

**“Nothing, Not a Scrap of Identity”:  
Janet Frame’s Vision of Self and  
Knowledge in *A State of Siege*  
Cindy Gabrielle**

Centring on a lone woman whose “quest for creative revelation [results in] death” (Mercer 108), *A State of Siege* (1966) has so far proven obdurately resistant to any attempts at attenuating its bleakness. The prevailing critical consensus concerning Janet Frame’s sixth novel indeed is that it represents a “culmination of despair” (Delrez, “Eye of the Storm” 126) in the author’s career. It is possibly related that, as Marc Delrez argues, “the novel supports, if only at the level of metaphor,” the view that the main protagonist, an amateur painter who retires to the island of Karemoana to seek some artistic and social independence, “dies to her long-harboured vision of the world, concomitantly with the onset of the quest” (130). Concurring that “death is foreshadowed from the time of Malfred’s arrival on the island,” Judith Dell Panny observes that “the bach she moves into is described as a ‘deceased estate’, where she is ‘alone, in charge and at rest’” (91). Dell Panny’s impression that the words ‘at rest’ have an “ominous ring” as they are “familiar on tombstones” (91) is surely not attenuated by Delrez’s reflection that the task of carrying the luggage for travellers such as Malfred Signal falls “rather ominously [on] the undertakers of the island” (“The Eye of the Storm” 131). Capitalizing on the notion that Malfred is already dead when she sets out to explore her “New View” (*State* 10), I argue that, in fact, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* forms the backdrop to *A State of Siege* and that an awareness of this intertext potentially sheds new light on the much discussed, yet still tantalizingly mysterious, topic of an after-life in Frame’s work. My analysis will show that “nothingness of identity” (Delrez, *Manifold Utopia* 133) is not meant to translate into “a shape beyond dissolution” (99) and, if a shape exists, that it is one that possesses *in fine* no self-essence, no “core of distinction” (194), but an ac-

cretion of emptiness. In contrast to exclusionary shapes which, artistic as they may be, entrench all sorts of dualisms, “empty shapes,” as Frame calls them in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (269), allow a free circulation between inside and outside, the living and the dead, the self and the world. Such extreme porousness, appropriately enough, is not simply a characteristic of the author’s alternative aesthetic. For instance, when Zoe, a character in *Edge*, declares, “let us be empty shapes of people” (269), she suggests that emptiness is at the heart of an authentic condition of both being and memory, since it is only when Zoe’s own ontological barriers are dissolved that she is able to commemorate the dead (*Edge* 133). To arrive at the dead, then, it is not sufficient to die; one must also become akin to an empty shape, albeit a deceased one.

This certainly validates Delrez’s statement that “Frame typically tackles immortality as a form of being that bypasses the strictures of the thinking/dreaming ego” (*Manifold Utopia* 133) although, in his view, to survive is to be remembered by someone else, preferably an artist, who has yet to face his or her own merging into the undifferentiated whole. *A State of Siege*, however, may well suggest that it is quite impossible to apprehend the world and truly see other selves just as they are (or were) in a state of non-dissolution—that is, so long as the self-world dualism is maintained. Therefore, I do not think it is a mistake to approach the Framean after-life “with an eye on the fate of the individual consciousness” (Delrez, *Manifold Utopia* 133), for only then can we consider knowledge (including memory and sensual perceptions) and nothingness of identity—or, to use the Buddhist terminology, a non-dual condition of being—as two facets of the same coin. Likewise, if, as Delrez maintains, the role of the artist is to salvage lost memories and if, as I argue, dissolution is a prerequisite to genuine commemoration, one wonders to what extent the final breaching of Malfred’s fortress of self is an attempt to halt her search for the New View, or if it is itself constitutive of the New View.

Thus, although critics such as Delrez, Patrick Evans (150), Ruth Brown (49), and Carole Ferrier (112) agree that Malfred “hardly qualifies as an artist” since she fails to “take advantage of the assets of the New Vision” to recuperate whatever may be lurking in the depths of

our overshadowed histories (Delrez, "Eye of the Storm" 137), my aim in this essay is to demonstrate that her blockage, or her inability to 'see' with this New View, is by no means final. To do this, it will be necessary to depart from the traditional definition of the New View (i.e. the idea that art is a means of conquering the real), which I attempt by dint of a comparison with one of Frame's earliest texts, the short story entitled "The Birds Began to Sing." The principles uncovered in the text connect to Frame's interest in eastern philosophies, which, in turn, informs my reading of *A State of Siege*. Working under the assumption that Frame became acquainted with Buddhism prior to writing "The Birds"—that is, when she was a student at university<sup>1</sup>—and with the knowledge that, while at university, she studied C.G. Jung extensively (Frame, *An Autobiography* 174), one may safely assume that she was curious enough to read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* for herself at some point. Indeed, Jung prized the book sufficiently to declare that, "from the year of its appearance onward, *the Bardo* has been my constant companion" (qtd. in Conze 222).<sup>2</sup> In effect, an examination of the different after-death planes traversed by Malfred in *A State of Siege* highlight the proximity of Frame's post-mortem poetics with that which is central to Tibetan Buddhism, a comparison which makes it possible not to claim that Frame was a Buddhist—there are also points of divergence between the New Zealand writer and the Buddhist standpoint—but to invest positive significance in Malfred's endorsement of the condition of selflessness characterizing a stone being.

