The One Story, Two Ways of Telling, Three Perspectives: Recent New Zealand Literary Autobiography

LAWRENCE JONES

I

FOR THE NEW ZEALAND literary autobiographer, "There is one story only." The story appears in its simplest symbolic form in Janet Frame's earliest tale (told to her family when she was three):

> Once upon a time there was a bird. One day a hawk came out of the sky and ate the bird. The next day a big bogie came up from behind the hill and ate up the hawk for eating up the bird.[1]

Like most good symbolic stories, this one is open to several interpretations, but for the literary autobiographer the relevant one is Robert T. Robertson's version:

> In a provincial society, the hawk is both the society and untamed nature; and the bogie is the art which eats up both for eating up the bird of inspiration or imagination in an unimaginative society.[2]

The story, then, is of the artist's struggle to find a "place" (often literal as well as figurative) in a hostile provincial environment: it is a story of defeat and persecution but also of victory in the achievement of art (even if the art succeeds only in holding up a mirror in which the society could see its unlovely self if it chose to look).

But if there is one story, there are two ways of telling it. The first is realistic, attempting to be objective, concerned primarily with the outward environment and the making of a place within

it (the story of a career), literal and chronological in method. The second is impressionistic, openly subjective, concerned primarily with the inner self and the development of a sensibility and a sense of psychological place, metaphorical and moving non-chronologically as the memory moves back and forth through layers of time. Given the fixed sexual roles of New Zealand society, the first method tends to be masculine, the second feminine; the first tends to be dominant, the second scarcely recognized as a tradition. But, as we shall see, from this genuine if unrecognized second tradition emerge some of the finest works of autobiography as well as fiction.

If there is one story and two ways of telling it, there are at least three perspectives from which it can be told. These are not determined sexually so much as generationally (although a "generation" cannot be defined only in chronological terms). Peter Simpson has provided useful categorization of these perspectives as "Late Colonial," "Provincial," and the "Post-provincial."[3] In recent literary autobiographies, the Provincial perspective has been dominant, as writers who grew up in the 1920's and 1930's look back on that experience of struggle with a puritanical, provincial society. Their outlook tends to be dualistic: on the one hand there is society, seen as "homogeneous, dull, conformist, philistine, puritanical, bourgeois, materialist, Anglo-Saxon and hostile" (to quote Simpson's useful listing), a society which has perverted its own dream of a New World as Pastoral Paradise or Just City; on the other hand there is the isolated individual, Man or Woman Alone, the artist as "an island in a sea of mediocrity," and the people with whom he or she tends to sympathize and identify — "the disaffected, the nonconformists, the deviants, the foreigners, the loners and losers," the spiritual elite within a dead society.[4] The Provincial writer's function in this situation is, as James K. Baxter put it in 1951, to speak the truth as he sees it, to deny the society's myth of itself as "a Happy Island [and] in some degree a just one" and to point out that it "is in fact an unjust, unhappy one, where human activity is becoming progressively more meaningless" while at the same time himself remaining in this "corrupt" society as "a cell of

good living," a Man Alone working for change "by writing or example."[5]

This central Provincial perspective is flanked by the Late Colonial leading up to it and the Post-provincial emerging in reaction to it. From the Late Colonial perspective, New Zealand society appears as imperfect, but because it is unformed, a society barely out of the frontier stage, one that may develop into the Just City but which so far has no place or need for the artist, who must either patiently bear with its immaturity or go overseas to a mature society to find a place. The writer has not yet arrived at the more sharply critical perspective of the Provincial artist. On the other hand, the Post-provincial stance is an attempt to move beyond the Provincial. New Zealand society is seen as a real, imperfect, living culture, its failure to live up to its own best ideals accepted as part of its human history. The artist, formed by it, need be neither expatriated nor alienated, but rather, accepting his society as he accepts himself, can be understandingly critical of its failures and can celebrate its virtues and its life as a unique social organism that has evolved through its own history in relation to its environment.

The "one story" has been told repeatedly in recent New Zealand literary autobiography, both in the realistic and impressionistic modes. Although there have been hints of all three perspectives, the dominant one has been the Provincial. Of recent literary autobiographers, only the oldest, M. H. Holcroft, shows traces of the Late Colonial perspective, and only the youngest, Alistair Campbell and Mervyn Thompson, have attempted to move towards a Post-provincial one. Holcroft's *The Way of a Writer* (first of a promised two volumes) traces the first half of his career, a career that might be said to be the last of the Late Colonial ones. Toss Woollaston's *Sage Tea* and Robin Hyde's posthumous *A Home in this World* are archetypal tellings of the one story from the Provincial perspective, Woollaston's a triumphant account of liberation told with a felicitous mix of the realist and impressionist modes, Hyde's a moving account of defeat told in a radically impressionist mode. The last part of Alistair Campbell's *Island to Island* and the last third of Mervyn Thompson's *All My Lives* mark the move from a Provincial to a Post-

provincial perspective. However, it is too early for any personal summing up from a Post-provincial perspective, and the major autobiographies on which this paper will concentrate, those of Frank Sargeson, Charles Brasch, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, and Janet Frame, are all from the Provincial perspective. Brasch, Sargeson, and (in an off-centre way) Ashton-Warner provide a final summing up of the experience of the generation born between 1900 and 1910 (born 1903, 1909, and 1908, respectively; Brasch's book is posthumous, and both Sargeson's and Ashton-Warner's appeared not too long before their deaths). Janet Frame, of course, is still very much with us, and her later work, especially *Living in the Maniototo*, shows her moving from the Provincial towards the Post-provincial, but her autobiography (as yet incomplete) appears to be her Provincial summing up, her final and definitive account of that aspect of her experience for her generation (she was born in 1924). The discussion that follows will focus on these four major Provincial writers.[6]

