Janet Frame and Resistance

ABSTRACT: Critics have long tried to account for Janet Frame's writing in terms of the apparent "good" that it serves. This good has often been preconstituted in the scholarly paradigm that critics have deployed, while overlooking some of the most difficult moments in Frame's writing. In this paper, I explore (1) how the good of Frame's writing has been understood, as against various articulations of Frame's apparent resistance to criticism; (2) the nature of the various creative responses to her fiction, especially by Patrick Evans, which have pursued the less companionable side of her writing; and (3) how these responses can help us to address the disturbing materials at the heart of one of Frame's most challenging novels, *Daughter Buffalo* (1972). I argue that by attending to Frame's wild and unsettling representations we are better able to confront her distinctive textuality – its rebarbative capabilities, and its presentation of fantasy and darkness. If this is not quite a register of praise, it is not one of proscription either, as I seek to move the critical conversation beyond various forms of moral criticism and recuperation.

KEYWORDS: Janet Frame; Patrick Evans; Daughter Buffalo; Holocaust

In notes for interviews from the 1980s, Janet Frame wonders: "Does it matter if my work is read?" "If it were not for the occasional reading and understanding", she continues, the whole process of "writing and publication would be an intolerable adulteration of oneself and one's work" (2011: 119). The frustration evident in these comments likely draws from efforts by readers of all kinds to link her writing with her biography, as well as her wider sense that due to her incarceration as a young woman in New Zealand's "lunatic asylums", as they were then known, she had been understood as a "mad" writer. "I'd rather not meet people who've read my work or have 'heard' of me," she writes, "I don't think they ever forgive the ordinary practical reality of myself as opposed to the myth that some people in New Zealand have created to represent me. I resent this myth" (2011: 119–120).

Despite Frame's misgivings, though, the "myth" surrounding her has proven to be remarkably generative for creative artists of all kinds, as they have developed adaptations of her work, representations of her life, and extensions of her literary imagination. A number of such works have become central to New Zealand literature and film in their own rights. Vincent Ward's

film adaptation of *A State of Siege* (1978) launched his career and won several festival prizes. Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990), a three-part adaptation of Frame's autobiographies, established the young director. Originally released as a miniseries, it continues to attract viewers through its distribution in the *Criterion Collection*.[1] Michael King's biography of Frame, *Wrestling with the Angel* (2000), remains significant as one of the few biographies of New Zealand's decisive mid-century literary formation. A documentary about Frame based on King's book was screened in New Zealand in 2004.

Frame has likewise been the subject of a remarkable range of imaginative treatments in literary fiction. C. K. Stead's *All Visitors Ashore* (1984) depicted a Frame character, "Cecelia Skyways", writing the novel that would become *Owls Do Cry* (1957) in the army hut of an artist named "Melior Farbro" (Frank Sargeson). More recently, the author of the first critical monograph on Frame's writing, Patrick Evans, has written two novels that feature a character based on Frame, and a third that explores literary inheritances in a more general sense. The first of these, *Gifted* (2010), returns to the same period in Frame's life that Stead explores, 1955–56, albeit in this instance narrated by a Sargeson figure. The novel focuses on the relationship between "Frank" and "Janet", and how "Frank" learns to read the guest in his house. *Salt Picnic* (2017) fictionalizes a Frame character, here named "Iola", in the period she spent in Ibiza, Spain, from November 1956 to March 1957. *The Back of His Head* (2015), which Evans considers the third in his trilogy — although it was published before *Salt Picnic* — centres on the literary celebrity of a writer named "Raymond Thomas Lawrence", a Nobel Laureate from Christchurch, New Zealand (Evans, 2017: 347). Each of these books has received a certain level of acclaim in New Zealand; both *The Back of His Head* and *Salt Picnic* were finalists for the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards fiction prize.

