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# Meeting Janet Frame

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## INTRODUCTIONS

THE FIRST VOLUME OF YOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES WAS PUBLISHED in 1982. I was born in 1981, and so in the first years of my life, when I had just begun thinking, smiling, walking, and trying out—for the very first time—our shared language, you too had begun something. With words on a page you were doing that which you say we all must do: speaking for yourself; giving your side of your own story.<sup>1</sup>

I was about three when you finished writing them, this trilogy of books which you refer to as both the “story” and “record” of your life.<sup>2</sup> When you died, I was twenty-two. You were seventy-nine. Now, I am twenty-seven and, if a person’s words reflect their person, I am meeting you “properly” for the first time. You were in your late fifties when you wrote the words on these pages, and I suppose that’s who I must be meeting: a woman of more than twice my age, re-imagining and re-creating her younger self.

“We read to know that we are not alone.” I believe that age-old cliché. It expresses an age-old recognition that reading is an autobiographical act. Are we not all covert, “closet”<sup>3</sup> autobiographers? Isn’t that why we read? Don’t we identify ourselves when we identify (with) another? As I read along your childhood, as I turn down pages and underline phrases, I know that this is what I am doing: marking tracks and turning points in my own childhood, moments common to us both except that you have managed to put words to them.

I must apologize. I must warn you. If I am anyone, I am probably one of Them. An analyzer, a judge, a dissector. A declarer, a describer, a definer. One day I may hold and wield the cultural clout that only an “expert” can have. I know you were wary of experts, of their power to name, to “know.”<sup>4</sup> So am I, and yet I suspect that I could end up as just that, as one of the history makers, less a creator than a re-creator, less an intelligence than a cleverness. You thought yourself to be a mythmaker.<sup>5</sup> You were so wrong. You are the myth, and it is we who surround you that carve out the intricacies of your myth, picking with our pen-knives at all that you left behind, looking for anything of yours that we can write our own names upon, thereby blotting yours out.

## METHOD: OLD PREJUDICES AND PERSONAL AGENDAS

I have known of you for a long time, but only as that “crazy” red-headed writer-woman. That is the image that precedes you, and I think that image comes from the film that was based upon your autobiographies, *An Angel at my Table*.<sup>6</sup> That film was highly acclaimed and so drew not only international, popular attention to you and your story but also attached visible faces and audible voices to your “selves” (child, adolescent, adult). Despite the photographs that I have seen of the “real” you, I find that it is the faces and voices of those actresses that I see and hear when I read your writing. Unfortunately, this association of them with you, of that film with your life, is not a benign one.

By the time the film was shown on television, I would have been about eleven years old. I have a vague but definite sense of my mother’s furious insistence that, for once, she would get to see the whole film, and that, for once, she was going to see it without a single interruption. I remember the resulting silence in which we watched it, and how that enforced silence told me that this film was somehow “important.”

Even now, I can re-evoke the horror that overwhelmed me as I sat with my parents and brothers whilst your first “monthly”<sup>7</sup> was enacted on our television. I *hated* you for that (for in my mind, you and the actresses were two and the same thing). I myself had only just acquired what every teenage girl must, that which you describe as a “new relationship to blood.”<sup>8</sup> Like most girls, mine was a relationship infused with anger and fear, and my anger was immediately directed at you: how *dare* you remind me, and my entire family, of my too recent, too private, too public experience! As I sat there watching the story of your first period, I was sure that my parents and brothers were thinking of the story of mine, an event that had occurred (cruelly) on a beach holiday, an event made doubly memorable by a horrific, early morning trip to a supermarket where, left alone, I was faced with a wall of sanitary equipment that I did not know how to choose from. My brothers and father hung around the other aisles pretending not to know what was happening. My mother, for some reason, was not there. How I squirmed watching your film, trying to make myself disappear when that too visible blood on your nightdress appeared on our

television screen: It was *my* nightdress that I was seeing, *my* accidents! How I flushed as I felt my brothers' embarrassment and disgust at the repulsive poverty of your pinned-on rags, which were responsible for the blood leaking through your school uniform onto the classroom chair! You were drawing my brothers' attention to *my* clumsy sanitary pads and your enactment of that much-feared classroom situation seemed to mark its inevitability.

When the film was over and we were allowed to talk again, my brothers conspired to torment me, saying that I *was* you, that I was "just like Janet Frame" because I was chubby and had curly hair and liked to write stories (and, I thought, because I had just started bleeding, too). I thought you were weird and ugly. I didn't want to be like you at all. I didn't want to become a funny-looking, toothless, fuzzy-haired woman locked away in a nightmarish hospital.

So, it is with some very old and hard-to-shake associations that I meet the "real you" (?) in the medium of your own words. Because of my preconceptions, however, I cannot meet you "properly" at all. I cannot do a "pure" reading of your writing. I cannot read your work as words alone (if that is, in fact, what a pure reading is). Instead, with my old belief that you are "important," I read and look for signs or proof of this importance. With my old belief that there might be something "wrong" with you, I read and look for evidence of your "normalcy" or "weirdness," "saneness" or "craziness." With my old resentment and dislike of you, I find that I read in a way that no scholar should: as I read I am trying to work out whether or not I like you.