II

Frank Sargeson's autobiography may well prove to be the definitive New Zealand account of the making of the Provincial artist. Sargeson's "one story" resembles Woollaston's, but is much fuller and takes the artist's career beyond his first successes to more problems and to his rebirth as a writer in later years. The first movement is, as with Woollaston, the discovery of identity and vocation within a hostile environment. Such a discovery was made more difficult not only because of the external restraints established by puritan parents but also, more seriously, the internal ones, the establishment of parental values within Sargeson as conscience. Thus he recounts how, confronted on a King Country train by a navvy sharing a beer with an adolescent Maori, he found that his "father's belief seemed suddenly to reassert itself," expressed as an inner disapproval of what he saw, a feeling which "annoyed" him but which he could not escape (p. 84). Faced with the internal and external forces of puritanism, he had only his maternal uncle as a counter-example, a model of a different and better way of life, but that was enough

to bring forth from him when he was twenty a statement that he wished to be "just like" his uncle, a statement "which had seemed to emerge from regions within [him] far below any layer of mind or heart of which [he] had any kind of accurate knowledge" (p. 133).[7] Six or seven years passed before the implications of his statement began to come clear to Sargeson, but it is significant that even at the time his uncle, through stories of his mother's childhood and adolescence, began to give him a perspective on his parents' puritanism, the beginning of a critical understanding of it, a perspective that reading further clarified, bringing the knowledge that "the environment which [his] father and mother took for granted, and which for them was a natural reality nothing could alter and nobody would question, needn't necessarily be what it was at all" (pp. 103-04). Thus, when his mother precipitated the "determining crisis" of his life, he was able to stop "walking unsteadily on top of a fence" and come down on the side opposite to hers (p. 106). (The metaphor is a revealing one, typical of Sargeson's Provincial dualism, like the puritan dualism in accepting that there are only two ways, the puritan way and the other side of the fence — a category lumping together all the various non-puritan possibilities, but an inversion of it in the choice of the "other".) But from leaving his parents' home in Hamilton, it was a circuitous route that finally took him back to his uncle's farm ("the one place where I had wanted to be all my life without question," [p. 131]) by way of a trip to Europe and a civil service job in Wellington. Nonetheless, he did arrive and re-experience the scene of his confession to his uncle with "apparently sensory perception," a mysterious moment when "time, space and circumstances ceased to be of any importance" that confirmed his vocation as a writer rising above the constricting effect of environment (pp. 133-34).

The second movement of Sargeson's "one story," as of Woollaston's, is the attempt to make a place, both literal and figurative, in which to live his art. The bach in Takapuna is Sargeson's version of the sod house in Mapua, the life-long relation with his friend Harry his version of Woollaston's marriage, his discovery of "an appropriate language to deal with the material of New Zealand life" (p. 223) his version of Woollaston's discovery of

"light contemporaries" in colour (*Sage Tea*, pp. 261-64). But whereas Woollaston's account ends at that point, Sargeson takes the story on, not only through his making a viable way of life and the creation of his early fiction, but also through his long postwar slump, the years of "torment" when his life was a "large question mark" (p. 281), when he was left behind by "a new generation with new interests" (p. 243), living in extreme poverty, and no longer imaginatively sustained by his now dead uncle who had provided "a lifeline with country parts" (p. 374). Thus for Sargeson's story the real climax is his rediscovery of vocation in his "second career" as a writer, the "post-Sargeson" Sargeson who straightened up out of the assumed "stoop" of his early first-person proletarian fiction and put into free play the full range of his verbal inventiveness, his intellectual inquisitiveness and playfulness, and his humour, including the bawdy and the black, while dealing with both the past, now seen as distant past, and the "new environment . . . that was now appearing momentously different from what had served [him] well for literary material so far" (p. 387).[8] Thus the one work that receives the most attention in the Autobiography is *Memoirs of a Peon*, that intended final book which instead opened the door to surprising productivity and the second career ("and let friends readers and critics keep or catch up with me if they could," [p. 400]). The final account of the discovery of M., his northland farm and his kauri tree, as a replacement for his uncle, his King Country farm and his honeysuckle tree, is the appropriate close for a story of discovery, loss, and recovery, the image of watching a bush dawn as being "present at Creation all over again" the appropriate final symbol (p. 430).

Sargeson's way of telling this story of his struggle to affirm and reaffirm Creation in an environment determined by Rules, to make his own "bridges" and achieve and re-achieve "reconciliation of a sort" (p. 354) is itself a reconciliation of the realistic and impressionistic modes. Sargeson, of course, was, with John Mulgan, the creator of critical realism in New Zealand fiction. However, he was also author of such an impressionistic work as *I Saw My Dream* (especially the "When the Wind Blows" section), and in *Sargeson* both modes are present. The