By contrast, the reception of Frame's work in academic literary scholarship has never quite achieved the same level of impact, neither in the reading public nor in the more rarefied world of university English. Frame studies has not coalesced into a field in the way it has for some other

writers from this period and earlier; there is no Frame studies journal or scholarly society. The current issue of *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* is one of few academic periodicals to be wholly dedicated to her work since the inaugural 1993 special issue of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*.[2] Several collections of essays have been published in the last two decades.[3] The few academic monographs that have emerged on Frame have tended to stand alone as opposed to integrated into the story of late twentieth century literature or the development of Anglophone world literature generally.[4] This is regrettable as single author monographs can raise the profile of more marginal writers in the literary academy, something achieved by Hermione Lee's *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (1977), for example, or they can help to focus wider debates about a period or movement.

I am describing something of a paradox, then. Even as critical interest in Frame has remained relatively limited, she has nonetheless been reimagined in a variety of powerful ways by filmmakers, novelists, and biographers. Notably, Evans, one of the leading protagonists in Frame's critical reception — or antagonists, depending on one's view — has even made his own successful transition from scholarship to fiction, publishing the first book of his trilogy around the same time that his final academic essays were emerging.[5] This disparity between critical and creative uses of Frame help to launch this article, in a sense, as I explore the struggles that critics have had with her writing, and ask how her fiction may raise particular challenges for literary criticism.

Evans himself has contrasted the difficulty he has experienced in writing about Frame as a critic with the freedom he has found in writing about her in fiction. Notoriously, he sought to develop biographical approaches to Frame's work in his early scholarship, in particular his 1977 monograph; during her lifetime, Frame would become very resistant to these readings.[6] He would later offer several accounts of why she was so implacably opposed to his strategies of reading. In 1993, he wrote that "the more a critic like me tries to find, in his simple-minded way, some kind of origin for her writing, […] the more the writing is pulled back into historical time, the very tar

from which she wishes to extract it" (1993: 17). He was suggesting that she wished for her work to be lifted out from its particular circumstances — including biographical ones. In his 2004 obituary for Frame, he recalled confronting "baffling and insoluble" moments in her work, "the sense which dogs her writing that there is more to be told" (2004: 22). Students, he said, had often likewise been "unable to resist the sense that she is withholding something" (2004: 29). While numerous scholars have questioned Evans's approach (and with good reason), one of the more astute recent readers of Frame, Jan Cronin, has noted her "common detection [with Evans] of authorial presence within Frame's work, despite the different routes we then pursue" (2011: 13).

By contrast with these scenes of frustration and resistance, Evans has clearly found in Frame's fiction a range of possibilities that have helped to release his own creative imagination. He writes in the Author's Note to *Gifted* that "nothing is written for the first time", and that his novel "has been written out of the work of other writers" (2010a: 301). *The Back of His Head* "reads like a parable of reading" he concludes; it is "a book that asks just how much and how little someone else's writing can be expected to yield the reader" (2015b). The trilogy as a whole "reflects the influence of the writing of Janet Frame […] on my creative imagination and my understanding of the world" (2017: 347). Instead of pursuing various truths in critical writing, whatever those may have been, Evans has found in fiction the capacity to reflect on Frame's influence, and, with that, literature's broader capabilities.

In this article, I show how recent creative work that has drawn on Frame's imaginative world offers modes of interpreting her writing that tend to be at once more speculative and rebarbative than are ordinarily countenanced in criticism. Such works highlight the elements of Frame's corpus that have tended to be overlooked in her critical reception, and, as such, bring to our attention some of the most confounding dimensions of the experience of reading her. In turn, I suggest that one of the main issues that literary critics face in receiving Frame is the relation of her writing to concepts of the good, a relation that all too often is preconstituted and inherent to

the critical structures that we have sought to deploy. By drawing on *Daughter Buffalo* (1972), I show how an attention to the perverse and perplexing moments in her work can encourage a reassessment of what we understand the value of her writing to be. Such an attention can also help to undomesticate the oddness of Frame's *oeuvre*, I suggest — a dimension of her literary vision that no doubt continues to compel readers, estranging though that oddness may be.