#### METHOD: NEW PREJUDICES AND ACADEMIC AGENDAS

Apart from my younger self's imagining of you as a crazy unlikable woman, I bring academic or intellectual prejudices to your work as well. The best way to reveal these is to explain how I came about choosing you as my "subject." (You have been a "subject" for nearly as long as you have been writing. How did it feel living and writing whilst knowing everything you did and everything you wrote was being analyzed? Did it interfere with what you did? Who were you writing to when you wrote your fiction and who were you writing to when you wrote your autobiographies? What does it mean that you reversed the old defense, writing under your real name whilst living under a pseudonym?)

I became interested in autobiography when studying history at university. I was interested in how life and history and story affected autobiography's potential uses and reliability as both an historical and literary document. Having always written stories and poems myself, I already had an uncomfortable awareness of a reader's power to decide the autobiographical status of a text. I already knew that once a reader thinks a text is autobiographical, few things will change this belief and that this belief is often established (through assumption and association?) before the text has been read. Anything recognizable in a text simply "proves" to readers that the text is a transcription of reality. Last year, with these interests

and concerns in mind, I began looking at the relationship between Sylvia Plath's fiction and journals.

Like you, Plath was a woman writer whom many have described as "mad," and I became interested in how this perception made people read her work as a "symptom" of her "psychosis."<sup>10</sup> Read like this, everything Plath wrote is perceived as autobiographical in the sense that her writing is treated as her "person."<sup>11</sup> Such a reading habit is "psychobiographical," a practice based on the assumption that all artistic creations are autobiographical because they are the product of an individual psychology.<sup>12</sup> Psychobiographical reading of a subject popularly known as "mad" can easily result, as William Todd Schultz warns, in "pathographic" readings where a critic (re)diagnoses a writer through her writing.<sup>13</sup> This reduces the writer's work to little more than a disease.<sup>14</sup> Criticism of Plath's work provides an abundance of evidence to show how people, influenced by the popular belief that she had "written herself to death,"<sup>15</sup> treated her work as an autobiographical symptom of her psychosis.<sup>16</sup> As a female interested in reading and writing fiction and poetry, Sylvia Plath's treatment of and by a culture directly related to my own both disturbed and fascinated me.

Subsequently, looking for my new subject to research this year, I wanted to study someone whom I thought I could "use" to explore a specific number of things: the genre of autobiography; the practice of psychobiography; the notion of pathographic reading practice and feminist interpretations of the impact that cultural (and medical) perceptions have had upon women writers in the twentieth century. Based on my knowledge of you as a "crazy" woman writer who had been in an asylum, I simply *assumed* that you would be an ideal "case study" for me. I assumed that whilst seen to be mad, you were not. I assumed that you were an innocent victim of a conservative and conforming society. I assumed that male chauvinism in the social and literary and medical world would have had plenty to do with your committal and public status as mad. I assumed also that, as a manmade mad woman, you and your writing would be feminist and focused on gender issues.

In preparation for a feminist approach to your work, and in order to reacquaint myself with relevant ideas and issues, I spent the summer reading a couple of popular books that are generally perceived as being engaged with feminist issues. Whilst I have never worked only with feminist theory, I have read enough about women's experiences and women's writing to know that the kind of scholarship I value is that which I can feel, quite literally, *enabling* me in my studies. Such scholarship is self-critical,<sup>17</sup> grounded in experience (i.e. uses evidence, anecdotal or otherwise), and aspires to clarity rather than abstraction. I chose to read a couple of popular feminist texts because such books' popularity indicates that they both represent and contribute to mainstream notions of what feminism is, what feminism has done, and what feminism should do. I am uncertain if you pursued an interest in the more academic feminist thinkers of your time; women had only just begun to make their presence felt when you

began your autobiographies. I am certain, however, that you must have been exposed to the extreme popular views that manifest in the books I describe below. I do not present these books as ones that I think you read or would have wanted to read. I have simply sought them out to reacquaint myself with the kinds of issues and arguments that people, including myself, will insist on bringing to your work.

The first book I read was Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*. Being an antipodean text, and a key text in the feminist movement of the seventies, I thought it would be more relevant to both my life and yours than the work of the much more fashionable canon of French feminist theorists of the seventies and eighties. I was disappointed. I know that Greer's *impact* and her public image is probably more important than her "substance,"<sup>18</sup> but I read her hoping to find a systematic dissection of the material-historical reality from which the old feminist slogans (now clichés) were born. I read her hoping that she would put *more* than just words to my own vague awareness of something being "not quite right" about the way men and women have, historically and presently, (co)existed in our society. Greer effectively articulates and describes many problems, but it is often unclear upon what evidence her thinking is based, if that evidence is appropriate, and to which situations her comments can or should apply.<sup>19</sup> Too often, Greer makes strong and simplistic statements that seem to be founded on little or no evidence at all.<sup>20</sup> As a result of these inadequacies, chunks of Greer's book seem to rant and rave, if eloquently, more than they argue and illustrate. Her tone emits an arrogance of "knowing" that insults the intelligence and undermines or dismisses the experience of her readers.<sup>21</sup> Greer (divorced and childless) implies, and sometimes explicitly exhibits, a deep contempt and lack of empathy for those of her "fellow" women who value marriage and who love their children and their children's fathers.<sup>22</sup> Also revealing, and disappointing, are those parts of Greer's book that suggest that some deeply bitter and personal experiences are the true source and target for her tirade.<sup>23</sup> How discouraging that such an infamous and supposedly feminist response to *The Patriarchy's Oppression of Women* should simplify, and be so dismissive of, those things that are ambivalently and complexly at the center of so many people's lives: relationships and family.