Prefiguring *A State of Siege* with respect to its concern with art and perception, nature and the appropriation thereof, "The Birds Began to Sing" (collected in *The Lagoon and Other Stories*) stages an encounter between twenty-four singing blackbirds and a narrator intent on identifying the birds' song: "What are you singing all day and night, in the sun and the dark and the rain, and in the wind that turns the tops of the trees silver?" (Frame 157). The woman's inability to recognize the song is curious, to say the least, since the nursery rhyme after which the tale is named is surely part and parcel of her cultural baggage. Nevertheless, the birds blatantly ignore the narrator who, as a result, has no choice but to strain every fibre of her being in order to identify the song: "And

I listened,” she says, “I listened with my head and my eyes and my brain and my hands. With my body” (158). What she concludes from her intense listening is that “the birds began to sing” (158). It is strange that her eyes rather than ears should be called upon in this renewed endeavour to name the melody chirped by the birds. At any rate, it would be a mistake to consider that the narrator’s failure to recognize the song derives from an inability to reconnect with sensual experience, for both her mind and her body have been subordinated to the task of categorizing the world. That this is in fact rather symptomatic of the narrator’s general approach to experience is conveyed when, for a short while, she turns her back on the birds and takes a stroll:

in the rain over the hills[,] . . . through swamps full of red water, and down gullies covered in snowberries, and then up gullies again, with snow grass growing there, and speargrass, and over creeks near flax and tussock and manuka.

I saw a pine tree on top of a hill.

I saw a skylark dipping and rising. . . .

I stood on a hill and looked and looked.

I wasn’t singing. I tried to sing but I couldn’t think of the song.  
(157)

Interestingly, it is not through any grass that she treads when she walks up and down the gullies but through snowgrass and speargrass or, when she nears a stream, through flax, tussocks, and manuka. The narrator provides the exact name of every single strand of grass, animal, or tree she comes across, a cognitive reflex which is made apposite to the blockage of all recognitions.

The more the narrator attempts to code the world with names and labels, the more it eludes her, as though reality were unfathomable within the ambit of conventional knowledge. Frame herself, then, concurs with Buddhism that “wordiness and intellection - /the more with them, the further astray we go [from the suchness of the real]” (qtd. in Conze 172). This is to say, in other words, that the author gestures towards a realm of existence that is unadulterated by what may be loosely termed empirical or symbolic knowledge—which indicates, quite im-

portantly, that her poetics contains fewer affinities with postmodernism than has been suspected. Indeed, even though it is perhaps the case that Frame sees subjectivity to be a result of language when it deploys itself *in* the realm of the symbolic, she also appears to suggest that to lose the kind of language that functions as an exclusionary shape is to begin to exist. While, as Tessa Barringer suggests, similarities exist between Frame's a-symbolic real and the semiotics in Julia Kristeva's theories (Barringer 71), it can never be sufficiently emphasized that, for Frame, the a-symbolic is nothing less than the principle upon which the immensity of space and the infinity of time are constructed.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the interdependence of aims between an 'unframing' or an 'un-harnessing' of the world and the author's condemnation of the symbolic, as we will see, informs Frame's thinking well beyond her first published volume.

The "trimming of the view" (*State* 87) by the mind and senses that is central to "The Birds" is also a prime component of *A State of Siege*, in which the freshly retired art teacher moves to the island of Karemoana to paint her New View, only to decide that she is already "too tired, too middle-aged, dignified, to explore her past" and "what she had missed seeing by her dutiful habit of looking" (Frame, *State* 20). Such an admission of defeat may well be a sign that Malfred is content enough with an aesthetic that allows her to "ignore all irrelevant movement, color, form" (174), simplifying the picture to such an extent that her landscapes are stripped of any human presence. She is, however, not counting on the "touch of the agent that release[s] the prisoner into happiness—or new suffering, new prisons" (46) and that, in the guise of a prowler and of a storm (also called the Island's 'element'), will fissure and crack, one by one, all of her old defences. The first turning point in the text occurs when, one night, a storm breaks out on Karemoana, "hurling itself against the windows and the walls of the house" with such "an abandonment of screaming" (62) that Malfred's mental barriers, as if they "were made of paper" (244), no longer seem solid enough to contain the world's frightful fluidity:

The whole world lay without; within, there was nothing . . . ;  
the table flowed, the curtains hid nothing, were nothing. The

enormity of what lay outside began to touch Malfred with a cold brand that slid in a snail-track of sweat across her forehead. She listened intently. I must distinguish the sound of the sea, she thought. I must make something rational, eternal, from this animal screaming. (63)

