

*Redemption, Secrecy,  
and the Hermeneutic Frame  
in Janet Frame's  
"Scented Gardens for the Blind"*

JENNIFER LAWN

[Frame's] fresh exploration of her childhood and life opened up my own, stimulating many painful and funny memories that somehow under Janet's courage and beam of honesty no longer seemed so bad or so embarrassing.

JANE CAMPION (Director of *An Angel at My Table*)

There has been a tremendous goodwill towards this production [*An Angel at My Table*]. I think the script is extraordinary and I feel lucky that we have such good material to work with. But on all levels, there has been an amazing willingness to contribute, I think because it's about Janet Frame.

BRIDGET IKIN (Producer of *An Angel at My Table*)

There is a remarkable taboo around Janet Frame, a remarkable desire to protect her from enquiry.

PATRICK EVANS, "The Case of the Disappearing Author"

Concerning Janet Frame's decision to change her legal name to Janet Clutha, in 1973 — thereby making her "first" or given name her pseudonym — Vanessa Finney writes,

Janet Frame has made an explicit part of her own self-representation the distance between her identity and history as a "real" person (fluid and dispersed like her namesake the River Clutha) and her author figure and function (literally, a "frame"). A history of "Janet Frame" can only be a history and an interpretation of her public figure, a discursive object, a name.<sup>1</sup> ("Speaking" 6-7)

It is a sign of Frame's popular and literary mythologization that one can ask, echoing the title of an article by Finney (first deliv-

ered as a paper in 1992), what does this discursive object, "Janet Frame," mean? What is "Janet Frame" a "figure" for? By conventional literary critical usage, the name "Janet Frame" serves as a metonym for all the works written by the woman whose legal name is Janet Clutha. Yet, as the following ostensibly tautological comment from Patrick Evans suggests, there is a further refinement to be made: "the living quality of her writing . . . distinguishes her best work; it is what makes Frame Frame" ("Case" 12). Evans repeats the name "Frame" as if the two word tokens in his sentence did not share the same referent. It seems that "Frame" refers not only to the signature appearing on Frame's texts but also to an essential idea, a "living quality," a soul or life-principle, a Frame-of-Frames.

But which "Frame" is one to designate as this unifying principle of Frame's oeuvre? Reception analysis of Frame's work has identified at least two co-existing versions of Frame, affirmed by the epigraphs to this paper: the secretive Frame, couched in "taboo," and the fresh, courageous, honest Frame, which arose and flourished in the 1980s, partly in response to the relative accessibility of Frame's three-volume autobiography and the success of Jane Campion's film based upon it, *An Angel at My Table* (1990). One Frame speaks teasingly, indirectly, in riddles, parables, secret gestures; the other not only speaks frankly about the most personal matters but also brings forth true speech from her admirers, "stimulating many painful and funny memories that somehow under Janet's courage and beam of honesty no longer [seem] so bad or so embarrassing" ("Filming a Trilogy" 6). While it is the redemptive, accessible Frame that has secured the author's international reputation, especially in the fields of autobiography and women's writing, it is the secretive or "hermeneutic" Frame that I seek to re-theorize and reinvigorate in this article, although not in the terms by which this Frame has been elaborated to date. Regarding Frame as her own best ironist and critic, I shall read *Scented Gardens for the Blind* as a theoretical intervention on the impulse to find and enquire into "taboos." *Scented Gardens for the Blind* presents a "second-order" secrecy, in which the fictional scenario — three characters trying to construe the secret of a young woman's silence — mirrors the situ-

ation of hermeneutic literary interpretation. In the figure of Erlene, with her adamant silence, Frame proleptically stages her own literary institutionalization within a hermeneutic tradition while criticizing the lure of the secret — set up by her own novel — as a death-based epistemology.

I draw upon the term “hermeneutic” to designate any interpretive exercise that coalesces around a central secret and seeks to replicate or uncover a prior but forgotten or occluded state of mind. The “hermeneutic” orientation not only fixates upon secrets as the structuring principle and motivating force of Frame’s fiction, but also strives to obliterate secrets by removing their opacity. Secrecy takes place only as pure resistance to be overcome or exorcized by denominating the answer and hence solving the riddle. For example, in *I Have What I Gave* (1992), Judith Dell Panny attempts to pin Frame’s cryptic textual puzzles to some overarching explanatory apparatus through the assiduous hunting down of references to Christian and classical sources. And in “Janet Frame’s Novels and the Disconcert in the Reader’s Mind,” Norbert H. Platz offers a candid example of hermeneutic frustration couched in the terminology of competition and struggle. Platz regards the process of interpreting Frame as a “showdown between text and reader” (414) from which the defeated reader emerges “feel[ing] inferior to the text” (425): “I can’t possess the text [*Scented Gardens for the Blind*], and yet, for all its elusiveness, its disturbing features still haunt me” (423).<sup>2</sup>

The trajectory of Evans’s criticism on Frame delineates the hermeneutic impetus. In a series of articles spanning twenty-two years, this controversial commentator has shaped himself — with increasing self-ironization — into three successive hermeneutic personae: the disciple, the psychoanalyst, and the detective.<sup>3</sup> Evans coined the term “the novel of the ‘visionary élite’” (“Alienation” 296) in 1973 to describe Frame’s literary works and later referred to the “successful” reader of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* as an initiate, “admitted . . . to an experience not available to all” (“Farthest” 39-40). In 1981, Evans turned to popular psychoanalysis, locating the private well-spring of Frame’s creativity in a secret which she withholds from herself. Evans suggested that Frame relentlessly writes

around — but never directly touches — a centring neurosis, the pathological failure to mourn her two sisters Myrtle and Isabel, who drowned in 1937 and 1947, respectively (“Farthest”). However, in his two most recent articles on Frame, “Filming Fiction” (1991) and “The Case of the Missing Detective” (1993), Evans hypothesizes a deeper secret. Representing himself, first implicitly then explicitly as a literary detective, he insinuates in the last moments of each essay that Frame may have been sexually abused, perhaps by her father or brother.

