earlier than now, I have not done so. I am merely sitting at my typewriter, sometimes dreaming, sometimes prodding the keys into saying I am tired I am so tired I am so tired oh god but I am tired; sometimes sniffing the fumes of the oilstove which burns with a blue flame if it is functioning correctly, like a child whose condition can be gauged by the colour of its tongue; dreaming, typing, dreaming again; and always conscious that in the next room is the man of the house, my landlord, who has been absent from work all week and who lies in bed each morning until eleven o'clock. ("FET," 97)

The reader gets the impression that the narrators' creative energy is floating aimlessly on the surface of things but without really sticking to anything. Those first few lines do sound like the work of somebody "typing words that are not a story," as if this account were a way to make up for the lack of inspiration. Yet this is where we perceive a major difference in the two stories:

while both represent an author-figure who is figuratively trying to enter the room of her imagination, the narrator from "Jan Godfrey" succeeds in breaking through with the help of her roommate, Alison Hendry, whereas the other narrator fails. She doesn't manage, unlike the former, to use her immediate surroundings as a springboard for her imagination, and her words strictly adhere to what she is describing. In other words, she fails to transcend reality out of a lack of poetic inspiration. The presence of her landlord in the other room seems to obsess her and to obstruct her field of vision:

> Yesterday he mended the arm of the vacuum cleaner, extracting peanuts, hazelnuts, hairpins, raisins, silver paper from the crook of its elbow. The day before, he fixed a new washer on the upstairs tap. The day before that he made ten wooden wedges for my window, strengthened the snapping power of the letter box on the front door, revitalized the zing of the electric bell. So much to mend! Will he have time in his life to mend everything? What will he choose to mend today? ("FET," 99)

Here the use of a metonymic, descriptive form of realism paradoxically underlines this impression of an elusive reality that pervades the story, as if the words worked as a safeguard against the fear of looming madness, as if, by enumerating the objects around her, the narrator was trying to hold on to the materiality of her surroundings. This anxiety is expressed with the repetition of "I am afraid of danger" ("FET," 98), and with a permanent sense of doubt as to the perception of reality: "I did not dream his ailment" ("FET," 98), "Is it really flu and eye trouble?" ("FET," 99) The narrator in "Jan Godfrey," on the contrary, manages to transcend the strict level of immediate reality through backward glances into her childhood. Bachelard, in his study of space, *La poétique de l'espace,* believed the space of the house to be the ideal location for the poetic reverie to unfold, almost always bringing us back to our first house, the one we lived in as children.[2] In "Jan Godfrey," the observation of such a banal aspect of the room as the wallpaper enables the narrator to reach back into her childhood:

> I have no pictures on my walls yet. There are only the bunches of blue and pink flowers on the wallpaper. In the old bedroom where I slept as a child there were asters round the top of the wall and we played I spy with my little eye something beginning with… you can never guess, it's high up. It was the asters, dark blue and red, like flowers on Grandma's coat, all around the top of the wallpaper. ("JG," 130)

She seems to be physically transported into the past and actually uses a spatial metaphor to describe her attempt to return to the matter at hand: "But I have wandered again" ("JG," 130), a sentence which will echo throughout the text.

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[2] This is also true in the case of Freudian theory and more particularly in the interpretation of dreams, where the figure of the house is very often interpreted as a representation of the body.

Both author-figures have different problems: in "Jan Godfrey," the narrator seems to travel back and forth; she gets distracted, as if to avoid something; whereas the protagonist from "Flu and Eye Trouble" is stuck in the here and now of her own failure.

But both women have this in common: they are trying to deal with the presence of the Other, the stranger with whom they are forced to share their private space. The narrator from "Flu and Eye Trouble" makes this clear from the beginning: "I wish my landlord would go to work. How can I write when he is in the next room?" ("FET," 98) Paradoxically, the man is actually both present and absent; he is on the other side of the wall, but seems to be constantly within earshot: "He is ill, I think. He coughs, clears his throat, honk." ("FET," 98) She overhears his conversation, listens to him singing while he is gardening. The landlord's presence seems to grow so much within the narrator's immediate perception that it becomes hard to say whether it is his presence or his absence causing her despair. Fear of and desire for the Other, especially the male Other are usually opposing forces that nevertheless work together in Janet Frame's work (particularly in a later novel, *A State of Siege*), and the use of the highly ambiguous expression "the man of the house" ("FET," 97) to describe the landlord, obviously hints at the possible threat of an intrusion of the male element into the author-figure's female space. And this is perhaps why the story ends not on the narrator's failure, but on the necessity to protect herself from forced entry into her bedroom, that is, "into her heart":