Malfred's confrontation with the "insubstantiability of the visible and tangible" (62) brings to mind Zoe in *Edge of the Alphabet* where, when her life is "sucked at last in the whirlpool" (Frame, *Edge* 107) by a kiss that is "beyond reason" (109), "beyond meaning" (90) and "unidentified" (170), she endeavours to "recapture a shape, pin, hook, net, the milling ocean" (107). Malfred's experience also recalls Vera Glace's exertions in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* in which, prefiguring her counterpart in *A State of Siege*, she discovers that objects swoop and dance once they are "free from the supervision of human eyes" as though it were "only the fact of being seen which keeps them in their places" (Frame, *Scented Gardens* 15). This sort of *Weltanschauung* may be informed by the author's interest in Buddhism, for one of the prime components of the philosophy is indeed the conviction that less of the world is perceived when the mind, via the supervision of the eye, immobilizes experience in an empirical net made of abstractions and symbols, whereas reality is "the water which slips through" whatever container we design (Watts 45). On a more familiar level, the working of the "ungrasping mind" might be compared to our peripheral vision, which registers all that is within eyeshot but which "works most effectively" when we are "not *trying* to see" (19). If rational knowledge is the favoured mind-torch of the numerous individuals who, in the fashion of lighthouse keepers or miners, make "their own seeing, in their own light" (*State* 165), Malfred's (or Vera's or Zoe's) search for imagination must necessarily be spurred by an impulse to discard all those exclusionary shapes which encourage the perception that reality is a collection of things and selves that happen or are outside ourselves.

This reading confirms, in retrospect, the continuity of concern linking *A State of Siege* to "The Birds Began to Sing," for, after all, it is the narrator's endeavour to make a rational shape out of the animals' chirping

which, in the short story, compromises her ability to recognize a reality that, on a deeper level of awareness, she already knows. It is not just, however, that the wealth of manipulated memories and selective perceptions that go hand in glove with symbolic knowledge induce a comforting blindness and a soothing amnesia. Subtending the reliance on symbolic knowledge is indeed a craving for conquest and control, an agenda that the narrator in "The Birds" discloses when she pleads that she is:

a human being and I read books and I hear music and I like to see things in prints. I like to see *vivace andante* words by music by performed by written for. Tell me and I will write it and you can listen at my window when I get the finest musicians in the country to play it, and you will feel so nice to hear your song so tell me the name. They stopped singing. It was dark outside although the sun was shining. It was dark and there was no more singing. (Frame 158)

Dumbfounded by human arrogance, the birds fall silent, thereby contradicting their remark that "we are singing and we have just begun, and we've a long way to sing and we can't stop, we've got to go on and on. Singing" (157). Just as the narrator divulges her wish to dispossess the birds of their song, darkness suddenly engulfs the world, conveying—albeit only obliquely—the extent of the tale's distrust of the symbolic.

That, more often than not, the transfer operated by human beings of the nonconceptual to the symbolic amounts to an appropriation of the most unethical sort, is conveyed more relentlessly in *A State of Siege* than in any other text by Frame. Before retiring (or dying), Malfred witnesses with contempt her fellow non-indigenous New Zealanders' mounting desire to be adopted by their country. Taken together, the Pakehas' attempts to apprehend the "soul of [their] own country" (Frame, *State* 122) and the narrator's continuing failure in "The Birds" to understand the birds' song intimate that to try and appropriate reality is to lose it, as though the segments that are extracted with human symbolic chisels are no more significant than scraps of knowledge deprived of their context. Herein lies an important gateway into Frame's Buddhist-inspired epistemology inasmuch as the author's interest in some undivided and

un-appropriated real invites a comparison with “the room two inches behind the eye,” Frame’s metaphor for the imagination (Delrez, “Eye of the Storm” 139). Malfred claims that what “lay there, treasure or no treasure, did not belong to her, had not been captured by her and given a name. Perhaps it would never be captured and named” (9), and this metaphor is consonant also with the “white undiscovered silence” in *Edge* (97) or with the Maniototo, the central image in *Living in the Maniototo*, which has been identified by critics such as Janet Wilson (631–49) as the artist’s abode and depicted by the narrator as an “untouched, undescribed, almost unknown plain” (Frame, *Maniototo* 43). The Maniototo, the undiscovered silence, the “room two inches behind the eye,” and the secret store are metaphors for the imagination, but they also correspond to a realm of existence that is not simplified by symbols and definitions. Frame’s favoured images, in other words, all point to the nonconceptual.

To represent the world in paintings and in poems, one can infer from the novel, it is best not to operate any exclusionary transfer to the symbolic. However contradictory it may sound, since art tends to be construed as a process of symbolization, this simply means, in *A State of Siege* as in Buddhism, that the artist must retain no sense of apartness from what she or he paints or lyricises (Watts 185), which is why she or he must become akin to an empty shape. This is hardly what Malfred achieves when, in her paroxystic fear of the enormity that lies outside, trying to get in, she gropes for paper and paint-brush to fix the flux within a framed frame, “a kind of double-capture, a View within a View, double burning, a double definition” (Frame, *State* 174), acting on the rationale that “paint preserves, maintains, seals, is a defence you can never do without” (102). Ironically, the art teacher’s failure to paint imaginatively is inversely proportional to her inexperienced pupil’s ability to do so, one whose talent, Malfred remembers guiltily, she dismissed out of pure envy. Reminiscing about the episode, Malfred still cannot quite comprehend how a “mindless sponge” (123) such as Lettice Bradley had failed to absorb her teacher’s academic precepts. The episode is worth emphasizing because Lettice’s peculiar knowledge of the world is set in clear contradistinction to that of most other Pakeha



New Zealanders who grope for a similar access to the land's "secret store" (122) and source of "imaginative abundance" (122), which they are denied as they also desire to "stake a claim in the identity of the country" (124). Conversely, it is my contention that Lettice derives her superior recognitions from a relationship to experience that is unmediated by concepts. However, in order to understand this, some light must first be shed on Malfred's treatment of her sister Lucy, whom she views as another "mindless sponge."