Although such speculation deserves serious consideration and sympathy should it prove true,<sup>4</sup> my concern is that intimations of abuse or any other terrible secret risk becoming an act of textual mastery when represented as the linchpin around which Frame’s oeuvre and public persona would cohere and fall into place. Claims to reveal secrets ought not to be played out, in a form of critical triumphalism, as the achieved answer to the tendentious figure of “Frame-as-enigma.” That said, however, I too am fascinated by themes of trauma and secrecy in Frame. In negotiating this perspective, I have asked myself the questions posed by Shoshana Felman: “How should we read? How can a reading lead to something other than recognition, ‘normalization,’ and ‘cure’? How can the critical project, in other words, be detached from the therapeutic projection?” (*What Does* 40). A study in the boundaries of cognitive understanding, *Scented Gardens for the Blind* refuses the psychoanalysis of catharsis and the hermeneutics of the nameable secret. The novel formulates an absolutely unrecoverable, ultimately ethical secrecy that does not stem from “repression” in the popular, pejorative sense. Rather, secrecy in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* relates to that which in principle cannot be known, an internal incoherence that cannot be brought into harmony with the rest of a structure.

### I. Redemption and Secrecy

Finney dates the beginning of a shift in the public definition and reception of Frame from the publication of the first volume of the autobiography, *To the Is-Land* (1982). Prior to this, journalists and interviewers frequently described Frame in terms emphasizing her shyness and eccentricity (borderline madness),

depicting her as a disappearing genius, a "disembodied presence," whose mind wandered off to "that world" while her body lodged reluctantly in "this world" (Felman, *What Does* 194).

Both Finney and Gina Mercer suggest that Frame endeavoured to revise her image through the publication of her reader-friendly autobiographies and the accompanying press releases. Finney reports that following the publication of *An Angel at My Table* in 1984, Frame's status had progressed — sort of — to that of a "good fairy" (200) apt to present any number of public "selves." By the publication of the third volume, *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985), Frame was rewarded with reviews recognizing her as a presence, literal and symbolic. By 1996, the "absent" Frame had reached a sufficient level of saturation in "serious" usage to be mocked precisely as a label or a trademark that had outworn its use, an "intricate social simulacrum put into circulation so that Janet can live a fuller and more satisfying life in some other part of the world, content in the knowledge that her simulacrum is maintaining the illusion of the paranoid Frame-legacy in some suburban Palmerston North hideaway" (Cooke 60-61).

The three volumes of Frame's autobiography not only succeeded as a public-relations exercise but also brought the aspect of gender to the forefront in the literary industry. The publication dates of the autobiographies coincided with the blossoming of the women's book market in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> Both locally and internationally, Frame found a new market in women readers who felt encouraged by the readerly nature of the autobiographies, with their sense of an encounter with a generous-minded, sensitive, living author. Author Rosie Scott states, "it's like meeting a friend to read [Frame]" (qtd. in Ferrier, "Preface" 11). Gina Mercer accurately describes the autobiographies as "considerate, accessible, friendly and unthreatening," a "very necessary, warm, and comforting garment in which to wrap [Frame's] life" ("Simple" 43-44).<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it was the act of re-appropriating herself, of claiming control over her own story, which most thoroughly created Frame as public property, as stock open for purchase by the general public, especially women: in Frame's life story, many women recognized the potentialities and limitations of their own lives. In his tributes to

Frame, Evans finds affinity with her as a fellow New Zealander and South Islander: "which of us," he writes, "is able now to drive through Oamaru without knowing that they pass through her Kingdom by the Sea?" ("Case" 19-20). Women readers could claim the further affinity of gender, a bond which seemed so powerful in the heady 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

While female readers were gathering around this hearth of comfort, this frank, open version of Frame, male critics were less receptive. Evans and two other male literary critics, Keith Garebian and Peter Simpson, viewed Frame's autobiographies with suspicion (Mercer, *Janet Frame* 227-32). In "Filming Fiction," Evans attacks Campion's film version as a screen memory diverting attention from the founding trauma of Frame's art, which Evans hints to be childhood sexual abuse. Evans pursues a pun on "screen," though he does not actually use the term "screen memories," which I have introduced from Freud's article of the same name.

To paraphrase Evans's argument, screen memories are the usual but pathological mode of popular film, which must stay light and frothy to ensure sales to an audience eager for a comic tale of redemption. Frame's "screen" life-story prettified the harsh aspects of her autobiographical fiction: "the audience's attention [is] skilfully deflected from the original purpose of the structure to the surface of things, to the screen at the end" ("Filming Fiction" 14). The redemptive Frame promoted by the film — the victimized Frame who survived a patriarchal psychiatric system, the accessible, inspiring Frame — is the fake product of a marketing strategy, an "icon," "the euphemized symbol of a sanitised self" (17). Having "made it [his] task to familiarize [himself] with the trivia of Frame's early life" (15), Evans can see through the screen; he is an "inside" reader of the film. Ironically, the true disciple, the one who recognizes the false signs from the true, is the one who rejects the author's redemptive capacities.