> Any human being who occupies the next room, whether he is alive or dead is a threat to my sanity, my ordered existence, and that is why each night in the shape of a spider I hang woven traps across my doorway. At all costs I must prevent the entry of the living and the dead into my heart. ("FET," 100)

Although the menacing Other could take the form of "any human being […] whether he is alive or dead," the metaphor of the spider-web conveys a typically female vision of writing as the weaving of a fabric, which the narrator is here trying to interpose as a screen between her and the rest of the world – a male world, as is made obvious from its intruding prerogative. The narrator of "Jan Godfrey" entertains an equally ambiguous relationship with the Other, who, this time, even shares her bedroom. Unlike the narrator, she has a name, Alison Hendry.[3] But in this story, the Other does not run counter to the writing process, she is the backbone of the story, the source of it, as the narrator tells us: "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."

[3] The reader should not be confused by the title "Jan Godfrey," which is the result of a printing mistake. The original title was supposed to be "Alison Hendry," whereas Jan Godfrey was the *nom de plume* Frame was using at the time, Godfrey being Frame's mother's maiden name.

("JG," 131) But what is particularly striking here is that the character of Alison Hendry does not just passively agree to be the topic of a story, the object of the narrator's gaze. She literally takes over her voice:

> 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. I am too tall what shall I do I am too tall my head pokes forward my shoulders hunch I knit here in secret with my yellow needles going tap-tap tap-tap. ("JG," 134)

The reader has no way of finding out whether the original narrator has "opened" her voice to Alison Hendry, or whether she has not had it forced upon her, as the story ends with these words: "My name is Alison Hendry." ("JG," 135) This indeterminacy itself may remind us of Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, which consisted in the narrator relinquishing control over the text and allowing other points of view to emerge within it. Alison Hendry's vision of the world is indeed completely foreign to that of the narrator – "but that is not what you know" ("JG," 135) – yet she gets to express it as well as the narrator. But the ending also suggests that the author-figure from the beginning has disappeared, and has been replaced by her roommate. There is a sense of urgency to her voice, as if she were trying to pack in as many words as she could within the space she is given, until the number of words that she has, poor in her opinion, is exhausted and she is left repeating the same thing over and over again: "[…] my mother is on the Institute, buying little frilly cake-papers, cake-papers, cake-papers." ("JG," 135) Yet readers remain puzzled: where does this outpour of words come from? Does this mean that she shares more than the narrator's bedroom?

The Alien Inside

Many elements in the passage devoted to Alison Hendry lead us to serious doubt as to her status in relation to the narrator. What we do notice is the uncertainty in the use of pronouns, which blurs the line between monologue and dialogue:

> When I undress I turn my back so she cannot see me, and I slip quickly into bed drawing the sheets over my body to hide myself, and in the morning I wait till you have gone into the bathroom before I get out of bed and when you come back into the room smelling of Protex and Kolynos I blush because I am timid. ("JG," 134, emphasis mine)

This uncertainty regarding the identity of Alison Hendry, as well as her lack of human depth, leaves room for the possibility that she might be nothing other than a figment of the narrator's imagination, a creature of words. But she is not just any alter ego insofar as she gets to wind up the story, with an affirmation of her identity. More than an imaginary character, Alison Hendry seems to be the result of a schizophrenic split, which takes over the creative

void left by the original narrator. The blurring of the limit between the narrator and Alison Hendry is also to be understood in parallel with the blurring of the life/fiction divide, as the narrator is obviously an autobiographical one. She definitely has creative attributes: is she not a "tailoress" after all? Moreover, her presentation of herself as knitting "here in secret" echoes with the traditional metaphorical association between text and fabric which one can also see at play in "Flu and Eye Trouble". In this respect, she could be a projection of the author's creativity. We know from the autobiography that Frame read widely on the subject of schizophrenia in order to feed the fantasies she had elaborated on the subject, and it is possible to read the story as an illustration of different aspects of this disease: estrangement from the world, echolalia (i.e., the aimless repetition of the same words) – culminating with the always dramatic split-personality syndrome. This is in keeping with the very detached tone the narrator uses to recount several episodes she spent in a psychiatric hospital:

> But I got tired of it [teaching] and I went to the hospital in Dunedin. It was warm the night it was admitted. I was frightened to go to sleep in case I would miss something, so I lay there watching a night nurse roll swabs of cotton wool and swot anatomy and read Philip Gibbs, and then somebody gave me two brown pills with medanol in them, sleep sleep and then wake up fresh in the morning. ("JG," 132)

The alien here comes not from the outside, but the inside of the bedroom, that is, inside the self, yet the narrator does not try to repress it/her, instead giving her free rein to express what she cannot, or does not want to. In "Flu and Eye Trouble," the narrator's sense of reality is threatened by the presence of the Other, and by the subsequent loss of her creativity. In "Jan Godfrey," it is the emergence of the alien inside that is at the origin of the ontological doubt which pervades the story. In this respect, schizophrenic figures not so much as a theme, but as a trope, a method of investigating meaning – and especially the meaning of identity:

> Alison Hendry. Margaret Burt. Nancy Smith. We cling to our names because we think they emphasize our separateness and completeness and importance, but deep down we know that we are neither separate nor complete nor very important, nor are we very happy (Alison Hendry, Margaret Burt, Nancy Smith, children) playing mud-pies by ourselves over the fence […] ("JG," 131)

The image of the "fence" reminds us of the wall that separates the narrator in "Flu and Eye Trouble" from her landlord – both narrators are painfully aware that identity is just a cut in the natural human flow. Actually, this list of names separated from the human beings they designate, like signifiers cut off from their signified, can be read as alluding to a certain failure of individuation: identity is just an arbitrary notion since, in reality, proper names are just a way

to hide our entanglements with the rest of humanity, that is, our lack of "separateness and completeness". Besides, proper names, and especially last names, are a notorious legacy of patriarchy, and from a feminist perspective, they refer less to a person in his/herself than to her belonging to a family, and more particularly, a father. Such radical doubt can also be found regarding the meaning of identity in "Flu and Eye Trouble" with the narrator's remark about the National Assistance man: "He is an elderly man. His skin is stained, as if carbon paper has been pressed upon it. Is he only an impression of someone?" ("FET," 98) In this ontological questioning of the world, identity is the first casualty, the most fragile of our constructions.

But while the narrator from "Jan Godfrey" seems to open herself up to these irruptions into her identity, which constitute the true condition of creativity, the narrator from "Flu and Eye Trouble" is terrified of losing her grasp on reality, which is perhaps the "danger" she seems to be so afraid of. In "Jan Godfrey," the fabric of the text is looser, and allows for other voices to emerge in the main narration – voices from childhood…

> […] playing mud-pies by ourselves in a tiny backyard when other kids are out in the big playground over the fence, look what I've made, race you Charlie, tell tale tit your tongue shall be split and all the little puppy dogs shall come and have a bit. ("JG," 131)

… or the voice of anonymous despair:

> hell
> me
> me
> me ("JG," 131)

In "Flu and Eye Trouble" there is only one instance of an alien voice breaking through the surface of the text, and it is the voice of madness itself:

> I receive National Assistance because wherever I go to work I notice that people have five claws and four folds of eyelid, that feathers are dipped in oil, that skin is naturally waterproof, that secret branding irons are inserted in people's lives, this being known as the Scorched Earth Policy where the enemies face each other with no man's land between where nothing ever grows. ("FET," 98)

In fact, the entire story seems to revolve around that one passage of delirium, as if the whole text were an attempt to repress it. A closer look at these few lines reveals that they mix plain hallucinations ("I notice that people have five claws and four folds of eyelid") and what could actually pass for a metaphorical apprehension of the world ("secret branding irons are inserted in people's lives") As in "Jan Godfrey," the particular gaze of madness is used as a source for literary creation, yet in "Flu and Eye Trouble" we do not find the almost festive pleasure the narrator took in experimenting with the limits

of reality. The weight of experience has wedged itself between the two stories with the narrator's awareness that "I am what is known as 'a burden on the state'." ("FET," 98) From fantasy to reality, the author-figure in the story has understood that she will not make schizophrenia her home – something the narrator from the autobiography explains in strikingly similar words:

> Why do I use again the metaphor with a spider? It seemed as if, having been in hospital, I had, like a spider, woven about me numerous threads which invisibly reached all those who 'knew' and bound them to a paralysis of fixed poses and expressions and feelings that made me unhappy and lonely but gave me also a recognition of the power of having spun the web and the powerlessness of those trapped within it. (Frame, Autobiography, 194)

Finally, the two short stories can be read as explorations of the limits of reality, but also of realism, as there is a parallel between the narrators' elusive grasp on reality and their search for an appropriate representation of this reality. In both stories, the same movement from metonymic realism to a purely "idiosyncratic" language similar to that of Daphne in *Owls Do Cry*[4] can be actually observed, as if the author-figures were experimenting with ways of expressing their experiences of interiority. This is why the motif of the house is an interesting one to resort to, as it is both a familiar and an oppressive environment. In Frame's work, the house often works as the boundary between inside and outside – and similarly, from a representational point of view, it figures here as both a traditional support for realist investigation, and as the birthplace of fantasy.