1. *The Back of His Head*

The three books that comprise Evans's trilogy address slightly distinct topics. Whereas *Gifted* and *Salt Picnic* are more obviously concerned with Frame's textuality (both its seductiveness and difficulty), *The Back of His Head* is interested primarily in the opposition between the peaceable tendencies of official literary culture and the depravity that can lie within and behind literary production.[7] This latter book can be understood as an effort, arising out of a lifetime of reading Frame, to explore the frustrations and resistances of a writer of her nature, and to offer alternative ways of understanding the significance of fiction in our lives.

In the Christchurch of *The Back of His Head*, Evans's local Lawrence — "Raymond Thomas" rather than "David Herbert" — is suffering much the same fate as his English namesake, namely being canonized into a writer who the public may admire. This newly fabricated Lawrence wins the Nobel Prize, in the words of the citation, for "the spontaneity and integrity with which [he] has shown what happens to the European mind far from home, and for his holding before our collective gaze the wretched of the earth" — the latter presumably referencing those whose lives have been deformed by colonial oppression (2015a: 369). Over the course of the book, however, it becomes clear that this major Christchurch writer is an especially poor candidate for celebration by official culture — he is simply too objectionable. Evans described him in an

interview as "charming, certainly, but in the same way that Albert Speer reported Hitler to be charming" (2015b).

The problem for those who wish to celebrate Christchurch's "Lawrence" is that his creativity, such as it is, is linked to depravity rather than any recognizable form of social contribution. In the first half of the novel there is a lengthy discussion between Marjorie, one of the members of Lawrence's literary trust, and Peter Orr, his nephew and adoptive son. Orr is one of the two narrators of the novel, and it is often through his voice that we gain access, albeit indirectly, to the harm that the writer has inflicted on his many hangers-on. Marjorie details how Lawrence took her as a 14-year-old girl to Ibiza and, in her words, "*debauched me in a tiny pine forest near the old cathedral up in Dalt Vila with a donkey watching*" (2015a: 189). Orr then describes the encounter as it plays out in Lawrence's fiction:

> As you'll know, of course, if you've read *Bisque*, that's exactly where Julia loses her innocence in the novel, although the debaucher in the fiction is the charlatan poetaster American whom she meets soon after arrival on the island. The donkey is there, too, and so many of the other things Marjorie claimed to have experienced herself on Ibiza that it's obvious the character has become as much a part of her as she was a part of the character. He made her on that island. He *made* her, and he unmade her as well. (2015a: 189)

Linking fiction to life is the stock in trade of biographers, and Orr voluntarily takes on this role in his efforts at explanation. Even through Orr's voice, though, we see just how inadequate his approach is. Marjorie cuts Orr off to tell him that her adolescent relationship with Lawrence has led her to be unable to form meaningful relationships with men.

As one might expect, it is the adoptive son, Orr, launderer of the great writer's reputation, who has been least able to reckon with the psychic consequences of his cruelty. Orr rejects the idea that his encounter with Lawrence has done any lasting damage: "I *met* [Lawrence] at eleven", he tells Marjorie, "and he did *not* have me". She responds:

> Yes he did! […] Every time he hit you with that bat-thing of his he was having you! It's all about pain and power and humiliation, doesn't that sound like sex to you? (2015a: 202)

Soon Orr recalls the time that Lawrence brought a knife to his adolescent nephew's neck, "trying to trace the tip […], the very tip, into the skin" (2015a: 208). They were bound by a "*lash of love*", he likewise reflects — a formulation that turns out to be yet another rationalization of Lawrence's nastiness, this time as somehow necessary to the writer's art (2015a: 209). "I don't think I've ever been so *close* to anyone in those moments when, somehow, I got something right", Orr says, "except in those moments when I got something wrong" (2015a: 209). The gruesome chapter finally ends with Orr recalling his appraisal to his fellow members of the estate: "*Look where he took us*, I tell them, *He took us to Stockholm*" (2015a: 209). Our cloth-eared narrator seems unable to recognize the other meaning of his words, just audible: Lawrence, Nobel laureate, has made his hostages identify with him.