"Frame" therefore divides into at least two different public faces: the occult, veiled Frame and the inviting, "beaming" Frame; the secret Frame and the Frame from whom no secrets are hidden; the absent Frame, "nowhere and everywhere" (Evans,

"Case" 20), and the incarnated, human Frame; the Old Testament Frame and the New. Campion (qtd. in "Filming a Trilogy") and Bridget Ikin (qtd. in Clement) warm to the latter image, while Evans vacillates between a Frame who seems to speak for him and a Frame who maintains a knowing, infuriating distance from him. Arguing that the "living principle" of Frame's work inheres in its capacity to speak to all of us, Evans also implies — crucially — that she withholds something in that speaking.

Evans ponders the questions which underlie public fascination with Frame: "Why is Frame such a genius?" and "Did all those horrible things really happen to her?" The answers Evans arrives at lead him into discussions of writing and neurosis, interpretation and authority, and "inside" versus "outside" readings of a text. Evans writes that Frame's texts are characterized by "avoidance," by the "skilled creation of lacunae," and by "gestures at implied knowledge": there "is a secret here, she seems to be saying, and I am going to share it with you. But at the very same time the very same texts take her away from us, concealing her with their apparent verisimilitudes" ("Case" 18). Frame's texts gesture at something — an experience or event, Evans would say — which must remain unspeakable. Yet Frame's texts also shed their secrets with disarming openness. As Lauris Edmond has written, Frame has a tendency to state the obvious, showing an "urge towards over-explicitness, a desire to define what has already been manifested in action or character" (10).

How does it come about that Frame's texts can speak plainly, yet remain silent? Evans addresses the paradox in "The Case of the Disappearing Author":

It [the symbiosis between Frame and her reading public] gives her writing that distinctive quality I found when I first read it as a teenager, the capacity to reach into our lives and *speak for us*. . . . And, balancing this, there is . . . her ability to offer herself as a text outside her own texts, a text which we help to write, creating as we do so the version of her we want to have: the writer as post-modernist, the writer as gameplayer, as imposter, as ventriloquist, the writer as crafter of language, and, supremely, I think, the writer as victim, representative sufferer of *all the blows that may be suffered in a society like ours but which may not be spoken about*. This last is for me the most potent of her roles, the one upon which we most eagerly fasten

because it seems *to give a voice to the greatest of all taboos* in our society, the one which *forbids us to speak* about the family violation of children.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is in her capacity to do these things, to seem to open up her own life to us even as she reaches deeply into our lives, to be nowhere and everywhere, that Janet Frame seems to me to have vaulted clear of her fellows, to have distinguished herself most signally from all our other writers, and to have come closest to investing meaning in that complex and evanescent term, "greatness."  
(19-20; emphasis added)

Frame's texts "speak for us"; they express the essence of what it is to be a New Zealander; her secret is also ours. Yet her texts do not speak; they merely represent "what may not be spoken about." She "gives a voice" to a taboo — and yet she does not speak after all because she can only express the impossibility of expression. Evans concludes the penultimate paragraph by finally naming the taboo he refers to — couched within a prepositional phrase within a dependent clause — then immediately skitters off to his conclusion, with its flurry of clichés and one too many superlatives. Readers are left wondering who the "disappearing author" of the title is, Frame or Evans, who enacts a rhetorical hit-and-run at the close of his address by mentioning intra-familial trauma and then retreating.

A psychotherapeutic account of speaking silence informs other pieces by Evans. In "Farthest from the Heart," he writes that Frame's work is "full of deceits engineered to trick the reader; its significance half-stated and often obscure, as if the process of writing has not fully released the impulses which have brought it about" (31). According to this conception, Frame writes for therapy to overcome the grief of a personal tragedy, in the hope that "the word [proves] mightier than the pain" ("Muse" 3). Frame attempts to exorcize ghosts, Evans alleges, by a process of authorial ventriloquism, aiming to "abolish what was actual and painful simply by putting it into the mouths of people who never existed" (3), by transposing the experience of loss to fictional characters. Starting from a position "where the meaning is felt but never explained," Frame can relieve her trauma by revisiting it, naming it accurately, and thereby discharging the pent-up affect attached to the repressed memory. That which lies actively dead in memory, potent yet unacknowledged, might then



be released and definitively killed through what Jane Gallop calls the "blasphemous" impulse of the psychoanalyst, who "[puts] into words something terribly powerful that is demeaned and reduced by being spoken" (147).

Hence we have the hermeneutic critics' special dependence upon death and absence. Drawing attention away from the present moment of reading, such critics seek to recall a meaning that has "gone" from the text. Eerily, Evans announces Frame's premature death: "I felt intimidated by the difficulties of writing about someone whose past seemed as obscure as if she had died centuries ago" ("Muse" 1). And in response to Frame's objections to his biographical investigations,<sup>8</sup> Evans writes, without apparent irony, "we all know that most writers would do anything to be *embalmed* in a literary critical work that is part of a world-wide series: Frame, it seems, would do anything to avoid it" (2; emphasis added). Evans not only sets Frame among the dead, as T. S. Eliot recommends for the appreciation of literary talent (7), but actually pronounces her dead. Ironically, to achieve immortality, the author must die. Or, more accurately, she must be killed off; the literary detective becomes the murderer.