Unlike her sister, Lucy was never praised for her academic achievement, nor did she have Malfred's sense of proportion; in fact, Lucy could never "understand the elbowing tyranny of triangles" (113). The sense of superiority Malfred continues to derive from this is qualified somewhat by her recollection that Lucy "*knows* people; perhaps the extent of her knowing can be summed up thus: she can bring a plumber from *nowhere* to plumb on a public holiday" (211). Far from signaling the collapse of Malfred's rational self, her statement must be related to the fictive phone calls she makes to a doctor and a priest on the night the prowler and the storm test her sense of hospitality beyond all endurable limits. Eventually, she decides that no one will answer her call, not because the telephone is disconnected but because "the members of various professions have their provinces and must keep to them; they mustn't trespass" (145). Thus, quite in line with her preference for objects that are immobilized by a certain kind of seeing, she finds that people, too, should keep to their assigned places and this is why, when the past knocks at the door in the guise of her former fiancé, she "address[es] the man primly in [her] best Mind Your Shading manner" and blurts out, refusing him entry, "I, too, have my province" (208).

The conviction she had expressed earlier that "understanding's a subject to be studied, to be trained in, like shading" (98), leaves little doubt that the academic method of double definition, or symbolic knowledge, constitutes the ontological provincialism which entrenches dualisms and which Lucy and Lettice have outgrown. Theirs, in other words, is the *Weltanschauung* of the indiscriminate individual whose mind, in the Buddhist tradition, is said to work as a mirror insofar as it receives all but keeps nothing, so that it is neither able to select nor to appropri-

ate (Watts 142). In this context, Malfred's conclusion that the "vacant spaces in Lucy's mind" are "inclined to spread like weed on a stagnant pond [and] such weed can be eliminated with method" (Frame, *State* 211), must be seen as preposterous in the extreme, for it is precisely because Lucy and Lettice are uncluttered by symbols that they are able to accommodate, sponge-like (that is, in the fashion of empty shapes), the world's unfathomed complexities; hence, they know with the "Biblical force of the word" (122).

Although she bemoans the fact that, unlike Lettice's, "none of her painting [has] ever described the way in which the plains submitted, a world without walls . . . to the invasion of light and air and snow-colored water" (21), Malfred finds it no contradiction to construe her change of vision (or lack thereof) as:

a cunning means of escaping from inevitable change by taking the responsibility of change upon herself. Not I am dying but I die; not I am born, but I bear, not that I am seen . . . but I see, I see. The habit of passive living, of *submitting dutifully to the imposition of each day*, has turned upon itself. I think that I, too, snarl at morning. There is blood beneath my fingernails, too, as I tear the flesh of the killed beast. (40, emphasis added)

From a feminist perspective of the kind adopted by Susan Ash, the prospect of a woman regaining agency is good news, though the intimation that violence or a form of ontological cannibalism lies at the heart of active living casts some doubt on the validity of this reading. Elsewhere the text posits that the enemy of "the invasion of the mind" is "habit, routine, inertia" (Frame, *State* 50), which indicates, curiously enough, that self-world dualism, as well as active living or the refusal to submit to the world, is tantamount to a state of inertia. In yet another attempt to prompt Malfred's stationary consciousness to budge an inch or so from her conceptual prison, the island's agent suddenly immerses Malfred's house and self into the flood of the undivided real. Momentarily receding into the background, the roaring winds besieging the house make way for the dominion of silence that reigns in the eye of a storm:

It was first silence, emerging from emptiness, from nothingness . . . ; a tyrannical, cunning silence subject to change because it had the essence of knowing that all attributes and objects change, it simply could not be caught out in its perfection. It did not bring fear or pleasure or wonder; it brought itself. Malfred . . . [could not] exclaim in the uproar: "it is Sound! Silence is but a facet of sound." She had learned to beware of the telescopic, fashionable, so-called poetic thinking that calls the beginning the end the end the beginning, that marries opposites in order to unite them and decrease the effort to understand their separate natures. Surely, there was never any such silence on earth or in the sky, and if there had been no one had been willing to recognize it. . . . There was an obsession of man to prove that everything uttered had language, patterns of sounds. (160–61)

Beyond the usual provinces of the human mind and the rarely muffled sound of definitions, first silence emerges from the emptiness not of absence but of some utter fluidity in which nothing has a separate essence and, therefore, can be taken away. Malfred, albeit against her will, comes face to face with the void, "the Alogical, to which no categories drawn from the world of name and form apply" (Woodroffe lxxi) and in which silence, once distinguished from sound, is simply meaningless. Importantly, the passage suggests that the a-symbolic is ever-present in the midst of people's lives but is concealed behind the "patterns of sound made by the brain" (*State* 162). Similarly, "The Birds Began to Sing" intimates that the unmediated real lies directly under the narrator's feet yet she cannot touch it, persuaded as she is that, to borrow a Buddhist image, the measure (i.e. the definition or empirical container) is the world that is being measured (Watts 41). The implications of this idea are numerous, especially in view of the current debate among critics about the nature of the real in Frame's texts and of her conception of what Delrez terms a "utopian reality" (*Manifold Utopia* 124).