I also came across a book that my mother had been reading. At first, Danielle Crittenden's reply to the radical feminist movement of the seventies, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*, seemed an ideal foil to Greer's side of the story. Crittenden argues (or rather states) that her generation ("we," "us") are an unhappy, self-righteous, lonely, and obsessively independent lot who have lost more through the acquisition of "equal rights" than we have gained.<sup>24</sup> Crittenden constantly refers to, but never properly defines, women's "fundamental female desires"<sup>25</sup> and "fundamental interests,"<sup>26</sup> except to say that they are rooted in "the very nature of their biology"<sup>27</sup> and expressed by "the roles the vast majority of us eventually assume as wives and mothers."<sup>28</sup> Crittenden's text subtly reveals what she never explicitly states: that she speaks as

a "Western," white, middle-class, educated, professionally employed, conservative Christian (hence, I suspect, my mother's bookmark abandoned one-third of the way into the text).<sup>29</sup> Crittenden's lack of analysis about the implications of speaking about women from a minority position (especially in a global sense) makes her thoughts about "We Women" not only irrelevant but highly destructive. Blind to the privileged and exceptional nature of her own demographic, Crittenden's vicious and sarcastic denigration of the women's movement threatens people's understanding (and thus maintenance) of women's rights where they have been won, as well as people's ability to identify and aid those women who still have little or no rights at all.

Whilst reading Greer's and Crittenden's very different and differently relevant texts has not given me the insight I desired into women or feminists or feminism or feminist theory, reading their work has given me a crucial and valuable insight into the rhetorical power that poor scholarship can wield through a clever use (and abuse) of language.<sup>30</sup> Greer, and especially Crittenden, do not seem to think *evidence* (or an honest and *clear* use of it) matters when it comes to making claims about what they identify as their own group ("We Women"). They would do well to look again at Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a study that is firmly grounded in a material reality, a study that *illustrates* what it argues. Friedan may or may not honestly represent that material reality (for when it comes to "evidence" any act of selection must be an act of omission), but at least she provides something tangible around which she and her critics can debate more abstract problems.

Reading Greer and Crittenden has forced me to consider which "academic" values and practices I will bring to my reading and "writing" of you and your work. Irrespective of what their writing enlightens or obscures about feminism, it is my actual reading of your autobiographies and *Owls Do Cry* that has ultimately made me question my preconceived belief that yours is a feminist perspective. I therefore wonder if a feminist reading of your work is an appropriate or "legitimate" thing to do. In your writing, I hear a voice that expresses a complex and often abstract sensual perception of people and the world they inhabit. Is sensuality, complexity, or abstraction evidence of an inherently female or feminist perception or aesthetic? Your work, so far, does not seem to empathize with women and their situation more than with men and theirs, nor does it seem to perceive men and women as being in direct or indirect conflict with each other. In fact, you generally seem to sympathize more with your male characters than your female ones, reinforcing the stereotypes associated with the latter. For example, your ambivalence towards your mother as expressed in your autobiographies—a "martyr" and a "victim"—starkly contrasts with the sympathy and greater respect you seem to have for your father.<sup>31</sup> You do not explicitly explore the forces that might have made your mother behave as she did, and you instead seem to "blame" her for her disposition.<sup>32</sup> Your lack of empathy and sympathy for your mother is evident when you recount that

first time that she came to retrieve you from the hospital. You screamed, horrified by the vision of her, “the eternal peacemaker” dressed “in her pitifully ‘best’ clothes.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, you screamed at her not because of who she was, but because of that other reality that you associated with her, namely, your own inability “to find a place in the Is-Land,”<sup>34</sup> the eternal present where we all must live. Throughout your autobiographies you seem unable or unwilling to see your mother as anything *other* than merely a projection of your own anxieties.<sup>35</sup> For someone who so glories in the power of the imagination,<sup>36</sup> you fail to use your imagination to empathize with your mother. Is it because you blame her for the leucotomy you almost had?<sup>37</sup> Is it because you were jealous, believing that she protected Brudie from mental institutions and not you?<sup>38</sup>

If I were to read fiction as fact, I could interpret your depiction of Amy Withers in *Owls Do Cry* as representing your realization that your actual mother, Lottie, was more than the image that you imposed upon her. In *Owls Do Cry*, you construct a description of Christmas day in the Withers’s household around the refrain, “*And the hollow house will never be filled.*”<sup>39</sup> Amy, Bob, and Toby all wander off for separate naps and Amy “with her head upon the dirty pillow-case” (for “she has given the clean one to Bob”) finds herself crying, and “turns her face to the pillow smelling the dusty flock and the stopped smell of years.”<sup>40</sup> If Amy can be seen as a more complex study of your mother (perhaps, even, a feminist study of the conditions that create female “martyrs” and “victims”), it is a brief sketch that you draw, and the sympathy is not sustained throughout the text. It is the men in the book, Toby and Bob Withers (brother and father) who are depicted sympathetically, whilst Amy and especially Chicks (mother and youngest sister) are often unconvincing in their predictability: the former is the pathetic downtrodden martyr-mother; the latter is a stereotypically vain, materialistic, suburban woman vaguely worried that she has “no inner life.”<sup>41</sup> Should I read the reductive way you describe Chicks in *Owls Do Cry*, and your mother in your autobiographies, as a manifestation of a “trickle down” attitude from the patriarchal society in which you wrote, a society that gave women no valued place outside of the home? Is your depiction of these women thus evidence of your unwitting enculturation by patriarchal ideology? Or perhaps I haven’t understood, and your depiction of Amy and Chicks is an indictment of the society that produced them, rather than a criticism of the women themselves. Perhaps, but in your autobiographies and *Owls Do Cry*, I find it difficult to believe that you are making general, critical statements about the forces that shape Women or Mothers, or Marriage. Having read them together, I feel that in your autobiographies and your fiction you are talking about *your* mother and *her* marriage, *your* sister and *her* marriage, *your* non-motherhood and *your* non-marriage. Am I meant to interpret your depiction of Daphne, with whom you clearly sympathize, as being a (feminist?) study of the effects that the conforming powers of society have on creative, individual