impressionism appears in the use of memory, the movement back and forth in time, especially in the account of the bus-ride in "Up onto the Roof and Down Again" and of the train-ride in "Third Class Country." Even in the less subjective later sections there is the use of a non-chronological, associative structure, most obviously in *Never Enough*, which moves from a conversation about travel in the 1950's back to childhood trips to Matakana and Hawera, to various journeys to Northland (told out of chronological order), interspersed with an account of the trip to Europe in 1927, and so on. Even then, in writing of his later books he circles back to pick up the story of B, his inspiration for *Memoirs of a Peon*, and then a completion in 1974 of his 1924 visit to Northland, his re-discovery of M's farm after seeing it from the train 50 years before. That last passage points to another important impressionistic device, the use of recurring motifs and images, the construction of a spatial, symbolic structure as well as a temporal, literal one. Dan Davin, in writing of *More than Enough*, the middle volume, has said that it is "very much an internal autobiography,"[9] and all the impressionistic, subjective devices work towards that end. Yet Dennis McEldowney has commented that "as biography" the memoirs "are often tantalizing because they leave many things unsaid."[10] Thus Sargeson never tells us of his choice to be Frank Sargeson rather than Norris Davey, nor what that might symbolize in terms of his rejection of his parents and his preference for his uncle as model. Nor does he more than briefly hint at his bisexuality (unable, for example, to resist calling our attention to just how much *Memoirs of a Peon* is a tour de force by telling us that the book is "remarkable among all [his] writings for depending so little on any personal or direct experience," for "everything that goes to make the sum total of misadventures upon which the novel so much depends for its success was far beyond [his] personal capabilities," p. 368). Thus, despite his use of subjective devices, Sargeson keeps the focus away from some aspects of himself. The third volume, *Never Enough*, is subtitled "Places and People Mainly," but it only presents a difference in degree from the first two volumes, for the gifts of the writer of realistic fiction are evident everywhere, as McEldowney notes, not only in "the

physical and social image of the country," but also in "a series of portraits which . . . are seldom less than generous."[11] The book is a rich record of things and people outside the writer.

The perspective from which both self and outside world are seen is archetypically Provincial in that inverse puritan dualism to which reference has already been made, that division between the realm of "Rules" — the puritan provincial society, and the realm of "Creation" — art, nature, feeling, personal relations, the flesh, all that puritanism represses or denies. The perspective is likewise Provincial in its view of the artist as Man Alone, necessarily an outsider in a puritan society and in the consumer-society which came to replace it, yet nevertheless attempting to contribute his bit to "what might evenually emerge as the Scriptures of the new kind of society we could all readily imagine" (p. 392). (The book also has many portraits of other artists as Men or Women alone, mostly eaten or at least thoroughly chewed by puritan society — Fairburn, Greville Texidor, and Karlf Wolfskehl especially.)

Charles Brasch does not figure in Sargeson's account, and in many ways would appear to be his opposite — South Island to his North Island, wealth to his poverty, a life spent half in Europe to a life almost entirely in New Zealand, poet to his prose writer, theist to his agnostic. Yet a deeper, more important pattern of similarity emerges when *Indirections* is put next to *Sargeson*. The "one story" that Brasch has to tell (brought out the more clearly, one suspects, by James Bertram's judicious editing)[12] is, despite all the obvious differences, basically the same. Like Sargeson, he had to resist a father who had no sympathy with his goals. Like Sargeson, he had a model elsewhere in the family, in his case his grandfather, a man who stood for the ideal of bringing to the new world of New Zealand "Europe's ancient culture, its accumulated wisdom, its tolerance and liberalism, which should take root and flower more freely in fresh soil, unencumbered by the trammels and shadows and prejudices of the past" (p. 55). Like Sargeson, he discovered even as a child that he wanted to make "something visible and tangible in the real world" that was at the same time beautiful (p. 23). His literal image of the network of grass stalks he made as a child

compares with Sargeson's figurative image of "the child with his mud-pie" as a symbol of one's "own particular brand of creation" to which "everything else must be secondary" (*Sargeson*, p. 226).

With somewhat more assurance than Sargeson, Brasch discovered his literary predilections in adolescence, feeling that poetry "compelled [his] attention through everything [he] did" (p. 86). But, like Sargeson, he found that his interests had to be protected from his family, in his case from the "scrutiny" and "withering criticism" (p. 88) of his father. Like Sargeson, he found positive experiences in nature (North and Central Otago rather than Te Aroha or the King Country), the feeling-tone more Wordsworthian than in Sargeson, although the sense of sharing in the "earth's life" (p. 122) seems to have been an experience common to both.

As for Sargeson, the years 1927-36 were for Brasch crucial in discovering his vocation, but while both men had a first experience of Europe in 1927, Brasch was able to stay there through most of his next twenty years, while Sargeson had to return to New Zealand after a few months. Both faced the problem of trying to find a personal voice, Sargeson at first falling into the manner of Joyce, Brasch into a derivative mixture of "Shelley and water, Keats and water, sometimes Yeats and water, but mostly water" (p. 151). As Sargeson found that [his] "life would be stripped bare of meaning if [he] abandoned his writing" (p. 226), Brasch discovered that if he was not a poet then he had "no real existence, and no reason beyond habit for going on living" (p. 190). While Sargeson had his uncle's farm as "a point from which one could get a marvellously dispassionate view of one's own affairs, besides those of human society" (p. 71), Brasch found his "exemplars" in the trees and stones of Queenstown Park (p. 178). In July 1935 Sargeson's search came to fruition with "Conversations with my Uncle," the first sketch in which he used his own New Zealand language, while in January 1935 Brasch wrote his own first real New Zealand poem, "the first time that [his] whole life had gone into a poem" (p. 251), although it was not until 1939 that he wrote his "first real poem" ("The Islands, 2," p. 343). Like Sargeson he was exposed to the

political currents of the 1930's but resisted being taken over by politics, for "political action is never a complete response to earth's disorders," and "for most people an indirect way is inevitable, and probably far more effective" (p. 404).