## II. The Death of Speech

Frame's fourth novel remains her most unredeemed, most secretive, most "untherapeutic" text. Erlene sits, like a closed text, in silence and darkness. Her parents, Vera and Edward Glace, and her psychiatrist, Dr. Dick Clapper, attempt by idiosyncratic methods to divine Erlene's secret, to make it speak, and thus, perhaps, to make her speak. *Scented Gardens for the Blind* thus anticipates, and ironizes, Frame's own literary institutionalization as a taboo-ridden figure buried under a flurry of hypotheses and interpretations. The Veras, Edwards, and Dr. Clappers of academe loom around the text, vying for its recognition, as the leering adults once clustered around the infant Erlene:

Erlene remembered that when she was very small and learning to walk, there were wooden bars, like a cage, set up around her, and her mother and her father and her grandfather stood outside the cage and stared at her. They were so tall. Their mouths dribbled with saliva, and their shadows pounced. . . . The faces moved, and

the shadows moved with them, and words came out of the faces, sharp, commanding words, "Walk to *me*, Erlene, walk to *me*, walk to *me*." (*Scented Gardens* 225)

"Talk to *me!* Talk to *me!* Talk to *me!*" hermeneutic critics coax, wanting to believe what Geoffrey Hartman terms the "conventional prosopopeia" that texts can be revived so as to "speak" to readers. But *Scented Gardens for the Blind* instructs us in the failure of this acroamatic model of literary interpretation:

We try to call this process [the subject-object relationship between reader and text] a dialogue, or claim, using a conventional prosopopeia, that texts "speak" to us. But the animating metaphor in this is all too obvious. It betrays the fact that while we feel that books are alive, we cannot find a good model, a way to picture that. The more we try to animate books, the more they reveal their resemblance to the dead — who are made to address us in epitaphs or whom we address in thought or dream. (Hartman 548)

What can readers "hear" in a novel of sensory failure such as *Scented Gardens for the Blind*?<sup>9</sup> How might a reader address *Scented Gardens for the Blind* "in dream" and thus "read the wound," as Hartman advises, as an irreducible, inward "traumatic kernel" that cannot be externalized and extinguished by naming? Contra the endeavour to exorcize the trace — "that which prevents everything's being given at once" in the domain of meaning (Copjec 54) — Erlene's blank silence maintains the "hermeneutic Frame" in a space of absolute alterity that is simultaneously vibrant and spectral. In a traditional or classical novel, Erlene's silence would belong to the domain of what D. A. Miller terms the "narratable": those instances of "disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise" (*Narrative* ix), a state which "can only be liquidated along with the narrative itself" (3). But the lack which precipitates the *Scented Gardens for the Blind* scenario is of a different order; it is a traumatic, necessary gap in symbolization which is not dispelled at the close of the text.

Evans puts into play the metaphor of literary detection. What kind of detective novel might *Scented Gardens for the Blind* be? The novel centres on the death, presumed murder, of Erlene's speech. Erlene's inert body, like that of a dead person, sits in a

darkened, morgue-like room. Like the corpse in a detective novel, her body works to "bind a group of individuals together" (Zizek 59). The remaining characters are brought together by this disturbance, this incoherent, speechless body which is presumed to know the circumstances of its own linguistic murder, yet will not tell. Guilt, suspicion, aggression, and secrecy are pandemic in the novel; even the newly appointed psychiatrist assures Dr. Clapper, "Don't worry. She won't incriminate you. She won't point you out as the guilty party" (251). As in a detective novel, the reader and the characters themselves expect some final, redemptive awakening which will reveal the "proper beginning" (Zizek 58) and exonerate the murderous desires of all by pronouncing guilt upon a single party.

Yet, despite the best attempts of critics to turn *Scented Gardens for the Blind* into a redemptive text, the novel refuses any cathartic projection. The critical consensus on the novel's two-part structure provides an example. Chapters one to fifteen are focalized in turn through Vera, Erlene, and Edward. By contrast, the final chapter has omniscient narration, and it repeats narrative details from the first part of the novel, albeit in shuffled or distorted form. A woman sits silently in a room, but her name is Vera Glace, not Erlene; she is sixty, not young; and she sits in a mental hospital, not in a house. This silent Vera is attended, as is Erlene, by the psychiatrist, Dr. Clapper.

This two-part structure is usually read as the irruption of reality into fantasy. Upon encountering the final chapter, the reader realizes that chapters one to fifteen are not the principal narrative level but are rather an embedded narrative, the fantasy of another character, who conflates the characteristics of two of the figures generated by her own imagination, bearing the name of Vera Glace and the silence of Erlene. Chapter sixteen would enact a shift from an internal perspective of Vera's mind to an external view of her as a patient, a shift from a split self to a unity, from illusion to reality, from falsity to truth, from darkness to light, and from readerly immersion within a story to the knowledge that such immersion was brought about by verbal trickery.<sup>10</sup> The governing trope of the novel, then, is dramatic irony, consisting in the reader's superior access to Vera's "secret silent dreams" (247), which remain opaque to Dr. Clapper.