females? I can read the text in this way. I can read the text in any way that suits me, yet I can’t help but think that in the first, second, and third instance Daphne is depicted sympathetically because she, “the crazy one,” most resembles *you*. Just as your depiction of Amy and Chicks can be read as a (jealous?) attack upon your mother and sister; your depiction of Daphne could easily be read as a retrospective defense of yourself.

Though my academic leanings try to predetermine my reading of your work by sensitizing me to “gender issues,” the reality of your writing has forced me to concede that perhaps you see class and poverty and socio-cultural constructions of “illness” as the great oppressors of both genders’ humanity and individuality. How else can I read the story of your younger self getting a fully supported, high-school and college education in the thirties and forties whilst your epileptic brother sorted through rubbish bins looking for books with which to educate himself?<sup>42</sup> How should I read your disarmingly honest (boastful?) description of the game you played with the medical establishment, a game motivated by desperation (and ego?), but a game in which you play a highly calculated and complicit (if misunderstood) role? That game goes wildly wrong and yet, after more than eight years in an asylum, two hundred shock treatments and the threat of a leucotomy, you want to hold on to what gave you a certain type of power and identity: illness. The socio-cultural attitude towards illness that you describe, that links disability to talent, that linked you to Van Gogh, does not seem to be a gendered one.<sup>43</sup> You do not seem to me, simply, to be one of the many manmade mad women trapped in the yellow wallpaper of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story, women that she depicts as being forced to insanity by the men (doctors, husbands) who control their lives.<sup>44</sup> I see both male doctors and female nurses treating both male and female patients appallingly. Does it matter that the doctors are men and the nurses are women? (I’m not sure.) Either way, in its simplest description, what happens within the asylums is that one group of people, who are educated and professionally employed (“Somebodies”), have free reign over another group of people, who are identified only by their mental illnesses (“Nobodies”). Likewise, though your family can, theoretically, determine your entry into and out of the hospital, the reality of their socio-economic class position (“Nobodies”) gives them little power to “say no” to the “experts” who “know.”<sup>45</sup>

From such examples as these, I have realized that, turning up to your work equipped with a belief that you are one of these women writers labeled “mad,” victimized by a viciously conformist society, whose work is ripe for a feminist reading is dangerous. So far, I have had little reason to believe that you saw (or “wrote”) the world through a necessarily feminist “lens.” In turn, it seems more like an imposition than a means of exploration to observe you and your writing through such a lens. I fear that this politically loaded means of seeing can not only distort and/or determine what I see, but implicitly name (by “association”) that which I look upon.<sup>46</sup>

Questioning my presumption that you and your writing

is feminist, or demands a feminist reading, has forced me to question my other academic desire to read your work psychobiographically. This reading practice is founded on the assumption that a person can be read through their writing. Such an assumption too easily excuses a reader from acknowledging that, though art comes from life, its connection to it can only be a complex and perhaps inexplicable one. And yet, I have wholeheartedly consumed your autobiographies as if they can, and do, accurately refer to and represent your life. Worse than this, I have consumed them as if they *are* your life, they *are* your voice, they are *you*. Though your autobiographies were written after *Owls Do Cry*, I read *back* from the novel to your autobiographies, matching the two of them up, ignoring the complex implications surrounding the chronology of their making.<sup>47</sup> Literary theorists in the postmodern court would have me executed for the way that I am, naively, consuming and understanding your writing: here I am, absorbed in *Owls Do Cry*, thinking that, though its beauty comes from its language, its emotional punch and its poignancy derives from the novel's relation to real life, its "truth," its relation to *you*. There is nothing you can say, though you have said it often,<sup>48</sup> to dissuade me from believing that *Owls Do Cry* is anything other than your personal, often literal (and always symbolic) representation of your self and your life. Francie, in the novel, is Francie-Myrtle, Myrtle being your actual sister: both were forced out of school, both were expected to "take their place" in the world, both tried to rebel by wearing slacks and makeup and smoking and talking to boys, and both of them died horrible deaths at a too-young age. Isn't Francie's burning to death in the rubbish tip (that tip where children see treasure and adults see trash) your representation of what life does to children (to girls?) when it forces them to *take* a place in the world instead of *make* one? Isn't Francie's fate your way of communicating your *own* experience of the transition from childhood to adulthood, your way of showing how this socially mediated transformation is, in itself, a death? Isn't Francie, then, actually Francie-Myrtle-Janet? Isn't *Owls Do Cry* the means through which the healing you, writing in the mid-1950s, could package up and dispose of the past: the grief you felt for lost sisters; the humiliation you felt at always being (so publicly) "dirty and poor";<sup>49</sup> the terror you felt when you were unable to perceive either a place in the present or a path into the future?