First, insofar as the a-symbolic real is simply a fuller version of its symbolic counterpart where "nothing [is] left behind . . . /nothing retained"

(Conze 174), it is possible to infer that Frame's "beyond" lies within this reality and therefore does not constitute a transcendental sphere of existence. Thus, without wishing to contradict Simone Drichel's accurate perception that Frame, in the fashion of Emmanuel Levinas, considers that "the infinite, like the other, cannot be 'compromised'—grasped and contained" (199), I suggest that, in Frame's conception, the infinite needs not be transcendental in order to remain uncorrupted by "the narcissistic subject" (Drichel 198), by the self who systematically reduces the Other to the selfsame. Indeed, while Levinas envisions human egotism as an irremediable given, Frame, and Buddhism for that matter, maintains that it is possible for the subject to dissolve her or his ego or discriminating consciousness. Because a true encounter with the infinite and the other is seen less as a utopian beyond than an urgent necessity, the New Zealand author, perhaps unlike the philosopher, operates a radical revalidation of the profane. From this standpoint, it can therefore be claimed that, when Malfred dismisses the non-dual as wishful poetic thinking, she disowns the infinite, the other and an impulse that, in fine, is deeply ethical. Yet, undecieved by the inadequacy of her response, Malfred intuits that "there was some action she should have taken while she had been alone in the silence; there was something she ought to have done, she could not think what it might have been" (Frame, *State* 162). In all likelihood, the missing step would have precipitated the deceased consciousness down the symbolic cliff, into the void of the nonconceptual.

The proximity that exists between the passage on "first silence" and the individual's encounter with the Clear Light in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is truly remarkable and deserves closer scrutiny. According to Tibetan Buddhism, all deceased momentarily enjoy:

A condition of balance, or perfect equilibrium, and of oneness [in the realm of the Clear Light]. Owing to unfamiliarity with such a state, which is an ecstatic state of non-ego, of subliminal consciousness, the consciousness-principle of the average human being lacks the power to function in it; *karmic* propensities becloud the consciousness principle with thoughts of per-

sonality, of individualized being, of dualism, and, losing equilibrium, the consciousness-principle falls away from the Clear Light. (Evans-Wentz 97)

“From that radiance,” the text proposes, “the natural sound of Reality, reverberating like a thousand thunders simultaneously sounding, will come” (Evans-Wentz 104). Hence, when silence first dawns upon Malfred, she too hears sounds that are unadulterated by any human sense of selective perception. To push the point further, it is worth signalling that the path followed by the deceased along the different *bardo* planes or after-death states in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* corresponds, for the most part, with Malfred's post-mortem peregrinations in *A State of Siege*. Unaware that it has probed beyond life, the deceased consciousness in Tibetan Buddhism is typically under the delusion that it still possesses a body: “Life immediately after death” is “similar to, and a continuation of, the life preceding it” (Woodrooffe lxxiv). From the standpoint of its uncanny intertext, the narrative plot in *A State of Siege* may not, as Delrez fears, contradict his conviction that Malfred is dead at the onset of the novel (Delrez, “Eye of the Storm” 130), for the island of Karemoana is perhaps nothing other than Malfred's mental construction, a rock she clings to in the eye of the storm.<sup>4</sup>

Thus wallowing in their own ingrained inadequacies, the freshly deceased in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and, arguably, in *A State of Siege*, are neither able to realise that they have crossed over to the other side of life, nor can they recognise the Clear Light (first silence) when it shines through the opacity of human habits of thought. Unacknowledged, the Clear Light retreats below the conceptual horizon of the deceased; this marks the termination of the first, or superior, *bardo* plane, in which “man is liberated but does not know it” (Woodrooffe lxxii). Functioning as a purgatory of sorts, the next *bardo* plane foregrounds the advent of *karmic* illusions which, not unlike dreams, are “entirely dependent upon [the individual's] mental content” (Evans-Wentz 34). In Tibetan Buddhism, the state of consciousness in the second *bardo* is known as the “dream-state” (34), which ties in with the allusions in *A State of Siege*

that Malfred's unsuccessful encounter with first silence prompts her to further quest for the New View in "the dream-room," a chessboard-like chamber whose golden squares are doors to different memories (Frame, *State* 182), entered into upon falling asleep while, outside, the storm is far from abating.