Yet the text itself challenges — or, at least, fails to confirm — the binaries upon which this interpretation is based. For one thing, the final chapter scarcely brings relief; I doubt whether any reader arriving at chapter sixteen, sighs, “thank God it was only a dream!” The structure of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* can rather be likened to the Gary Larson cartoon in which a man wakes up, startled and distressed, to find himself in a dormitory within a fiery cavern. The man in the bed next to his offers comfort: “Go back to sleep, Chuck. You’re just having a nightmare — of course, we *are* still in hell.” The final chapter dashes Vera from the nightmare frying-pan, so to speak, to the real-world fire of the psychiatric ward and nuclear annihilation.

But finally there *are* no awakenings depicted in the fictional world of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* and hence no sure foundation for gauging where invention, imagination, illusion, and fantasy end. This point can be illustrated by comparing the structure of the novel with a very similar narrative pattern, which Žižek names “retroactive fictionalization”: events “progress in a linear way until, all of a sudden, precisely at the point of catastrophic breakdown, we find ourselves again at an earlier point of departure. The path to catastrophe turns out to be only a fictional detour bringing us back to our starting point” (17). Typically, such narratives open with a scene which is repeated at the end, with the events sandwiched in between retrospectively recognized as fantasy taking place between two points of reality.<sup>11</sup> Readers who interpret the final chapter of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* as a shift from an internal to an external reality implicitly introduce the narrative paradigm described by Žižek; that is, they mentally situate the figure of Vera dreaming in the psychiatric ward at the beginning of the text. In fact, the novel offers no such opening scene. The textual landmarks which might peg out the demarcation between reality and fantasy do not appear in the novel, for fantasies do not respect boundaries; they “move in and take over territory, and, like words, set up their form of dictatorship” (*Scented Gardens* 119). There is no sure indication that chapters one to fifteen are the mental projection of Vera and not of one of the other characters. Perhaps Dr. Clapper, not Vera, dreams the first part of the novel; after all, he has recently

"experienced some disturbed nights, troubling strange dreams which persisted during the day" (248). Or the novel may consist of merely one narrative level, with the final chapter focalized through Vera (perhaps as a dream), according to the alternating pattern established in the first fifteen chapters. Or Vera may have written the entire novel, given that she writes as she waits for Erlene to speak (67 and passim). It is not possible to confirm who owns fantasy in the novel.

This ambiguity between "reality" and "hallucination" contributes to the never fully expelled sense of menace within the narrative, an effect which Žižek describes as a "swarm" of "perverse and obscene implications" emanating from a repressed, prohibited domain (90). Erlene's silence does not signal the absence of signification but rather bears too many possible signifieds, some of them contradictory.<sup>12</sup> Her silence, signifying nothing in particular and yet too much, therefore "sticks out" from the other narrative details: it cannot be integrated unambiguously into any causal chain of events or system of meaning. It is, to use Žižek's terms, the "phallic blot," which "vertically doubles" all narrative events, loading them with significance:

the "phallic" element of a picture is a meaningless stain that "denatures" it, rendering all its constituents "suspicious," and thus opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning — nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning. The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this very lack propels us to produce ever new "hidden meanings": it is a driving force of endless compulsion. (91)<sup>13</sup>

By this process, Erlene's silence doubles the possible significance of every narrative detail of chapters one to fifteen of *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. Not only do readers assimilate these quirky details in their own terms but they also ask, "and what does this point tell us about why Erlene stopped speaking?" Normal chains of cause and effect have snapped; any event could connect unpredictably with any other. Put another way, there are only chains of signification in the novel; freed from that one signified which would fix their relation, the many possible meanings of Erlene's

silence displace each other without terminus. The entire universe of the novel becomes psychologized, teeming with possible significance, full of signs, auguries, and portents, a disorienting zone in which Dr. Clapper's psychiatry takes place as merely one superstition among many.

To invoke further Žižek's vocabulary, Erlene's silence functions as an "extimate kernel." In my understanding, the oxymoronic "extimate kernel" signals one of the properties of the "little piece of the real," which breaches the cohesion of a symbolic system (Žižek 33). The notion of the "kernel" signals the belief that Erlene's silence holds some key or secret code, some core principle or meaning. Yet the "extimate" position of the kernel guarantees that it remains outside comprehensibility, beyond any coherent network of signification; it founds the system of representations yet remains outside it. The "problem" of Erlene's silence is beyond understanding, yet central to it. The desire of Vera, Dr. Clapper, and Edward, together with would-be interpreters of the novel as a whole is to solve this problem. But desire lives by the principle that it ought never be extinguished, for "by obtaining the object, we lose the fascinating dimension of loss as that which captivates our desire" (Žižek 86). Erlene's silence is the necessary mystery, which fuels hermeneutic potential and maintains the position of Erlene — and by analogy Frame-as-Erlene — as fantasy-space for critical speculation. This oscillation between desire for an object and the fear of losing that desire helps explain why Vera and Dr. Clapper urge Erlene to speak yet also want her to remain silent.

But, of course, the silent figure at the centre of Frame's novel does speak in the end:

Dr. Clapper frowned. It seemed unintelligible, but he moved nearer to catch the new language. He heard it clearly.

"Ug-g-Ug. Ohhh Ohh g. Ugg."