While Sargeson had discovered in Europe in 1927 that "for better or worse, and for life, [he] belonged to the new world" of New Zealand (p. 114), it was not until 1940 in wartime England that Brasch discovered that "New Zealand lived in [him] as no other country could live, part of [him] self as [he] was part of it, the world [he] breathed and wore from birth, [his] seeing and [his] language" (p. 360). However, in the years before the war he had had hints of his possible role in New Zealand, the first clues being as early as his appearance in *Phoenix* in 1931-32, the journal that opened up the possibility of "adult inquiry and criticism in a hitherto complacent, uncritical, incurious society" (p. 187). In his 1938 visit to New Zealand he had received further clues in his contact with *Tomorrow*, (the journal that had first published Sargeson), his reading of Fairburn, his reunion with Frederick and Evelyn Page, and his meeting with Woollaston ("That even one such artist had appeared in New Zealand at once changed the nature of the country," [p. 310]). But it was not until after the war that he was sure that he must return and take his part in the "essential fertilizing, civilizing work" (p. 310), to found in *Landfall* a journal that could help foster "a distinct New Zealand literature . . . enabling it . . . to define itself and so to define New Zealand" (p. 391). Whereas Sargeson had taken the story of his struggles with his vocation through to the finish, Brasch's story leaves off at that point, with the death of his grandfather and the birth of *Landfall* symbolizing his carrying on in a new way the best of his inheritance, just as Sargeson had done with his uncle's heritage.

In *Landfall* in March 1951 Brasch wrote of Sargeson that he "went abroad and returned to live as a writer, and a writer only, in New Zealand; which meant, at that time, to live as a virtual outcast from society."[13] His own choice had been later and less radical and without Sargeson's economic hardship. However, each man made the choice with comparable reluctance and inevitability. Sargeson, despite his much briefer exposure to

Europe, nonetheless knew that for the cultivated landscape (as against the uncultivated) and for "the human society which had shaped it," he preferred the old world, for New Zealand was a society which had no real respect for "the disciplines skills and end-results of learning and scholarship, of the written word painting the plastic arts music" (p. 357). Similarly Brasch recognized that life in New Zealand was "*formless*," a term with "moral as well as aesthetic connotations" which "meant mindlessness and torpor; failure to distinguish and discriminate; the ugliness of living content with the second-best" (p. 175).

The shared pattern underlying seemingly different stories indicates the attitude common to these statements, the Provincial perspective. As Simpson says, "Acutely conscious of living at the edge, not at the centre, the provincial is prone to a critical and melancholy spirit."[14] Brasch's critical spirit focuses more on New Zealand's philistinism, less on the puritanism, but the critique is obviously related to Sargeson's and joins it in condemnation of puritan attitudes to work ("It is not only an offence against society to be seen in the streets flaunting the fact that one does not work like everyone else; it challenges the settled order of things, a threat that no right-thinking New Zealander could tolerate" [pp. 294-95]) and to non-conformity (the "blind folly," the "lack of imagination in public places," the "timid petty-mindedness" revealed in the treatment of conscientious objectors, [p. 382]). Brasch's Provincial perspective also resembles Sargeson's in its emphasis, even more acute in Brasch's case, on the duty of contributing to the aesthetic awakening and ultimate salvation of their society. Brasch even more than Sargeson would have agreed with Robert Chapman's peroration in that archetypal document of Provincial literary criticism, "Fiction and the Social Pattern": "The artist must sound his trumpet of insight until the walls of Jericho — the pattern as it is — fall down."[15] And as Brasch saw Sargeson assuming the role of Man Alone as artist to blow that trumpet, so he saw himself as assuming a more patrician version of the role. The small house on Heriot Row with its many well-filled bookcases, as much as the bach of Esmonde Road with its overflowing piles of books, was the home of the Provincial artist as Man Alone, involved in his lonely yet

socially significant tasks of self-expression and cultural criticism.

Brasch's way of telling, his expression of his "one story" and his Provincial perspective, is more straightforwardly literal and realistic, less impressionistic and poetic than Sargeson's. The chronology is straightforward, with no use of layers of memory or shifting time-levels, and there is no tendency to spatial structure, little use of recurring images and motifs. Although James Bertram has called the book "the candid and revealing account of the making of a New Zealand poet" and finds only *Sargeson* "comparable" in New Zealand literature (pp. xii-xiii), the focus of *Indirections* is less inward than in *Sargeson*. Brasch is even more reticent about many personal matters. It is less an account of the formation of a sensibility, more of the discovery of a vocation by "indirections." Perhaps this is because of the nature of that sensibility; as W. H. Oliver has pointed out, it communicates as a passive one, with Brasch "always at the receiving end of experience," although John Geraets sees this as a positive value and a conscious choice, a way "to remain open to *becoming*."[16] Thus the strongest impressions in the book are probably those of the natural setting, imprinting themselves upon the passive observer. However, in addition to a passivity there is also a reticence about any personal emotion other than the aesthetic, so that Brasch's sexual feelings are discussed in only one moving but quite generalized paragraph about how he had "failed in love" and had discovered that he would "never find what [he] sought," "a complete impossible union of souls and bodies, physical and spiritual in one," and thus that he "was alone and would always be alone" (p. 171). Even less than in *Sargeson* is there an exploration of what Bertram has called Brasch's tendency to be "bisexual in his feelings."[17]

III

If Sargeson and Brasch present two predominantly (but not exclusively) realistic tellings of the "one story" of the artist's struggles with the puritanical society, viewed from the Provincial perspective, Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Janet Frame present that story from a similar perspective, but told more impressionistically,

with the additional complication that they were not only artists in an anti-aesthetic society but also women in a male-dominated one.

Ashton-Warner's story is more one of struggle, less one of victory than Brasch's or Sargeson's; the bogie battles the hawk but scarcely eats it up. More than in either *Sargeson* or *Indirections*, we are presented with a picture of a difficult, complex self as one element in the struggle.