Lawrence's abuse weighs heavily on how we rationalize the relationship between a writer and his works, which is a central concern of the novel. We see how ideologies of aesthetic autonomy, literary greatness, and national contribution, allow Lawrence's remaining literary family to delude themselves about his violence. Lawrence's readers in the Trust understand both him and his personal conduct through these concepts. Without these justifications, Orr's deformed life is without redemption — which perhaps explains why he clings so closely to them. "I came to understand that if I hadn't accepted the things he made me do and the things he did to me when I first came into his life, I would never have walked with the gods", Orr writes (2015a: 209).

Unfortunately for Orr, though, it also becomes clear that Lawrence's art draws from unacknowledged sources. Late in the book, Orr describes how Lawrence has reworked "into something that comes to seem his own" sections of a novel, *Tangier Buzzless Flies* (1970), by an author named John Hopkins (2015a: 332). Sentences, phrases, and even whole paragraphs have been lifted and to some extent revised from numerous sources. This may be in the nature of literary

invention, Orr thinks, as he begins to experience Lawrence's voice emerging from other writers, too. Certainly, the novel itself shows us how writers are made up of other texts — Lawrence constantly speaks in quotations, a practice that Patricia Neville, for example, has explored in her work on Frame. Here, though, Lawrence's quotations include at least one from Adolf Hitler. Orr and his collaborator destroy the evidence of the great author's misdeeds: "Julian and I burned the books and the notes and the incriminating little scraps of paper, everything the Master's borrowings had come from over thirty or forty years. We gave him back his authenticity" (2015a: 338).

In these moments, Evans is exploring how we can understand the nature and appeal of destructive forces, in both fiction and life. It is Orr himself who best articulates at least the literary side of this. He reflects that one of Lawrence's novels, *Other-people*, is part of the "order of fiction in the world that is […] unforgivable, almost criminal: unreadable, but nevertheless read and reread" (2015a: 294–5). He continues at some length, offering what amounts to a theory of Lawrence's writing. On this view, literature is not redemptive, nor good for any determinate end, but might instead command our attention through the power of its depravity:

> That Jerzy Kosinski novel—I can't even reminder its title but I can remember every moment of the scene where a boy watches a man's eyes being gouged out with a spoon. The scene in which Major Marvy is castrated in *Gravity's Rainbow*. […] Unreadable, and every word of it read and read again. […] So many more as well—and in all of them, genius and evil crouched together in the dung, conspiring, the one thing, inseparable. Hell itself. (2015a: 295)

The sense that a work of fiction might be unreadable and read over and over again is a richer way of understanding literature than the nationalist and ethical languages that have otherwise subtended the discourses of appreciation for Lawrence's fiction, including from Orr. Resistance invites repetition. As such, writing can force us into dark and uncomfortable spaces, "hell itself",

rather than demonstrating better ways of living. *The Back of His Head* might lead us to reflect on how living well with people and appreciating literature's darker possibilities may be two entirely different things — even if this distinction tends to become lost in our accounts of how writers contribute to various worthy causes, and even if official literary culture might be uncomfortable with such thoughts.

By contrast with the newly domesticated Lawrence that Orr desperately seeks to invent, the depraved version of him that we see throughout the novel's pages at least captures the sense of compulsion that underlies literary power and makes a claim on how literary experience can be something other than edifying, constructive, and orientated toward the good. Lawrence wants the creative writing school named in his honour to be opened "in the former men's room" — "*Only place for it!*", he says, "*they should have kept the trough and the stalls*" (2015a: 101). For all its sexism, there is a certain desacralizing power to his description of the social dynamics of right-minded literary culture: "*Brenda* […], *they're all called Brenda and they'll blow anyone who's written a book, man or woman, doesn't make a difference what the book's about, whitebait or sandflies, doesn't matter, as long as it's a book down they go and start sucking, no questions asked, you can hear the joints crack from out on a Korean fishing boat*" (2015a: 183). The outrageous force of this diatribe, with its at once specific and nonsensical account of the physicality of these "Brendas", contrasts with Orr's erstwhile insistence on Lawrence as the national literary deity. "*Fuck* the prizes", Lawrence says at one point, "*the prizes are the problem*" (2015a: 294). Stuffing sausage rolls into his carer's pockets and listening to couples having sex in a car, Lawrence is one of the few in the book who is truly interested in the uncontainable dimensions of experience — the very terrain which we might think is the preserve of literature at its most compelling.