Out of ancient rock and marshland; out of ice and stone. (251-52)

Here is one of the most profound and unredeemed examples of bathos in Frame's oeuvre.<sup>14</sup> Vera's grunt is a giant step sideways or even a reversion, when a leap forward is anticipated in the novel's "evolutionary theme of the long struggle of human be-

ings to emerge from darkness into light" (Rhodes 139). Far from bringing light, Vera's grunt merely ushers in another order of darkness, another unsymbolizable kernel; it merely swaps one "little piece of the real" — Vera's silence — for another little piece of the real, another order of silence.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, no character in the novel finds the answer to the "problem" of Erlene's silence; none secures the position of the detective, who pieces together the clues, or of the psychoanalyst, who peels back the layers of the trauma. The textual universe at the end of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* remains a world in which "everything might have a meaningful bearing"; there has been no "repudiation of meanings" customary at the close of the classical detective novel (Miller, *Novel* 34). But this finding does not mean that no "subject-supposed-to-know" emerges, no-one who might, "by his mere presence, [guarantee] that the chaos will acquire meaning" (Zizek 176 n. 11). Erlene herself takes on this role, not because she knows why she is silent — she does not<sup>16</sup> — but because the other characters presume that she does know: "[t]he 'subject supposed to know' is an effect of transference and is as such *structurally impossible in the first person*: he is by definition 'supposed to know' by another subject" (62).

*Scented Gardens for the Blind* thus overturns the dynamic of "analyst" and "analysand" set up by Evans's hermeneutic criticism. Evans sets out, like the analyst, to state a truth that the author repeatedly gestures at yet shies away from. He sees through her "curious and almost neurotic desire to manipulate the reader" ("Farthest" 38). But in the very act of coming before Frame as the bearer of secrets — as Vera, Edward, and Dr. Clapper come "before" Erlene to make her speak — Evans enters into a transference relation with the authorial figure, in which he takes the role of the patient, not the analyst:

The text has for us [literary critics] authority — the very type of authority by which Jacques Lacan indeed defines the role of the psychoanalyst in the structure of transference. Like the psychoanalyst viewed by the patient, the text is viewed by us as 'a subject presumed to know' — as the very place where meaning, and *knowledge* of meaning, reside. (Felman, "To Open" 7)

In the case of Frame and the spiritual élite of suffering individuals represented in her fiction, this transference relation converts an “other” — silent woman, crazy woman, any marginalized figure — into an “Other,” one who knows us better than we know ourselves, who sees without being seen and hears without being heard, who can read our secrets and “reach into our lives” (Evans, “Case” 19).<sup>17</sup> In the relation of interpretation, Evans knows the truth about Frame; in the relation of transference, Frame knows the truth about Evans, but archly refuses to state it.

*Scented Gardens for the Blind* has been an exemplary text because the bottomlessness of its secret paradoxically makes it a text without secrecy. In this novel, as Maurice Blanchot says,

[t]here is something to be said which one cannot say: it's not necessarily scandalous, it may be quite banal — a lacuna, a void, an area that shrinks from the light because its nature is the impossibility of being brought to light, a secret without secrecy whose broken seal is muteness itself. (Qtd. in Derrida 73)

Erlene's muteness is, so to speak, muteness all the way down — and if there is no possibility of “openness,” then its binary opposite, “secrecy,” can hold no force. What remains is a lacuna that is categorically irrecoverable — not a secret but a fundamental lack. What's the secret? There is no secret; that is the secret. In *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, the density of Erlene does not merely consist of layers of transparency that can be peeled back to reveal the “truth” of the other; knowledge hits against an absolute limit, which is not the refusal but the very possibility of communication (Nancy 73). It is here that Lacanian-based psychoanalysis meets ethics, the acknowledgment of the limits of what another subjectivity — text, character, literary figure — can be for me. Criticism ought not simply locate, excise, and suture the presumed “cause” of Janet Frame's disturbing writings, falling like the metaphorical snow upon Daphne's shaved head in *Owls Do Cry*, “criss cross criss cross to darn the believed crevice of [Frame's] world” (205). “Reading the wound,” as Hartman advises, occurs when the hermeneutic analyst/critic comes to acknowledge his or her own loss; the fact that it is not only impossible, but also ethically undesirable, to designate the “terrible point of loss” which seems to generate writing for Frame and her characters (Frame, *Living* 72).