As far as the experience of reading is concerned, I feel like I "know" who you are Janet Frame. You are Francie: her character represents your perception of your real sister Myrtle and your perception of the conforming pressures of society. You are Toby: his character represents your perception of your real brother Bruddie and your perception of society's treatment of those who are different. You are Chicks: her character represents your perception of your "normal" sister June and your perception of what "marriage and children" means in a materialist, consumer society. You are Bob and Amy Withers: their characters represent your perception of your parents and your perception of the conventional roles

that people trap themselves into, and are trapped into by others. You are Daphne: her character shows me what you think about how and why your life unfurled in the chaotic way that it did. Daphne's character tells me how you perceive "medicine" as being the means through which society punishes and controls those who refuse to conform. Yes, I *know* you Janet Frame: I have read you very closely. You are Janet, Francie, Chicks, Toby, Daphne, Bob, and Amy.

Of course, you are none of these things. You are dead. Would I presume to make such statements if you were alive? I will never get to speak to you in the flesh, and if I could, would I know you then? There might be fact in fiction, but fiction is not fact, and who am I to tell you who you "really" are, to tell you what your work is "really" about despite your protestations? As most critics do, I am ignoring what is perhaps the simpler, more embarrassing truth about the meaning of your work. It is I, the reader, who feels pain when I read your story. Doesn't that suggest that your writing's "emotional punch" lies as much in its relation to *my* life as to yours? How beautifully, and accurately, you describe the fear that I have felt (and that, surely, everyone feels) that growing up is a form of dying, that if change promises anything it promises loss, that loss builds blinkers over one's eyes, as if seeing less means there is less to lose: "you have to grow up. It's today and tomorrow and the next day. And it came with Francie—today and tomorrow and the next day. She grew more and more silent about what really mattered. She curled inside herself . . . If only she had some kind of treasure with her, inside, to help her; if only grown-ups could tell what is treasure and not treasure."<sup>50</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

I suppose in all of this I am trying to explain to myself, and to you, what I consider to be a legitimate form of study and a legitimate use of language, for I believe that both are inextricably linked. Fitting you or your work into any kind of "reading" (feminist, psychobiographical) seems to me to be a potentially dishonest and distorting act. My method, therefore, begins with the only reliable things that I have: a collection of words actively contrived by you, and my experience of reading those words. I do not want to shift this experience to a theoretical landscape whose geography too often seems composed (in another time and place) of multiple strata of abstract material, layered tenuously, one upon the other, with their foundation inexplicable or out of sight. Though I cannot remove my prejudices (the questionably founded landscape in my mind), I can be aware and wary of them. As I try to think about you, by writing to you, I will try to use language as a means of true communication,<sup>51</sup> as a way of expressing meaning rather than cleverly hiding its absence, as a means of making it clear when my work is about myself rather than about you. All I want, really, is to find a way of doing something *with* you, rather than *to* you; a way of wrapping myself in *your* words rather than obliterating you with mine. □

## NOTES

1 Frame talks about the importance of a nation “speaking for itself” through writers (Frame, *Autobiography* 2 78, 145) and she laments the “lost” (unspoken) life of her own mother (179). Frame also speaks of how she “arrived at the point of knowing the agony and luxury of trying to tell my story” (Frame, *Autobiography* 3 126).

2 Frame uses these terms to describe the nature of the document she is producing in, respectively, her third autobiography (169), and her first (9). The very fact that Frame’s autobiography was originally published as separate volumes, as ‘plural’ (autobiographies), can be interpreted as a comment on the texts’ “truth” value, suggestive of the potentially transient, plural and/or constructed nature of their “truth.”

3 Olney 26.

4 Frame’s ambivalence towards “experts,” particularly medical experts, is consistent throughout her autobiographies, and is expressed explicitly in *The Envoy from Mirror City* where she realizes how easily she had previously “surrendered” (116) to the opinions of those who wielded the power of “psychiatric gods” (127), namely those who diagnosed and “treated” her in New Zealand with electric shock treatment and, almost, a lobotomy. It was the psychiatrists in London who helped her finally “unearth” herself (126), mainly (Frame says) by helping heal her of her maltreatment by the New Zealand hospitals. In *An Angel at my Table* Frame notes how “official” labels carry a weight (129) that makes them impact far beyond the bounds of the doctor-patient relationship, this being illustrated by *The New Zealand Encyclopedia’s* reference to her “tragic disordered power” and “unstable personality” (qtd in Frame, *Autobiography* 2 177).

5 Frame, *Autobiography* 3 166.

6 Campion 1990.

7 Frame, *Autobiography* 1 145–46.

8 Frame, *Autobiography* 1 154.

9 In 1958, Frame changed her name by deed poll to Nene Janet Paterson Clutha, “So while some authors *wrote* under a *nom de plume*, Frame’s choice was to live under an alias” (King 191).

10 Schultz 135.

11 Rose 4.

12 Perceiving artistic states to be a specific kind of psychological state allows art, like dreams, to be “read.” This assumes that art “expresses latent content” or the psychobiographical subject’s “secret history” (Schultz 136).

13 William Todd Schultz warns, “Beware psychobiography by diagnosis. Diagnoses are always simplifications, ways of not understanding. And giving names to a set of ‘symptoms’ is both pathographic (excessively focused on the negative alone) and merely descriptive, never explanatory” (7).