The self that Ashton-Warner presents (but scarcely analyses) is one with strong emotional needs: on the one hand the need for emotional self-expression, on the other the need to love and, more important, to be loved and to be given attention. That self's means of attempting to meet these needs are in potential conflict: on the one hand, the pleasure principle, a kind of self-indulgent dreaming by which "whatever [she] wanted very much and didn't have [she] simply supplied it in mind" (p. 27); on the other hand, the reality principle, the discipline which can become "shelter like a roof over you" (p. 118). What she was searching for was a way to integrate these needs and means into a whole person, something that New Zealand society made very difficult with its distrust of emotion, its lack of respect for the aesthetic, its restriction of opportunity and accomplishment for women, and its authoritarian control of non-conformity — "the steel straight-jacket [*sic*] of tradition clamped upon the souls of the wild ones with penalties for variation" (p. 135). Such a "staid, sedated and timid society" (p. 135) discourages artistic expression, oppresses women, gives no recognition to original accomplishment, and even discourages the kind of psychological knowledge that might help one to cope with the stresses it causes:

> I was assembling quite a fair picture of how things were behind the eyes, which is known to most students today but to me, way back there in the stale air beneath the crinoline over the country, the respectability, righteousness and morality, the revelations came as simply shocking. (p. 282)

Thus Ashton-Warner's struggle was a long one in which she never fully achieved what she sought. As a teacher with an original method, she never overcame "PSBMEH — the Permanent Solid Block of Educational Male Hostility" (p. 356). She

achieved recognition and status overseas, especially in Canada, but not in her own country. As Stuart Middleton has said, "... there exists in the education system an almost unlimited capacity to scorn and reject the work of this writer/teacher."[18] In music and art she had searched for a way to "break cover from conformity, to get out from under the crinoline" by finding something "that could say the unsayable things inside you" (p. 69), but only in writing could she bring together the various aspects of self:

> ... unruly native imagery found a channel through which to surface, clearing out on its way the delirium of both music and paint to enrich the main stream. Writing siphoned off the effervescence of dreaming, the constant opposition party, and there was discipline required for that. (p. 347)

However, she still encountered a block of male hostility, for the New Zealand literary world, dominated by male rebels against their society, did not grant this female rebel status. More than Robin Hyde, who had at least an equivocal place on the edge of the male literary world, she was on the outside, for many years isolated from other writers in rural Maori communities and, even after she had achieved world attention rare for a New Zealand writer, ignored in New Zealand literary journals. The one substantial attempt to come to terms with her work, an article by Dennis McEldowney in *Landfall* in September 1969, was attacked by Brasch in a letter in the next issue in which he denied that her work deserved "serious consideration," implying that it would not have merited an article under *his* editorship.[19] At the end, all passion spent, she could say "I understand my country and forgive her all" and could accept that "whatever my disasters in this country ... these islands turn out to be the one place where I would wish to be" (pp. 496, 499), but, ironically, it was only with the publication of *I Passed This Way* that she achieved one of New Zealand's major literary awards.

The perspective from which Ashton-Warner tells her story is Provincial, with the usual dualism between a hostile society (with more emphasis on its rejection of non-conformity, less on its sexual puritanism or philistinism) and the alienated artist. The

artist as Woman Alone is presented in more self-dramatizing terms than are used by Sargeson or Brasch:

> I was in the wilderness myself, having fallen into the hands of the philistine who, on that high plateau of boundless horizons, had ambushed me and hurled me over a cliff upon the rocks below where I'd broken every bone in my heart. (p. 364)

But she also presents the artistic benefits of being Woman Alone:

> Isolation is the best condition for procreation as lovers will agree, ostracism the best sperm for conception, silence the best womb for the idea-fetus, persecution the best of incubators, and austerity the best education; all of which the white cloud supplied with profligacy, tossing up one large mind after another. (p. ix)

The imagery in these two quotations points to the most striking difference setting Ashton-Warner off from Brasch and Sargeson, her way of telling. McEldowney has ranked Ashton-Warner with Robin Hyde, Janet Frame, and other women writers in that her "discoveries have been made not so much through intellectual contemplation as through intensity of feeling," while C. K. Stead has compared her to Katherine Mansfield and Frame in the way in which "the raw, untrammelled, human personality and intelligence is overlaid with very little and breaks out easily into full abundant self-expression.[20] Both critics point to her place in the "feminine," subjective, impressionist tradition. This is evident in *I Passed This Way* not so much in the narrative organization (roughly chronological, although framed by a prologue and epilogue, with a shifting present-time perspective) as in her metaphorical, emotionally expressive style. Even descirptions of external place are put in metaphorical, subjective terms, so that the Wanganui River at Pipiriki is described as "lying on her back on the floor of the valley like a woman besottedly in love, forever desiring the forest above her reflected in her eyes" (p. 286), while the contrasting landscape at Waiomatatini is seen as having "the blanched face of nightmare when the artery of love is severed" (p. 316). The metaphors are even more profuse (with nature as vehicle rather than tenor) in the evocations of internal states:

> Juices flowed like sap in the spring, and the spring pushed on and on, round corner after corner, up steep hills and down the gullies, beneath overhanging cliffs. You forded frequent floods of passion or they'd swallow and sweep you away. (p. 324)

Thus, for example, the thought of sexual touch is described as "rocking the mindscape so that clay banks on the wayside split and crumbled, streams changed course and raw horizons reared" (p. 199). This style, like her mode of drawing and painting, is for emotional, expressive purposes, like one of her metaphorical paintings a way "to escape from the representational and to speak in uncluttered symbol" (p. 309). It is the expression of an inward focus. While *I Passed This Way* tells of a career, as do *Sargeson* and *Indirections*, it differs in that, (as in *A Home in This World*), the career is important primarily as part of an attempt to meet inner needs. Ashton-Warner's "Selah," the place from which she creates her art, is more physical than Hyde's "Home," more akin to Sargeson's bach, but it is more symbolic than the bach, finally, as Stead puts it (speaking of the earlier *Myself*) becoming an image of "the freedom of the creative spirit, the making of a space, a privacy in which it can live and breathe" (pp. 58-59).