## NOTES

- 1 See Evans *Janet Frame* (14) on the date of Frame's change of name. The Clutha is a river which flows through Central Otago and Southland in the South Island of New Zealand.
- 2 Platz runs *Owls Do Cry*, *Scented Gardens* and *Living in the Maniototo* through Michael Riffaterre's two stages of reading, a primary "heuristic" and "linear" reading and a second "retrospective," "retroactive," and "hermeneutic" reading. Platz finds in each case that the hermeneutic reading does not satisfactorily resolve the interpretive puzzles set up by the heuristic reading (it does not matter how many times we read *Scented Gardens*, we will never discover why Erlene remains silent).
- 3 For commentary on the homologies between psychoanalysis, theology, and detection, see Brooks; Ginzburg; Zizek 60-68; Wyshogrod; Shepherd; and Rieff.
- 4 Already the idea is gaining currency that the character Tom Livingstone, in *Intensive Care*, has sexually abused his daughters Naomi and Pearl; see Panny's reference to "an emerging pattern of sexual abuse" in the novel ("Hidden" 63). Carole Ferrier adopts and casually broadens this interpretation in her reference to "[a]nger about sexually abusive fathers [in Frame's fiction] — as in *Intensive Care* where Tom Livingstone takes on for his daughter the colossus-like qualities of Sylvia Plath's Daddy" (214).
- 5 Feminist anthologies published during this general time period include those edited by Ensing; Wevers; Webby and Wevers; Petrie; Dunsford and Hawthorne; and Plumb and Bilbrogh. Criticism on women's writing and the images of female characters in New Zealand literature included books by Roberts and Murray. Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* won the Booker Prize in 1985, to the triumph of its original publishers, the SPIRAL feminist collective. The nationwide Listener Women's Book Festival first took place in 1989, and *The Book of New Zealand Women/Ko Kui Ma te Kaupapa*, a biographical encyclopedia, was published in 1991. New Zealand literary commentator Gordon McLauchlan argues that the predominance of women as both writers and purchasers of novels in New Zealand has continued into the mid-1990s.
- 6 Mercer's intuition is confirmed by the fact that the autobiographies are recommended as the easiest introduction to Frame's oeuvre in the New Zealand Book Council's pamphlet, "Bookenz: A Traveller's Guide to New Zealand Books." The catalogue for the Workers' Educational Association Book Discussion Scheme —which grew exponentially during the 1980s and 1990s, with a predominantly female membership — recommends *An Angel at My Table* (listing the other two volumes of the autobiography as further reading), together with *Owls Do Cry* and (less predictably) *Living in the Maniototo*. I am grateful to Shelagh Murray, co-ordinator of the Book Discussion Scheme, for this information.
- 7 And women did bond over the film version of the autobiographies, if conversations with my mother and my grandmother are anything to go by. When I inquired about Frame's health in a phone conversation in April 1996, my mother replied, "rumour has it that she's ill, but you never know with Janet" — as if "Janet" were a personal friend of my mother's. And after seeing Campion's film, my grandmother, always proper and discreet about bodies, asserted that the film was flawed by a historical inaccuracy about sanitary products: commercially-made menstrual pads were readily available and cheap, she felt, even for women living in poverty, as my grandmother was during the years when the first part of the film is set.
- 8 In a letter to Evans following the publication of his bio-critical book *Janet Frame*, Frame suggested that Evans is one of "the Porlock people, maybe?" (qtd. in "Muse" 2). Evans comments:

The invasion of privacy that comes with "fame" is something we would all feel cautious about, but the reference to the artistically destructive visit of Coleridge's blunderer from Porlock means something different from that. It implies a special, magical attitude towards the world that surrounds the artist, and a possessiveness about one's own experience that makes it communicable only by oneself. ("Muse" 2)

- 9 On the novel of sensory failure, see Kermode 14. The interplay of cognitive blockage and hyper-awareness in *Scented Gardens* makes this text, rather than *Intensive Care*, Frame's most incisive representation of autistic perception.
- 10 Such, at any rate, are the conclusions I draw from the following descriptions of the structure of *Scented Gardens*, based as they are upon divisions between fantasy and reality, deception and truth:

[Edward, Erlene, and Vera] are presented . . . as the reader discovers in the final chapter, deceptively. . . . They are allotted five chapters each, until the sixteenth and final chapter, when the "truth" about Vera Glace is revealed to the bewildered reader, who then feels the need to re-read the text in order to understand it in the light of this revelation. . . . The site of the entire novel up to this point has been inside [Vera's] mind. (Mercer, *Janet Frame* 75, 76)

But in the last chapter, the illusion which has sustained the novel for fifteen chapters is removed as it is revealed that Vera Glace is a former librarian . . . (Evans, *Janet Frame* 103)

[W]e have been tricked into believing that [the novel's] one character, an old mute mental hospital patient called Vera Glace, is three people. . . . [O]ld Vera . . . has changed herself imaginatively into a child . . . (Evans, "Janet Frame" 378-79)

In the sixteenth and last chapter of the novel the point of view suddenly switches over to the "normal" world, and we understand that the three "characters" [Vera, Edward, Erlene] have no objective existence, that they are phantoms occupying the diseased mind of Vera Glace, a sixty-year old inmate in a psychiatric asylum. (Delbaere, "Beyond the Word" 97)

- 11 Although retroactive fictionalization does not necessarily govern the structure of *Scented Gardens* as a whole, a clear example of the technique occurs in chapter nine. The point of departure for the fantasy is the moment where Edward stands at Georgina Strang's door (131); the increasing surreality of his supposed conversation with her reaches the point of "catastrophic breakdown" when Georgina Strang's syntax dissolves into one long run-on sentence broken by the ludicrous question, "Are you a market-research interviewer or the Minister of Communications?" (142). The narrator then explicitly announces the end of Edward's fantasy by explaining, he "had been standing there for ten minutes, imagining his interview with Georgina Strang" (142).
- 12 This point may be demonstrated by sketching out the semantic field surrounding the possible reasons for Erlene's silence in *Scented Gardens*. If Erlene's silence is voluntary, it may be caused by miserliness (hoarding words [28]); attention seeking (coyness, wilfulness, perversity); cruelty (putting people to all this trouble, endangering and confusing them [13]); death (demonstrating "our ultimate dependence on silence" [49]); regeneration ("all true begetting is from silence" [49]); anger, offense, hurt ("having the pip" [10]); arbitrariness, purposelessness ("nothing to say, no point" [31]; "just doesn't think speech is important" [87]); indifference, non-recognition, coolness, callousness (87-88); omnipotence ("You think you are omnipotent, beyond words, beyond the need to walk up to people and speak" [223]); plenitude, fullness; holier-than-thou, knowing, infuriating ("She seems so infuriatingly self-contained as if there were never any need to speak" [152]); resistance, wilfulness, perversity, contrariness ("withholding information" [193]); secrecy ("We're going to tell each other secrets, aren't we?" [167]).