To put this another way: *The Back of Head* is skeptical of how we rationalize literature into accounts of its social contribution. It is not that the novel simply endorses Lawrence's view of the world, in which force of all kinds — literary, physical, and masculine — overwhelms all moral

accounting, and we "*submit to the destructive element*" (2015a: 54). The wreckage from this way of living is all too obvious. Nor does it endorse Orr's view that his own suffering is the price of Lawrence's art — this is mere delusion. But there is nonetheless a power to Lawrence's insistent exploration of masochism that the novel's other idioms cannot access. In one of the book's most remarkable moments, members of the literary estate steal cassette tapes of interviews that Lawrence recorded with an academic, Geneva Trott. Having reclaimed the tapes, one of the estate's Trustees returns and defecates on the living room carpet. "He wanted it to look like kids had done it", another character explains, "breaking in" (2015a: 313). It is here, as members of the trust speculate about who "shat on [Marjorie's] living-room carpet", and consider its meaning, that we are confronted with the true nature of Lawrence's interest and legacy — obscene and excessive, no doubt, yet undeniable in its human dimension (2015a: 312).

In such moments, Evans is clearly reconsidering his own career as a critic, and how he has understood and described literary value. Geneva Trott, the novel's figure of the scholar, is styled as an intruder, the author of an "unauthorised biography" on Lawrence, in which she "simply walked in and helped herself to the great man's life" (2015a: 52). The analyses she offers are creaky yet familiarly those of inapt scholarly paradigms. Her book, in Orr's account, undertakes "meticulously long-distance Freudian psychoanalysis, which made so much of the various ties, walking sticks, telephone poles and tall trees in Raymond's *oeuvre*, not to mention the occasional cupboard or cave" (2015a: 120). Other writing on Lawrence seems equally deluded: "Raymond Lawrence and Rainer Maria Rilke, Raymond Lawrence and the Holocaust" (2015a: 136). All of this — the biography and the various articles — describes, of course, Evan's own writing on Janet Frame, from his 1977 life and works book to his last publications in scholarly journals (1977, 2010b, 2011a). When the novel finishes with an encyclopaedia entry written in Olympian academic style by Trott on Lawrence, Evans directs us to his sense that he had failed to go beyond the self-assured patter of academic discourse and confront the writer and her legacies. If we want to

understand an author's significance, he seems to be saying in his fiction, we need to turn away from official culture and look towards the excrement that has been left lying on the carpet.

2. Redemption

In the opening of this essay, I cited Evans's sense that across his career, Frame's work continued to elude him. His struggles with her fiction return to his earliest works of criticism, when he sought to understand her as a national writer in the context of the Twayne World Authors Series. Later, he would seek more unusual critical registers, exploring, through Rilke's poetry and the work of translator and critic Irving Massey, what he sees as the "magical, transformative quality she always gives to words in her memories of her earlier years" (2010b: 69). Evans, at least in his view, was much like the many academic and literary speakers of *The Back of His Head*, as he struggled to make progress with Frame's fiction. The novel generalizes this experience to reflect on the limits of criticism and the encounter a reader has with a powerful writer.[8]