14 Schultz 135.

15 A. Alvarez stated that he believed Plath’s writing “bodied forth the death within her” (211).

16 The presumption of Plath’s madness was reinforced by (and/or derived from) the general cultural climate of mid-twentieth century America in which female intelligence was perceived and valued as being “expressive” whilst male intelligence was

“instrumental” (Macpherson 3). Each gender’s “role” was presumed to come “naturally” and failure to fulfill (and be fulfilled by) that role was interpreted as a “sign of sickness” (Macpherson 3). Thus the stigmatization of female intelligence was reinforced (and enforced) by the medical-psychiatric establishment, as evidenced by such texts as *The Psychology of Women*, which stated that “the intellectual woman is masculinized,” for in her, naturally “warm intuitive knowledge” yields “to cold unproductive thinking” (qtd. in Macpherson 88).

17 Many feminist writers seem, ironically, uncritical of their own methods or “conclusions,” and too often produce dogmatic essentializations of what Women “are.” In *Women, autobiography, theory: a reader*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson notice the potential for this, particularly in theorists who use psychoanalytical theory in (as) their feminist theory. They comment: “An unnuanced psychoanalytic logic is a universalizing, indeed essentializing logic” (20). In *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*, Linda Anderson warns of the paradox at the centre of feminist theoretical practice, suggested by the question: “[H]ow can a woman take up a stance within theory—attempt to theorize women—without repeating the very gesture which has traditionally deprived women of a voice . . . ?” (4). This paradox is, by no means, a reason to “dismiss” feminist theory but it is a problem that must be central to any creation or application of feminist theory.

18 “She [Greer] was the one who got the message across. There were earlier feminists, arguably there were better feminists but she was the one who ordinary women looked to, heard about, watched with glee and amazement as she strode the world stage and stirred everyone up so mightily. She was the great populariser.” *The Female Eunuch* has sold more than one million copies and has never been out of print (“Second Thoughts”).

19 Geer’s use of poetry and quotes from other theorists, interspersed throughout the text, are often not directly linked to her arguments and seem to be a selective and aesthetically effective way of giving her “opinions” authority. Literary and scholarly perceptions are “real” and valuable but only when they relate to something specific and concrete. At times Greer’s work seems to be made up of “opinions” backed up and authorized by others’ opinions and consequently unclearly linked to the “every day” experience of the women likely to be reading her book.

20 For example, in relation to family and community, Greer comments: “Once upon a time everyone lived in a house full of friends with large communal areas, where the streets were full of friends because the immobility of the community meant that all its members knew one another and their family history.” The paradise Greer describes here, this place of “Once upon a time,” is based on her analysis of the “stem” family which she describes in relation to aristocrat families of the feudal past. She is seemingly unaware that an “aristocratic” stem family does not represent a “universal” stem family. Though Greer does point out very briefly (in two sentences) the stifling disadvantages of her “stem family” ideal, she spends the rest of the chapter describing and damning the modern “opposite” (219–38). Family and children seem to be the realm in which Greer typically makes generalizing, idealizing and demonizing statements of what “is” and “should be.” See also endnote 22.

21 For example, Greer states: “It is true that men use the threat of physical force, usually histrionically, to silence nagging wives: but it is almost always a sham. It is actually a game of nerves, and can be turned aside fairly easily. . . . I have lived with men

of known violence, . . . and in no case was I ever offered physical aggression, because it was abundantly clear from my attitude that I was not impressed by it." (316) Here, Greer clearly assumes that her experience of "domestic violence" has given her a general/universal understanding of domestic violence. She implicitly "blames" women for *provoking* violent interaction through their bad *attitude* (their "nagging") and thus states that such women could, if they wished, stop it "fairly easily." From her very limited experience, Greer clearly feels able to state what male violence towards women "actually" is, "almost always" is, and "usually" is. Such a simplification and *dismissal* of domestic violence is frightening and places both the cause and solution in the hands of women.

22 "Bringing up children is not a real occupation, because children come up just the same, brought or not" (Greer 278) and "Children are more disturbed by changes of place than by changes in personnel around them" (234). Greer seems to think that a child "coming" up is the same as being "brought" up and that a child sees its parents merely as "personnel." Her belief that she would not need or want any child of her own to know her as its "womb-mother" (235) reflects her complete inexperience of conceiving, bearing, giving birth to, and caring for an infant, and perhaps reflects her hatred of her own mother (see below). Her absurd ideal "family" would be laughable if it wasn't described so earnestly—when she claims her ideal communal home would be "unbreakable" she is right because it does not and will not exist, and if it did it could only exist for those people willing enough to live "communally" around one (namely, Her) designing ego and for those with enough money to have a "farmhouse in Italy," to pay for the "local family" who would tend to the "house and garden," and who could afford to school children in "London or New York" depending on the child's preference (235–36).

23 In an extremely personal, vicious, (defaming?) way, Greer freely airs her grievances about her own mother: "Not all women are as desperate as my mother" (Greer 282, 288–89).

24 These attitudes are made evident in such comments as "the problems of women today are the problems of freedom" (Crittenden 179), and "it is the young, professional, and educated women who find . . . that the feminist ideas on which they were weaned do not lead them to happier lives but *only* to loneliness, stress, and the forfeiture of the most joyous experiences of a woman's life" (Crittenden 179–80, italics added).