Alternatively, Erlene's silence may be involuntary; she may be under blackmail ("Erlene must be prevented from telling the truth about me" [13]); forbidden to speak ("They will not let me speak" [101]; "not allowed to speak any more" [82]); under a spell or curse, guilty; traumatized, repressed, psychologically harmed; insane ("the silence of the insane" [113]); cast by a god (226); or hurt through accident (234).

Yet again, Erlene may be unable to speak for trans-personal or instrumental reasons: she may have been "chosen to represent the terrible silence which threatened mankind" (113) or she may have "strayed into the future" (118).

- 13 In theorizing Erlene's silence as "phallic," I invert the female morphology invoked by Mercer, who describes Erlene's silence in the vaginal vocabulary of the "crevice/crevasse" (*Janet Frame* 82). For a lively discussion of masculine envy of feminine silence, see Johnson. On speech and silence in Frame's writing, see Ash; Barringer; Ingram. For a creative feminist appropriation of and tribute to *Scented Gardens*, see Beryl Fletcher's novel *The Word Burners* (1991). Julia, the protagonist, lectures on *Scented Gardens* to her Women's Studies class, claiming that "the silent woman . . . is a metaphor for the phenomenon of the erasure of women's experience" and that Erlene embodies the logical conclusion of "the idea that the only good woman is a silent woman" (74). Caught up in her disintegrating marriage, her equally rapidly disintegrating ideals about feminist pedagogy and university administration, and her repressed lesbianism, Julia finally turns her comments on *Scented Gardens* into a self-fulfilling prophecy by ritually drowning herself.
- 14 Some critics manage to find signs of hope in this grunt. Mercer seems to follow Delbaere-Garant in viewing a return to the primal swamp as preferable to "a forward movement [of humanity] which can only lead to the cliff of total extinction" (Mercer, *Janet Frame* 83; see also Delbaere-Garant 710-11). Evans even optimistically suggests that at the end of the novel "the ancient Vera Glace utters the grunts that begin the evolution of a new, healing language" ("*Janet Frame*" 379). Admittedly, my reading of the grunt as bathos entails a form of logocentrism on my part, which might be precisely the attitude which the novel mocks: my refusal to see the "return to the swamp" as any kind of advancement may merely reveal how enmired I am myself in the rationality of the sentence.
- 15 My reading takes a synchronic "slice of time" rather than the diachronic account which Tessa Barringer cogently presents in her analysis of Erlene's anticipated re-entry into language as the "focus of the text's action" (75). Both Erlene and Vera are caught in liminal spaces between two silences, between the semiotic, which is received by socialized subjects as nonsense, and the symbolic, which represses the primal, corporeal drives of the pre-oedipal state. With the intervention of Dr. Clapper, the bond between Erlene and her mother comes under pressure, but Erlene resists the name-of-the-father and refuses the gendered position offered to her by the symbolic. And despite the text's "thetic break" into chapter sixteen, which seems to anticipate the successful emergence of the symbolic, Vera too refuses to re-enter that order; her final grunt "liberates the semiotic from its incarceration in the ice and stone regulation of the symbolic by refusing to repress and deny her foundation in the primary processes of the chora" (86). The semiotic has been frozen for so long that it takes the apocalyptic heat of an atomic bomb to free it.
- 16 Nothing in the text confirms that Erlene does not know why she is silent, but neither is there any positive indication that she *does* know. Erlene seems to believe she is under some prohibition ("And why has it all happened, that I am not allowed to speak anymore?" 82), but she adds, using a semantically indeterminate modal verb, that she "cannot" speak:

Then she remembered that she could not speak.

I cannot speak, she said [sic]. They will not let me speak. What will happen to me if I cannot speak anymore, all my life? (101)

- 17 See Schwartz for a convincing discussion of the elevation of the other into the Other in the dialectic between the "mad" and the "sane" in *Faces in the Water*. The "madwoman," Istina Mavet, imagines the psychiatrist Dr. Steward to be the being without lack who can guarantee her own wholeness. Dr. Steward, in turn, looks to the mad for the confirmation of difference, for assurance that the mad can be visibly demarcated from the sane; he finds instead an intolerable, uncanny similarity to himself. Dr. Steward mis-perceives himself as whole and turns away from the traumatic truth of his own lack represented by the figure of the madwoman. In both cases, the "promise that there is another present who will recognize the subject's existence" (Schwartz 124), proper to the imaginary, fails before the insistence of the symbolic that the subject is essentially desiring, unhoused, ungrounded, incomplete. The madwoman and the Doctor thus function to each other as symbolic signifiers of a real lack, signifiers of "that which is lost, the negative kernel around which the subject is constituted" (115).

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