At the end of her tether, Malfred first uses the dream-room as a refuge to nurse her separateness and, subsequently, to recover her old dual mode of being. On a subliminal level, this may be a further hint that the island of Karemoana itself is a primary dream-room, since she envisions it as the epitome of geographical apartness. In the next dream-room, her old hunger for trimmed vistas and people-free landscapes is still just about unquenched. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Malfred bars her family and lover from entry into her new sanctuary, persuaded as she is that they have robbed, and may still rob, parts of an essence she would like to see "framed, view within a view" (177, cf. 174). "There can never be an amputation of me" (189), she maintains, realizing only dimly that, to recuperate the aspects of her self that have been claimed by others, she will need something like an "extracting machine" (180). Once again, though, the resurfacing of such monstrous egotism is nipped in the bud by an 'agent':

All is well, [she deems,] dream-room philosophy, cripple to dancer, dumb to eloquent, though I was never dumb, suits me well until suddenly I am struck a blow that sends me leaping to my feet, running to the door (it is locked now) and crying "Help, Help". . . . I realize that in my dream-room two inches behind the eyes there are no shadows. No shadows! But everything has shadows, always: objects, people, plants, little dogs, plaits, uncles have shadows, their moustaches have shadows . . . , even the dead have shadows—surely? (182–83)<sup>5</sup>

The mounting anxiety she feels in the face of the shadowless objects scattered in the room, together with the denial that such shadowlessness may be the condition of the dead, provides a hint that she has been shocked into an awareness that she has been severed from her "physical body" by the "high surgery of death" (Woodrooffe lxxvi). This, in turn,

is in keeping with the notion expounded in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that, no longer able to deny that they are “neither reflected in a mirror nor [cast] a shadow,” the dead finally understand, when on the second *bardo* plane, that which they took to be their “physical body” is but a “dream body” (Woodroffe lxxvi), a ghostly illusion.

It is typical of Frame's recuperative approach to the past that the 'karmic illusions' that begin to clutter the dream-room almost the instant Malfred is struck a blow by the agent should take the guise of those memories which she has tended to shun but which are now “unfolding without hindrance” (Frame, *State* 175). In this context, it is interesting to note that Malfred's relatives embody the resurfacing of repressed memories as they materialize in the dream-room. I argue that determining the category of beings to which these apparitions belong is crucial for venturing a reconsideration of post-mortem possibilities in Frame's text. Although the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* insists that visions of gods and demons on the second *bardo* planes are *karmic* illusions, it nevertheless implies that entities “of like nature, being those of similar constitution [or level of knowledge] in the intermediate state, will individually see each other” (160, brackets in orig.). That Malfred is only able to interact with her mother while her other relatives remain distant may imply that mother and daughter are on the same after-death plane. It may well be, then, that the remaining members of the family belong to other categories of being either because they are still alive or, in the case of her dead father, because they have found a way out of or around this purgatory. Indeed, Malfred's father evolves in what the text identifies as “the area of universal belonging where the known arithmetic does not work, where division is not division, but what it is [his daughter] can't explain or find out” (*State* 186). Now aligned to the new arithmetic, Mr. Signal “has distributed himself about the room” (186) to such an extent that no extracting machine could ever succeed in re-assembling the fragments of his identity that he has scattered outside himself. In other words, it could be argued that Mr. Signal has become an empty shape or embraced an ontology which corresponds to none of the “categories drawn from the world of name and form” (Woodroffe lxxi), which means, crucially, that both Malfred's “first silence” and Mr. Signal's “area

of universal belonging” are akin to the Buddhist void, a locus that I call the non-conceptual.

To push the point further, it is interesting to note that, contrary to her husband, Mrs. Signal is the quintessence of the “predatory” individual who would “seize, snap up any individuality from any object she chanced to see” (Frame, *State* 195). Her obsession with recovering her shadow, and so, her essence, since “Man without his shadow . . . is robbed of his essence” (196), marks her as an unlikely candidate for immersion into the area of universal belonging. Indeed, still clinging to the view that one’s identity should never rest in “another person, age or place” (186) and that, as she puts it, “I am nothing but what I am . . . belongs to me” (196), she exits her daughter’s “windowless, sunless, shadowless room into her windowless, sunless, shadowless state of death” (202). Critics have understood Malfred’s insistence that “I am there always. There can never be an amputation of me” (189) as evidence that she belongs to the same category of being as her father and that “this is the closest [she] will ever get to a post-individualistic conception of the human person, with the possibilities of survival it implies” (Delrez, *Manifold Utopia* 147). On the contrary, I would like to argue that, at this particular point in the novel, Malfred is unable to exist outside herself. This is important to underline for, otherwise, one may have the impression that it is possible to endorse a non-dual condition of being while resisting the very idea of dissolution. It is in this sense that my reading of Frame departs from Delrez’s. Within Delrez’s reading of the text, a recognition of a world without walls (and of otherness) does not necessarily trigger a dissolution in the world so that, for instance, Malfred is able to acknowledge her past (the “internalized” other) while keeping the prowler (the other outside) at bay (Delrez, *Manifold Utopia* 3). This is, to some extent, true, yet the opposition drawn between Mr. Signal and his wife or daughter, or between Malfred and Lettice or Lucy, confirms the idea that, in order to know the world and absorb, sponge-like, its complexities, one must relinquish all agency or control over one’s identity and knowing. Significantly, such a non-dual condition of being is at once the informing principle subtending the area of universal belonging and the state of consciousness which Lettice and Lucy, though they are not dead, adopt.



Thus it becomes apparent that Frame's alternative epistemology depends on the notion that authentic memory, knowledge, perception, or art is impossible so long as the subjective distinction between the knower and the known is upheld and so long as one remains at a distance from the area of universal belonging.