The House of Fiction

There is a definite link between the throes of unsuccessful creation and the attacks on her identity that the author-figure has to suffer. Both narrators are haunted by the presence of an elusive Other, who seems to be pressing down on their sense of self, and eventually on their mental sanity. This is because the rooms they inhabit are not just any rooms, but rooms belonging to a boarding house, which means a common space that needs to be shared among strangers, and in which each has to create his/her own privacy, dig his/her own hole, as it were. It is a house where the sense of home needs to be constantly renegotiated by its inhabitants. The house is the main thematic drive that brings the two stories together. The narrator in "Jan Godfrey" remarks: "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." ("JG," 131) Here, the word "keyhole" suggests that reading the story

[4] The use of the word "idiosyncratic" actually comes from an article by Cherry Hankin on *Owls Do Cry*, where she actually contends that one of the main themes of the novel is each character's relationship to language.

offers one a glimpse of the author's own private "house". Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, have shown us the importance of the house as a powerful symbol for female interiority.[5] Yet, as these critics have shown, the house can also become a symbol of women's confinement within the roles that they have been assigned by patriarchy. Interestingly enough, they envisage the common trope of the double and the fragmentation of personality in nineteenth-century literature by women as an attempt to escape from these very roles:

> Significantly, too, the explosive violence of these "moments of escape" that women writers continually imagine for themselves returns us to the phenomenon of the mad double so many of these women have projected into their works. For it is, after all, through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained. (Gilbert and Gubar, 85)

Although the motif of the double is only present in "Jan Godfrey", "Flu and Eye Trouble" illustrates more radically the need for the woman writer to escape from men's interference ("male houses and male texts"), whether it comes from the landlord, or the National Assistance Man. More generally, in those two stories, the narrators seem to be pining for "a room of their own," their own private space, that house of fiction that they are temporarily locked out of while they are condemned to remain in the limbo of writer's block.

This is why writing appears in both cases to be a very concrete activity, as if it was a way for the narrators to literally build the walls of their private house of fiction. The words that materialize are the best protection against the anguish caused by unreality, because they do exist, concretely. Hence the great (albeit ambiguous) pleasure the narrator seems to be taking in the very materiality of words – they show up on the page, as in this very puzzling example:

> hell
> me
> me
> me ("JG," 131)

The words stand out on the page, confront us with the raw power of enunciation. In "Jan Godfrey," words even have a taste sometimes: "Ivy swore, every time she spoke she swore, it was like having pickles with every meal." ("JG," 133) All this reminds us of a very child-like apprehension of

[5] In this respect, it would be interesting to compare "Jan Godfrey" to the story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892, "The Yellow Wallpaper," which resorts to the same images, and in which enclosure and the splitting of the (female) self are closely related. I wish to thank Professor Zabus for having pointed out these aspects to me.

language where words are powerful bearers of meaning, as is the case in the following : "[…] and then somebody gave me two brown pills with medanol in them, *sleep sleep* and then wake up fresh in the morning." ("JG," 132, emphasis mine) Here, the mere repetition of the word "sleep" is enough to signify its duration. Similarly, at the end of the story, the character of Alison Hendry seems to express a sense of fascination for the words "cake-papers", which, after being repeated three times, lose their function as signifiers to become mere objects. But unlike in "Flu and Eye Trouble," the house that the narrator of "Jan Godfrey" eventually builds has many openings for the alien voices to emerge, or simply for the Other's taking a glimpse of what is inside. In this story, alienation is a driving force, whereas in "Flu and Eye Trouble," the whole text becomes the spider web that the author-figure uses at the end to protect herself from the rest of the world – her house of fiction is hermetically closed against the circulation of her own desire.

It was not until the writing of her autobiography that Frame finally managed to define her very own space as a writer, which became "Mirror City," the imaginary place where she could retreat and find her own peace.[6] But those two stories also herald the utopianism that will be the hallmark of Janet Frame's work.[7] The "spatialization" of such universal issues as writer's block is typical of post-colonial thinking, as is the questioning of dominating, Eurocentric concepts such as identity, and the difference between reality and imagination. With these two stories, Frame dramatically overturns those two major categories in a movement she will take even further in her later novels, like *Living in the Maniototo*, which explores the blurring of the reality/fiction divide by asking the following question: of reality and fiction, which is the original and which is the copy? The novel is indeed haunted by this issue: "[…] in a world of replicas the original cannot be matched in value, and the real fact is often a copy of the unreal fiction […]" (Frame, *Maniototo*, 64) This reflection is foreshadowed in "Jan Godfrey": "There is nothing so real as the funny twisted people out of Giotto" ("JG," 130) Janet Frame seems to say that there is nothing so real as the house of fiction.

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[6] See Ivane Mortelette on this topic. "Mirror City" was actually one of the avatars of the fundamental opposition in Janet Frame's work between "this" and "that" world, which she first expounded in her article entitled "Beginnings" for the *Landfall journal* in 1965.
[7] See Marc Delrez on Janet Frame's utopianism.

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