25 Crittenden 23.

26 Crittenden 174.

27 Crittenden 35.

28 Crittenden 174.

29 The following provides a typically revealing example of Crittenden's demographic blindness: "Many times throughout the writing of this book I've emerged from the Library of Congress on to the sunlit streets of Capitol Hill . . . As I stand out side the library getting my bearings, watching all the women walking swiftly by to their jobs on the Hill or balancing sandwiches on top of their briefcases on the lawn of the Supreme Court a few doors down, or carrying on an intimate chat with their lover on a cellular phone while waiting to cross at a light, I will realize that nothing I have read [of feminism] that morning speaks to the immediacy of a woman's life. And I don't just mean my life, but any woman's life" (179).

30 Smith and Watson note that whilst the "access to power of white academic feminists" remains untheorized, there has been a definite backlash against it driven by a widespread awareness that

such feminists "posit a universal woman—implicitly white, bourgeois, and Western—and . . . presume to speak on her behalf" (26). Greer and Crittenden both "posit" such a woman in their writing and, belonging to that demographic (one an academic, one a Washington journalist), both are in a privileged (powerful) position to "speak" and be "heard." Presenting their arguments to people who can identify with them demographically (people who will, therefore, be less critical of them), allows the sometimes-questionable substance of Greer and Crittenden's arguments to, perhaps, pass unnoticed behind the fireworks of the language with which their arguments are presented.

31 How odd it sounds when Frame refers to her family as being constituted of Isabel, Myrtle, June, Brudie, Dad, and "Mother." Frame states that she only began referring to her "Mum" as "Mother" when she felt "grown up enough to acknowledge her as a separate personality" (Frame, *Autobiography* 1 13). What does it mean, then, that her "Dad" never became "Father"? It's as if her mother is "grown out of," that she loses the "oneness," authority, and status that marks a parent's relation to her child, whilst Frame's father retains this privileged position.

32 Frame complains that her and her sister had grown up "in a thorough school" with their "mother as teacher" and that this school taught them to behave in a conciliatory fashion, such as always as telling their family only what they "wanted to hear" in order to "make everyone happy" (Frame, *Autobiography* 2 72). In this comment, it is clear that Frame perceives her mother as the problem in the family, not the father or brother (whose violent and selfish reactions may well have disabled, or rendered pointless, her mother's self-assertions), and certainly not Frame and her sister (who, noting their mother's submissive behavior, could have encouraged and enabled her self-assertion).

33 Frame, *Autobiography* 2 66.

34 Frame, *Autobiography* 2 66.

35 Recounting a visit to her mother when she herself was in hospital, Frame does note the reductive effects of her own "daughterly" attitude: "For the first time, as a result of her complete, dramatic removal from her family, I saw her as a person, and I was afraid and resentful. . . . What had we done to her, each of us, day after day, year after year, that we had washed away her evidence of self" (Frame, *Autobiography* 2 105). Whilst acknowledging how she and her family had cast her mother in a claustrophobic role, and perhaps making a general statement about what "family" does to women, Frame nevertheless continues to cast her mother in a reductive way throughout her autobiographies and it is the resentment that she admits to in this excerpt, rather than her enlightened view of her own twisting perception, that permeates Frame's autobiographies' treatment of her mother.

36 *The Envoy From Mirror City* is the text that most elaborates Frame's notions of what it means to be a writer and the role that the imagination plays in illuminating the extraordinary in the ordinary. *To the Is-Land* describes Frame's adolescent yearning to be seen as having "imagination" for this was, she believed, the precondition for being seen to be a writer (and throughout the texts, "being seen to be" a writer seems essential to the actual process of becoming one, for making a place in the world requires (doesn't it?) having that place recognized by others).

37 "My mother had been persuaded to sign permission for me to undergo a leucotomy" (Frame, *Autobiography* 2 106).

38 “And I thought of the horror in mother’s voice when, years ago, the doctor had suggested the Bruddie should go there [into an institution], and mother had replied, ‘Never. Never. No child of mine will ever go to that place.’ But I was a child of hers, wasn’t I? Wasn’t I? And she had signed the papers to send me there. I felt uneasy, trying to divide out the portions of family love to discover how much was mine” (Frame, *Autobiography 2*, 74). Of course, Frame fails to re-emphasize in this little comment that it was she, Janet, and not Bruddie, who actively sought out the asylums as refuge.

39 Frame, *Owls* 92–95.

40 Frame, *Owls* 93.

41 Frame, *Owls* 104.

42 “There was no schooling for him [Bruddie]. He educated himself with books that I brought home from the library and from the many books, originally from the library but now marked *Canceled*, that he found in the town rubbish dump and brought home on his trolley” (Frame, *Autobiography 1* 116).

43 Frame describes how when the polio epidemic of 1936 coincided with the novelty of child Hollywood stars, there was a general public focus on “crippled children” who had “overcome their disability” (Frame, *Autobiography 1* 97). Disabled children performers were presented with a stress on their disability, “as if it were somehow part of the ability, even necessary to it” (98). “I came to link the two,” Frame comments and thus began, for her, a “continued association between disability and proven ability” (97). This association was dangerously “cemented” by psychologist John Forrest when he said, “When I think of you . . . I think of Van Gogh, of Hugo Wolf” (Frame, *Autobiography 2* 79).