Evans is not alone in suggesting that Frame frustrates the categories through which we might ordinarily read a novelist from the mid-to-late twentieth century. In *The Frame Function*, Jan Cronin argues that there is an "authorial presence" at play across Frame's corpus, one that produces a "dynamic between prescriptiveness and elusiveness […] (i.e. the way the work seems to 'lay down rules for its usage', while the 'whole' continues to elude us)" (2011: 1). Frame's writing encourages us to search for "answers and solutions", Cronin suggests, a search which, were we to undertake it, would be at odds with the tendency in literary scholarship to sideline strong intentionalist arguments (2011: 16). Her reading is carefully balanced between two invidious poles: making Frame the adjunct to political or ethical projects not endorsed by the texts, or, by mainly following the internal dynamics of Frame's writing, failing to give an account of why others might

be interested in it. Yet that is not to say that Cronin necessarily emerges with a satisfactory account of the public significance of Frame's writing. Frame is ultimately more interested in "*how* a text works" than she is in "*what* it says", Cronin concludes, a practice which is in tension with the "humanist" project that the author sometimes advances — and which critics tend to value (2011: 170).

Cronin's approach is a welcome corrective to longstanding efforts to annex Frame's writing to various social causes, ones with which her writing might be awkwardly aligned. Such efforts in fact return to the earliest reception of her work. Frank Sargeson in his review of *The Lagoon* (1951), for example, used Frame's short stories to offer a critique of national culture: she is helping to "diminish the vast region of darkness by which we are all surrounded", he wrote (1983: 66–7). More recently, scholars have linked Frame with migration, utopianism, and Levinasian concepts of the good beyond being, among other ideas (Delrez, 2002; Drichel, 2009; Michell, 2009). Such approaches suggest in their various ways that by reading Frame we will become better citizens, newly receptive, more ethical, and attuned to forms of political struggle. These modes of reading are not limited to Frame, of course, but are rather part of a tendency in literary criticism to use the authors we admire to advance political and ethical arguments we endorse.

The bulk of attention that has been paid to political and ethical development in Frame's work has tended to limit our understanding to how her literary art can be profoundly disturbing — how it might be interested in leading us, as Evans has it in *The Back of His Head*, into "hell itself." In Leo Bersani's classic formulation in *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), the view that art may correct for misshapen life, or compensate for historical catastrophe, reduces art to "a kind of superior patching function", and is "enslaved to those very materials to which it presumably imparts value" (1990: 1). What Cronin calls Frame's "humanist concerns" — which include "marginality, displacement, [and] identity" — have understandably occupied scholars (2011: 199). But the crucial problem remains that Frame's interests and technique, as Cronin notes, often

undermine the commitment of her writing to those concerns, or at least to relativize them in some way. Indeed, it may well have been a surprise to Frame to discover that her fiction could contribute to a renewed ethics of openness and plurality given her avowed desire — which I think we must take seriously — to use her autobiographical writing to address what she saw as misapprehensions about her. "I wanted to write my story", she told Elizabeth Alley in 1983, "and you're right of course, it is possibly to correct some things which have been taken as fact but are not fact" (2011: 114).

For Evans in *The Back of His Head*, the crucial question is how we can understand those dimensions of Frame's work that do not contribute to public flourishing but nonetheless lay claim on us. C. K. Stead found himself provoked by this idea when he wrote in a review of *The Back of His Head* that he was disturbed by the darkness of the novel. "There is something so dingy about it", he concluded, while the end of the book, which includes some of Lawrence's writing, he said he "did not understand at all" (2015). The very dinginess of Evans's fiction, I am suggesting, enables us to get beyond an impasse in the reception of Frame's work: her tendency not only to demote humanist concerns but also to focus on experiences that seem irredeemable.

In a recent book on J. M. Coetzee, John Bolin explores the many ways that this remarkable writer, whose work has been the subject of innumerable critical readings emphasizing his moral and political thinking, is also motivated by contrary impulses, which can include the sadistic, spaces out of time, or what Coetzee himself has termed "moral blankness" (qtd. in Bolin, 2023: 1; Coetzee, 1992: 79). Bolin concludes his reading of *Foe* (1986), for example, by suggesting that the book's unusual ending intimates "that our capacity for encountering the other may be limited especially by and within the novel" (2023: 138). Rather than "summon[ing] alterity", Coetzee points us back to textual conditions of one form or another, in particular those that pertain to the "writing self", which has no such capability and is distinctly limited (2023: 138). Likewise, Bolin notes that Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965) — referenced by Evans in *The Back of His Head* —