To return to Malfred's dissolution, she distances herself from the old arithmetic when, in the dream-room, she realizes that painting affective landscapes is "an act of courage" (Frame, *State* 207) because "the condition of loving is that one withholds nothing, not even a scrap of identity" (206–07). At this liminal moment, first silence resurfaces from below the deceased's conceptual horizon, transforming the "noise of living" (162) and the clatter of definitions into a "final nothingness" (233), but, this time, Malfred is prepared to welcome "the natural sound of Reality" (Evans-Wentz 104). Nonetheless, the text sustains a sense that she will cease hovering between her cannibal identity and a more creative selflessness only on the condition that she glimpses what lies outside the dream-room. Safe and snug in the antechamber of consciousness, she must yet come face to face with the "dream world" of which "the insistence on being other than where one is" (Frame, *State* 240) is the informing principle. That Malfred must leave her dream-room behind is why, outside, the storm continues to rage and why, to her surprise, the prowler resumes its knocking, more inquisitive than ever. However, she again recoils from the prospect of utter selflessness and harks back instead to her god-like presumptions of power. Trying "to cast spells over the world to bend it to [her] will" (237), she erupts: "Why cannot I be left in peace in communion with the mountains?" (240). The agenda behind such a brand of romanticism is close to that of settlers trying to find their way to the secret store of their land; in both cases, the underlying intention is to stake a claim in the real so as to bend it to one's own purposes. To break free from "her prison two inches behind the eye" (40), Malfred must abandon the impulse to assimilate elements from the natural world while retaining enough of her identity (or agency) to control them. Again, this suggests that, for Frame, a genuine communion with the world only occurs when it is no longer possible to seize scraps of an individual's identity that do not belong to

another person, age, or place; and, again, the agent or island's element proves instrumental in prompting such a transfer of being:

Always, death, the past, the future, are on guard ready to thrust meaning into the smallest gap in the simplicity; somewhere, the domestic conventional armor wears thin. As Malfred stared at the window, there was a crash, a splintering of glass flying in all directions. . . . The wind, waiting at the window, leapt through the ragged gap, flapping wildly at the curtains; and, in a moment, the storm had entered the room. . . . Dazed, wondering what had broken the window, Malfred looked around the room. Beneath the window sill she saw a stone wrapped in newspaper. (243–44)

That the stone gathers around its core all the complexities of Frame's poetics of dissolution is made apparent through Malfred's inability to identify it: "She wanted it to be a river stone but she knew it was not, she could not name it" (245). She who had always been so intent on passing judgments on others (212) realizes an instant before undergoing the agent's finishing touch that the smallest counterpart of her beloved mountains—or stones—are much more "accomplished in their being" (241) than she has ever been: "how unhurried in their movements; stones in their lives are slow travelers with no history of judgment or making comparisons. Still they could, if they wanted, tell tall tales of moss, desperation in burning, murder" (241). Exactly like "the room two inches behind the eye," the stone cannot name and capture (that is, appropriate); nor can it be "captured or named" (9). It may well be, then, that what Malfred holds in the palm of her hand is no less than the dream-world, the secret store, the Maniototo or, simply, the a-symbolic real. Therefore, when the stone loses "its chill and [grows] warm with promise of sun" (246), one gets the sense that Malfred's deceased consciousness has withdrawn from "her windowless, sunless, shadowless state of death" (202) and found a place to be.

If nothing else, I have sought in this essay to bring into relief the importance of the a-symbolic order of the real, which it is no paradox to locate within and beyond life, for if the text is articulated around a quest

for imagination, and if the secret store of the land is a source of imaginative abundance, the destination of Malfred's deceased consciousness is precisely this secret, undescribed, almost unknown that plain Janet Frame calls elsewhere the Maniototo. Cardinal to this reading is the awareness that Malfred's move from the dream-room to the dream-world marks the termination of her quest (or makes her become acquainted with the third and final *bardo* plane), for what this emphasizes, in an important sense, is the impossibility of observing the world from a vantage point that is external to it. This not only explains why any attempt at appropriating and dividing the real condemns the self to a reduction of creative possibilities, but it also hints that identity is an obstacle to sight and vision. Indeed, Mrs. Signal's assertion that what she is belongs to her, together with her husband's ability to apprehend a higher order of being precisely because his essence, so to speak, is located outside himself where he has no more control over it, marks one of many intimations that what is under siege in the novel is Malfred's discriminating consciousness. To uncover Frame's concern with the dissolution of dual modes of thought is to shed an unprecedented light on the author's vision of art, perception, and memory, as well perhaps as her alternative epistemology, for she relentlessly suggests that, to know the world, the knower must retain "nothing, not even a scrap of identity" (207) from which she or he tries to perceive. The relinquishing of agency, the different after-death planes traversed by Malfred, and the intertextual echoes that thread together the Clear Light in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the "first silence" that emerges "from emptiness, from nothingness" in *A State of Siege* (160–61) point to a convergence between Frame's fiction and Buddhism, so that it becomes possible to venture that the survival of the individuated self is but a transitory state before the merging of the knower with the known, for in the Clear Light, "the experience and the thing experienced are inseparably one and the same" (Evans-Wentz 96). Nothing in *A State of Siege*, then, justifies Ash's claim that "Frame perpetuates the myth of the artist as an elite, isolate being" (186). Malfred may at first cherish the romantic desire for a boundless expansion of the human ego, but her endeavour is undermined by the agent, the avatar(s), perhaps, of the natural. Despite her profound attachment to