44 In Gilman’s story there are *only* women trapped in the wall paper which lines the children’s nursery to which the female narrator has been exiled in the name of a post-natal, enforced “rest” cure for her “nerves.” Likewise, it is *only* men who actively enforce this situation, though the husband’s sister does act as a monitor of the narrator’s condition (and as an example of the then ideal woman, one who can housekeep and child-raise without “hopes for a better profession” 47). Gilman’s story is by no means a “simplistic” study of the medicalization of female “unhappiness” in a conservative, constricting society. Many parallels can be drawn between the points Gilman and Frame both make, particularly in relation to the notion that madness is “made” by those who “diagnose” and “treat” it. Throughout Gilman’s story, the narrator identifies, and then identifies *with*, the figures of women that she sees trapped in the hideous wallpaper pattern of her room: “Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind [the wallpaper], and sometimes only one, . . . And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads” (55). In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, there is a strong sense that the narrator’s declining sanity is, indeed, manmade: her husband, who refers to her as “little girl” (50), admonishes her doubts and protestations and insists, “you really are better dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know” (50). Despite his “knowing,” by the end of the story the narrator has become animal-like and institutionalized, creeping around the wallpaper-torn remnants of her nursery, convinced that she should not and will not leave her imposed confines: “I don’t *like* the look of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. . . . here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way” (58). The most significant difference between

Gilman’s and Frame’s work is that Gilman presents a more strongly and explicitly gendered depiction of the phenomenon of “madness” and its treatment.

45 In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Michel Foucault comments on the power relations necessary for psychiatry to evolve as it has, namely “the absolute right of nonmadness over madness” (48). Frame’s texts clearly study this dynamic in her repeated allusions to those who have the power to “know” things and those who don’t. This power relation, Foucault continues, “gives rise to a knowledge, which in turn founds the rights of the power in question” (49). Foucault cites the “singular form” of this “power-knowledge” as being, in psychiatry, “expertise” (49). Frame and/or her family have no authority to influence her situation when confronted by such expertise. Foucault quotes J.E.D. Esquirol in reference to the relations of domination that characterize the hospital set up, “The sheer power of the doctor increases . . . and the power of the patient diminishes at the same vertiginous rate; the patient, from the mere fact that he is interned, becomes a citizen without rights, delivered over to the arbitrariness of the doctor and the orderlies, who can do what they please with him without any possibility of appeal” (48). Arbitrariness of psychiatric treatment is clear in Frame’s case, as revealed in her autobiographies and also as described in her novel *Faces in the Water*, where the main character, Istina Mavet, tumbles down the hierarchy of wards to end up, with no explanation or consultation, in Lawn Lodge, the ward for the “forgotten” who will remain there “until they died” (184). Istina’s observation of the dynamic imposed upon her and her fellow patients directly echoes Foucault’s analysis, as evident in her reaction to her solitary confinement cell, “I smelled the room, I went shopping among the smells—old urine mixed with misery for it was not the honest stench of babies not yet trained but a preserved and outcast adult smell of *those who had known and been deprived of their knowing*” (200, emphasis added).

46 Gina Mercer’s *Subversive Fictions* provides an example of a critic “imposing” (to my mind) feminist theory (derived from another culture, time and place) upon Frame’s work. Mercer states:

“Janet Frame has always written from the position of the other. . . . In particular she laments, and simultaneously celebrates, all the richness which is destroyed or denied through . . . systematic oppression. This richness, in her depiction, is to be found within various cracks, crevices, gaps, hollows, pleats and manifold (many-folds). These images are suggestive of the sexual and reproductive anatomy of women. The most fertile site and repository of the others’ potential to survive, defy and overcome oppression is distinctly female. Most of Frame’s writing then, is a celebration and exploration of all the multiple possibilities, or many-folds, of that which French theorists term ‘le féminin.’” [italics added to indicate where opinion and belief has been expressed as “fact”] (1).

Mercer’s interpretation of Frame’s work comes from reading the French feminist theorists Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst Mercer says their “le feminine” is not an essentializing concept, it is difficult to believe that Mercer’s *application* of this concept does not essentialize the nature of “otherness” or “femaleness” or “female” written expression, as suggested by Mercer’s belief that Frame’s writing indicates its “otherness,” metaphorically, through imagery that alludes to the sexual and reproductive anatomy of women. This seems to me to be a very limited and limiting way of approaching “women’s” writing.

47 Written first, and reflective of it, can Frame’s “fiction” be seen to have drafted (especially in a thematical sense) her autobiographies?

If so, what is the relationship between Frame's fiction and her actual life? Which wrote which?

48 Frame denies that the book is autobiographical:

"Later, when the book was published, I was alarmed to find that it was believed to be autobiographical, with the characters actual members of my family, and myself the character Daphne upon whom a brain operation was performed. Confronted by a doctor who had read the book, I was obliged to demonstrate to him the absence of leucotomy scars on my temples. Not every aspiring writer has such a terrifying but convincing method of displaying to others 'proof' that she has been writing fiction. The character, Daphne, resembled me in many ways except in her frailty and absorption in fantasy to the exclusion of 'reality'" (*Autobiography* 2 143).

Nevertheless, describing the text as merely fictional is dishonest, it is clearly not "just" fictional and Frame does not elaborate on the implications of what "using people known" to her as a "base" (143) for the main characters actually might be.

49 Frame, *Autobiography* 1 49.

50 Frame, *Owls* 36.

51 Here, I think of Ursula LeGuin's notion of the "mother tongue," the notion of a scholar's relationship to both their object of study and their reading audience as being one characterized by "conversation" and "relationship," the kind of communicative gesture that, unlike that of the "father tongue" (that of traditional, "objective academic" discourse), "expects" (rather than mutes) "an answer." See Tompkins's discussion of LeGuin's work (173–74).

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