Unlike Ashton-Warner's Janet Frame's "one story" is not yet complete. The first two volumes of her proposed three-volume autobiography take her from her birth in 1924 to 1956 when, *Owls do Cry* completed, she set off for Europe. She is thus left on the verge of achieving her first taste of fame, at about the same point in her career as Ashton-Warner then was (*Spinster* and *Owls Do Cry* appeared within a year of each other), but at a much earlier stage in her life. Nonetheless the emerging pattern is clear: the sensitive, naturally imaginative child as the "little bird"; the terrible hawk appearing as Death, taking two of her sisters, and as a conformist society imprisoning her from without and attempting to undermine her from within; then the bogie of imagination and art beginning to come forth in rescue. Art and imagination in Janet Frame's world cannot control Nature (and its agents, Time and Death), but they can see it in all its beauty and terror, with something like "the point of view of angels" (*Angel*, p. 153). Likewise, art and imagination cannot control

society, but they can help one to see it, including its lies and deceptions, and gain a kind of revenge on it by pointing out that the king really is naked, or that the consumer world of "permanent" waves and "permanent" pleats is no defence against Time and Death, for only the cycle is permanent, not its subjects.

The pattern, then, is the familiar one: Innocence, the fall into Experience, recovery and emergence into Art and Imagination. Frame has from the first rivalled Katherine Mansfield and Hyde in her ability to recreate the innocent vision of childhood, perhaps her art's most readily available and popular aspect, and in *To the Is-land* she succeeds once again. There is the sensitivity of the small child "listening to the wind and its song," recognizing in it the sadness "which belonged to the world" (p. 22); the "overwhelming sense of anticipation and excitement at the world — the world being My Place by the fallen birch log, with the grass, the insects in the grass, the sky, the sheep and cows and rabbits, the wax-eyes and the hawks — everything Outside" (p. 26); the child's ability to create a naive art about this world, and the direct response to art, the emotional participation in singing "E pare ra" and the intimations of mortality that it communicated, or the "delight and excitement" in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* — "everybody's story seen in a special way with something new added to the ordinary rules of observation" (p. 79).

Then there is the movement out into the world, the fall into Experience. There is the first felt strike of the hawk, the death of Myrtle. Literature, which "could contain all the unspoken feeling that moved alive beneath the surface of each day and night and came above the surface only in the way earthworms came, when there was too much rain" (p. 133), could help in handling this experience, for the young Janet Frame found that "in each day there was a blankness, a Myrtle-missing part, and it was upon this blankness that the poets in Mount Helicon were writing the story of my feelings" (p. 158). This exposure to a greater range of literature was one consolation of adolescence and young adulthood, literature not as an escape into another world but as something coming into her world, "streaming through it like an array of beautiful ribbons through the branches of a green grow-

ing tree, touching the leaves with unexpected light that was unlike the expected deserved habitual light of the sun and the seasons," the writers "bringing their hosts of words and characters and their special vision" into her world (p. 207). Thus there was genuine insight into what imagination might be, "an imagination that would inhabit a world of fact, descend like a shining light upon the ordinary life of Eden Street," not take one away to an "other world" of nightingales, misty dreams, and little old men (pp. 180-81). And there was a genuine literary impulse, to "anchor" the world of literature "within this everyday world," finding the "natural ingredients for literature" in the world around her (pp. 215-16). However, great goods are capable of great corruption, and part of the fall into Experience was to suffer the "corruption of literature" (p. 141) by taking sentimental formulae as truth, whether Alfred Noyes' simplistic version of the commercial life in "The Old Grey Squirrel" or, more dangerously, Rupert Brooke's glorification of war. This kind of corruption pointed towards a more insidious variety, the inner corruption of taking into oneself the stereotyped social view of the "poetic" and "imaginative" — dreamy, impractical, escapist — and then attempting to play the role in order to receive the recognition. Thus, "in an adolescent homelessness of self," the young Janet Frame came to play the socially imposed role of being "different" and "original," and "entered eagerly a nest of difference which others found for [her] but which [she] lined with [her] own furnishings" (p. 197).

As she left home and into the less secure world of Training College (dealt with in *An Angel at my Table*) Janet Frame found herself playing other roles to find a place, concealing her true self and what she really "felt, thought, and dreamed about" (p. 29). There was the role of "no trouble at all, a quiet student, always ready with a smile (if the decayed teeth could be hidden), always happy" (p. 65), a role that inhibited any move to "accept and be responsible for [her] self as a whole being" (p. 48). And there was the more dangerous role of "textbook schizophrenic," the most extreme of her "tricks of desperation," a way to win the attention of her young psychology lecturer and achieve a recognizable identity as one of those like Van Gogh,

Wolf, or Schumann, "great artists, visionaries" whose "artistic ability" was "apparently the pearl of her schizophrenia" (p. 82). Too late, after being in mental hospital, she discovered that she "had woven her self into a trap, remembering that a trap is also a refuge" (p. 98). And the trap caught her for most of eight years, a terrible waste, and yet one from which she emerged with something of value, for she "inhabited a territory of loneliness which . . . resembles that place where the dying spend their time before death and from where those who do return living to the world, bring inevitably a unique point of view that is a nightmare, a treasure, and a lifelong possession," a view "ranging even farther than the view from the mountains of love, equal in its rapture and chilling exposure, in the neighbourhood of the ancient gods and goddesses" (p. 99).