nature, Frame hardly comes across as a naïve inheritor of the European romantic tradition, which she re-shapes on the grounds of a growing awareness that communion equals appropriation when it occurs under the supremacy of a discriminating consciousness. At a deeper level of interpretation, this reading may allow a reconsideration of the views of the text as a “record of an imaginative failure,” wherein a lone artist proves unable to “load her memory with ‘an assortment of people clinging one to the other’” (Delrez, “Eye of the Storm” 167). If, as I argue, Malfred no longer knows herself apart from the world by the end of the narrative, and if the subjective distinction between the knower and the known at last disintegrates, then arguably Malfred has gained access to the undivided real where all identities (living or dead) that are usually suppressed are allowed to exist, not as individuated entities but as uncluttered selves able to accommodate, or carry, other times, persons or places. Although it may be the case that the dissolution of the self into the real is necessarily bound up with a post-individualist vision of identity, the creative and ethical potential associated with transcending the symbolic is truly extraordinary. Thus, even when Frame considers the after-life in her fiction, she does so under the banner of creativity.

## Notes

- 1 The idea that Frame became interested in Buddhism as a university student has been confirmed by her niece and literary executor Pamela Gordon. See our correspondence on “Janet Frame and Buddhism”; posted May 19, 2010, on *Janet on the Planet*. Web. 5 Sep. 2010. For further information on the topic, see also my article “Janet Frame in East-West Encounters,” forthcoming in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.
- 2 “Bar-do literally means ‘between’ (Bar) two (do), i.e. ‘between two states’” (Evans-Wentz 28).
- 3 See my article “The Fences of Being” in *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 33.2.
- 4 For a further examination of Frame’s use of places as “vehicles to enact her philosophical concerns” (Cronin 86), see Cronin’s article.
- 5 The “dream-room two inches behind the eyes” (*State* 182) and the “prison two inches behind the eyes” (40) should not be confused with the room two inches behind the eyes itself for, while the former rooms point to enclosed spaces and maintain the usual outside versus inside distinction, the latter, as has been suggested, is part and parcel of a “world without walls” (21), so that it is at once outside and inside.

## Works Cited

- Ash, Susan. "Janet Frame: The Female Artist as Hero." *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 6 (1988): 170–89. Print.
- Barringer, Tessa. "Powers of Speech and Silence." *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 11 (1993): 71–88. Print.
- Brown, Ruth. "A State of Siege: The Sociable Frame." *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 11 (1993): 49–58. Print.
- Conze, Edward. *Buddhist Scriptures*. London: Penguin, 1959. Print.
- Cronin, Jan. "'Encircling Tubes of Being': New Zealand as Hypothetical Site in Janet Frame's *A State of Siege*." *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 23 (2005): 79–91. Print.
- Dell Panny, Judith. *I Have What I Gave: The Fiction of Janet Frame*. Wellington: Daphne Brasell, 1992. Print.
- Delrez, Marc. *Manifold Utopia: The Novels of Janet Frame*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. Print.
- . "The Eye of the Storm: Vision and Survival in *A State of Siege*." *The Ring of Fire: Essays on Janet Frame*. Ed. Jeanne Delbaere-Garant. Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992. 126–39. Print.
- Drichel, Simone. "'Signposts to a World that is Not Even Mentioned': Janet Frame's Ethical Transcendence." *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame*. Eds. Jan Cronin and Drichel. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 181–212. Print.
- Evans, Patrick. *Janet Frame*. Boston: Twayne, 1977. Print.
- Evans-Wentz, W.Y., ed. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Or, the After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, According to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering*, 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1957. Print.
- Ferrier, Carole. "The Rhetoric of Rejection: Janet Frame's Recent Work." *South Pacific Images*. Ed. Chris Tiffin. Brisbane: U of Queensland P, 1978. 196–203. Print.
- Frame, Janet. *An Autobiography*. 1989. New York: George Braziller, 1991. Print.
- . *Living in the Maniototo*. London: The Women's Press, 1979. Print.
- . *A State of Siege*. New York: George Braziller, 1966. Print.
- . *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. New York: George Braziller, 1963. Print.
- . *The Edge of the Alphabet*. New York: George Braziller, 1961. Print.
- . *The Lagoon and Other Stories*. London: Bloomsbury, 1951. Print.
- Mercer, Gina. *Janet Frame: Subversive Fictions*. Dunedin: U of Otago P, 1994. Print.
- Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Random House, 1957. Print.
- Wilson, Janet. "The Inner World: Living in Frame's Maniototo." *Routes of the Roots: Geography and Literature in the English-Speaking Countries*. Ed. Isabella Maria Zoppi. Rome: Bulzoni, 1999. 631–49. Print.
- Woodroffe, Sir John. Foreword. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead or the After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, According to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering*. Ed. W.Y. Evans-Wentz. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1957. Print.