The payment for the fall into Experience was enormous, then. *An Angel at My Table* traces only the first steps upward out of the abyss. The immediate problem Frame faced was basically that which Sargeson had faced 25 years before: to find "a place to live and write, with enough money to support her self" (p. 113), and a psychological "place" such as Hyde had sought. And it was Sargeson who provided the first approximation of that place, a place at *his* place, in the hut in his garden. There she had what she needed: "the prospect of living as a writer, with a place to work, to be alone, with no worry over money, and sharing meals and company with someone who actually *believed* [she] was a writer" (p. 142). At least her vocation was accepted, even if her femaleness was not ("I felt the sadness of having moved from hospital where it had been thought necessary to alter the make-up of my mind, to another asylum where the desire was that my body should be of another gender" p. 147). To Sargeson, she was, as a woman, almost inevitably limited by being part of that "feminine tradition" which tends to deal with "the isolated details and moments of life"[21] so that her fiction could only be "quite good of its kind" (p. 145), but she was still a writer, to be supported and protected. Provided with a physical and psychological place, she could write *Owls Do Cry*. However, that place could not be more than temporary, perched on the edge of Sargeson's place at the edge of society,

and *An Angel at My Table* ends symbolically with a movement out of the protected waters of Wellington Harbour:

> Then suddenly the motion of the ship changed to a steeper rise and fall and rolling from side to side: we were on the open sea. My voyage had begun. (p. 195)

The perspective from which this yet unfinished story is seen is clearly Provincial, based on a dualism between the sensitive writer and a conformist society. That society is judged for its harmful effect on the writer and those like her. Sargeson has praised *The Lagoon* in 1952 for the way it captured the "piercing flavour of anguish and suffering" caused by a society of "emotional strangulation;" and the picture that arises from the autobiography is not unlike his vision of "that vast region of darkness" in *Sargeson.*[22] There is its social and economic inequality, personified in the Group in high school, those girls from professional families whose "lives overshadowed the lives of the rest of the class" (*Is-land*, p. 168) so that they not only received most of the visible favours but also dominated the psychic lives of the others, setting patterns of desire and consumption. There is the expected sexual puritanism, seen most dramatically in the parental response to sexual play that costs the young Janet Frame her friend Poppy, and seen more ordinarily in the secretiveness about the castration of steers. Sexual puritanism and social discrimination come together in the painful experiences of feeling both poor and unclean in using homemade sanitary towels. Even more than for Brasch, for Frame the deficiencies of her society have as their focus conformity. From the symbolic school uniform to the attack on her sister at Training College for daring to dress differently to the mental hospital as the ultimate instrument of enforcement, it is this aspect of New Zealand that finally drove her from her country:

> . . . I . . . knew that there was no way back, that if my path did lead back there would be no chance for my survival, that it was best to escape from a country where, since my student days, a difference which was only myself, and even my ambition to write, had been looked on as evidence of abnormality. (pp. 190-91)

The way of telling this story is impressionist, as befits its inward focus. That is not to say that the books do not present the external world, for it is vividly and vitally there in the literal imagery, so that Dennis McEldowney can praise *To the Is-land* for its "more total recall of the South Island landscape . . . , of the games we played, the films we saw . . . , the comics we read . . . , the radio we listened to."[23] There is more emphasis on the external world, less on "the room two inches behind the eyes" than in her fiction, but nonetheless this is the most inward, the most impressionistic of these autobiographies with the exception of *A Home in This World*. That inward focus is implicit in the literary preferences mentioned, for if she enjoyed that most realistic of books, *War and Peace*, with Sargeson, nonetheless most of the formative influences Frame mentions are writers of different modes: psychological novelists such as Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner; symbolist poets such as Eliot, Yeats, Rilke, Dylan Thomas, and George Barker (those ubiquitous influences on New Zealand literature in the 1940's and 1950's); theorists such as Coleridge on Imagination, Frazer on myth, Freud and Jung on psychological symbolism. And readers of Frame's fiction will recognize, in less extreme form, many of her characteristic devices for presentation of the inner life. There is in the early sections of *To the Is-land* the insertion of children's vernacular to capture the child's sense of the experience — "with all the relations dressed up and speaking in their high-up voices," "that same twisty railway journey" (pp. 67-68). There is the self-reflexiveness, the reminders that all of this is filtered through one sensibility: the metaphor comparing memories of adolescence to a whirlpool, "with different memories rising to the surface at different times and thus denying the existence of a 'pure' autobiography" (*Is-land*, pp. 235-36); the explicit acknowledgement that "Time confers privileges of arrangement and rearrangements undreamed of until it becomes Time Past" (*Angel*, pp. 14-15); the description of autobiography as "a looking *across* or *through*" as well as a "looking back," with "the passing of time giving an X-ray quality to the eye" (*Angel*, p. 69); the description of how "the future accumulates like a weight upon the past" so that, for the autobiographer "the weight upon the earliest years is easier to

remove to let that time spring up like grass that has been crushed," while with later years the mass has grown and presses harder so "the time beneath . . . lies bled of its green in a new shape with those frail bloodless sprouts of another, unfamiliar time, entangled one with the other beneath the stone" (*Angel*, p. 13). Many of these reflexive passages point to the most characteristic aspect of the way of telling, its symbolic and metaphoric quality. Some of the literal images become symbolic, such as the various rail journeys, especially the one that ends *To the Is-land*, or the sea-journey that ends *An Angel at My Table*, or the silkworms that Frame gives to Sargeson, or the "pine trees in the cool of the evening." And, although they are not woven into as elaborate patterns as in the fiction, metaphorical images abound. Metaphor, combined with pun and allusion, characterizes the titles of both volumes and many of the section and chapter titles. It is also used frequently to capture inward experience, the sense of the death of Frame's parents being compared, for example, to the removal of two trees "between us and wind, sea, snow," a removal that "might expose us but. . . . would also let the light in from all directions, and we would know the reality instead of the rumour of the wind, sea, snow, and be able to perceive all moments of being" (*Angel*, p. 163). As in the fiction, many passages that stick in the memory are the metaphorical ones.

IV

Four autobiographies, then, seen against a background of five minor ones; telling basically one story of a struggle against an aesthetically hostile environment, puritanical, materialist, conformist; told from the Provincial perspective, in two different modes, the masculine realist and feminine impressionist. Interesting as literary structures in their own right (and the Sargeson and the Frame autobiographies rank among the finest work of two of our finest writers), they are also important as literary documents and landmarks, marking perhaps the end of the Provincial period and providing the definitive bird-and-bogie-eye views of the battle with the hawk.

NOTES

[1] "Janet Frame," in *Beginnings: New Zealand Writers Tell How They Began Writing*, introduction and notes by Robin Dudding (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 27; a slightly different version appears in *To the Is-land: An Autobiography* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), p. 27; the "Beginnings" essay first appeared in *Landfall*, 19 (1965).

[2] "Bird, Hawk, Bogie: Janet Frame, 1952-62," *Studies in the Novel*, 4 (1972), 192.

[3] See "From Colonial to Provincial: The Evolution of Poetry in Canterbury 1850-1950," *Historical News*, November 1981, pp. 10-16; and *Ronald Hugh Morrieson*, New Zealand Writers and their Work, ed. James Bertram (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 54-60; for a discussion of the terms, see my "Ronald Hugh Morrieson and Post-Provincial Fiction," *Landfall*, 36 (1982), 461-71.

[4] *Ronald Hugh Morrieson*, pp. 58-59.

[5] "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry." in *James K. Baxter as Critic*, ed. Frank McKay (Auckland: Heinemann Educational, 1978), pp. 9-11.

[6] The books to be discussed are: M. H. Holcroft, *The Way of a Writer* (Whatamongo Bay: Cape Catley, 1984); Robin Hyde, *A Home in This World*, with an introduction by Derek Challis (Auckland: Logman Paul, 1984); Toss Woollaston, *Sage Tea: An Autobiography* (Auckland: Collins, 1980); Alistair Campbell, *Island to Island* (Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1984); Mervyn Thompson, *All My Lives* (Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1980); Frank Sargeson, *Sargeson* (Auckland: Penguin, 1981), first published as *Once is Enough: A Memoir* (Wellington: Reed, 1973), *More than Enough: A Memoir* (Wellington: Reed, 1975), and *Never Enough! Places and People Mainly* (Wellington: Reed, 1977); Charles Brasch, *Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1980); Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *I Passed This Way* (New York: Knopf, 1979); and Janet Frame, *To the Is-land: An Autobiography* (New York: Braziller, 1982), *An Angel at My Table: An Autobiography: Volume Two* (Auckland: Hutchinson of New Zealand, 1984). All references will be included in the text and will be to these editions.

[7] See my " 'New Zealand as it Might Worthily Have Been': Frank Sargeson and the 'Pilgrim Dream,' " *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 1 (1983), 87-100.

[8] See my note in *Landfall*, 36 (1982), 210-12.

[9] "The Survivor of North Shore," *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 July 1975, p. 820.

[10] "Recent Literary Biography," *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 2 (1984), 48.

[11] "Recent Literary Biography," 48.

[12] In his "Editorial Note" Bertram says that he was kept to Brasch's "main outline" in his editing and has not tried to make of it a "smaller book, built on some pattern of aesthetic contrast" but that he has cut the book to "about half the original length," primarily by cutting from "the very full sections on Egypt, the Abbey and wartime England" (pp. xii-xiii).

[13] *The Universal Dance: A Selection from the Critical Prose Writings of*

Charles Brasch, ed. J. L. Watson (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1981), p. 92.

[14] *Ronald Hugh Morrieson*, p. 58.

[15] *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. Wystan Curnow (Auckland: Heinemann Educational, 1973), p. 98; originally in *Landfall*, 7 (1953).

[16] Oliver, "Brasch by Himself: Two Views," *Listener*, 9 August 1980, p. 76; Geraets, " 'An Interior Landscape': Charles Brasch's 'Indirections' and 'The Universal Dance,' " *Islands*, n.s. 1 (1984), 74.

[17] *Charles Brasch*, New Zealand Writers and Their Work (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 26.

[18] "Releasing the Native Imagery: Sylvia Ashton-Warner and the Learner of English," *English in New Zealand*, 10 (August 1982), 16.

[19] See McEldowney, "Sylvia Ashton-Warner: A Problem of Grounding," *Landfall*, 23 (1969), 230-45; Brasch, "Correspondence," *Landfall*, 23 (1969), 407-09. *Landfall* under Brasch did review *Spinster* (12 [1958], 280), *Incense to Idols* (15 [1961], 88; a dismissive paragraph in an omnibus review), and *Teacher* (18 [1964], 379), but ignored *Bell Call* and *Greenstone*. Only the *Listener* among New Zealand periodicals regularly reviewed her books.

[20] McEldowney, *Landfall*, 23 (1969), 234; Stead, "Sylvia Ashton-Warner: Living on the Grand," in *In the Glass Case: Essays on New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 52.

[21] "Katherine Mansfield," in *Conversation in a Train and Other Critical Writing*, ed. Kevin Cunningham (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 29; originally a radio talk on 28 July 1948.

[22] Review of *The Lagoon, Conversation in a Train*, pp. 66-67; originally in *Listener*, 18 April 1952.

[23] "Recent Literary Biography," pp. 49-50.