"left a lasting imprint" on *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), as Coetzee sought "a double movement whereby, even as he searches for the truth, the Magistrate encounters an equally powerful resistance within himself to finding it" (2023: 66). "Bafflement" hence becomes a key term: "the failure of meaning to arrive in the face of a desire for that meaning that is too confused, ambivalent, or tainted to resolve or even to recognize itself" (2023: 66). Such thoughts reverse the general tendency in readings of Coetzee to find that his ethical treatment of figures of alterity gives political value to the novel; instead, the novel itself becomes an archive of desire, including the perverse desire to transgress.

I have something similar in mind here, as I explore Frame's attraction to forms of blankness, nightmarish visions, and oblivion. These interests are visible not only in the apocalyptic endings that populate Frame's middle fictions, with their bearing toward death, but also in what Bolin describes in Coetzee's work as "an unending series of obscene relations" (2023: 81). Frame continually sharpens her attention to such relations, which are fundamentally tainted — at times by history, but also at others by confounding and distorted desires. The approach I take here should encourage us to reassess how claims to the value of Frame's political vision have been obscurely tied to claims as to why she is an important writer — an approach that I argue shrinks before the most challenging elements of Frame's fiction, its darkest places. This is ultimately the Frame who is yet to be accounted for in criticism.

3. *Daughter Buffalo*

Of all Frame's writing, *Daughter Buffalo* (1972) is perhaps the most explicitly interested in objectionable encounters and forms of distorted intimacy. At the novel's heart is the relationship between Talbot Edelman, "medical graduate" and self-professed "student of death", and

Turnlung, an aged poet from New Zealand (1973: 5). As Cronin suggests, *Daughter Buffalo* "continually announces its status as a theoretical venture into death", but in a way that tends to withdraw any actual elaboration of that theory (2011: 83). The manifest content of the book is a series of reflections on death that draw loosely from sources including Freud and Plato, among others (see Cronin, 2011: 88). Instead of developing these thoughts, though, the novel offers speculative "rehearsals (positive and negative versions) of the same scenarios" (2011: 83). We may "arrange these various terms and concepts into patterns of meanings", Cronin continues, but doing so would make the book both "appear curiously arcane" and even "posit the text as not simply elusive but as a private enterprise" (2011: 83).

Despite the challenges *Daughter Buffalo* presents for ethical readings, this has not has not stopped critics from trying. Marc Delrez, for example, rather sanguinely suggests that the novel "tries to penetrate the bewilderment that sometimes accompanies old age" (2002: 70). He shows how Frame is exploring metaphors and practices of composition through a certain practice of recycling. He calls this interest a "reciprocity of imagining", as Frame uses fiction "as an instrument of exploration and retrieval" (which in this novel "now turns upon itself") (2002: 73). Such an approach is fine so far as it goes, but, on my view at least, misses the remarkable sadism that permeates and even structures the novel — it runs the considerable risk of banalizing a work that does not wish to serve our ethical needs.[9] It is in this spirit that Lydia Wevers notes in a review of Delrez's *Manifold Utopia* that "most of Frame's characters who attempt an alternative vision become speechless, or die": there is clearly something in Frame's literary imagination that is as interested in punishment and proscription as it is in opening up alternative moral universes (Wevers, 2003: 183).

In *Daughter Buffalo*, it is Edelman who is the locus of such explorations. He performs unnecessary operations on his dog, Sally, which eventually leads to her death. As he recalls: "That final semester, before Grandfather died, I spent all my time with the brains and with my dog Sally

who had survived almost every medical and surgical treatment including the removal of one eye. I brought her to live with me in my apartment after I performed a gall bladder operation on her" (1973: 13). Edelman tells his girlfriend, Lenore, that he can "operate more readily on her in her role of familiar pet than on an unfamiliar dog, as Sally had always showed her trust in me" (1973: 17). The chapter ends with Sally watching Lenore and Edelman having sex "with her one eye" (1973: 18). Later in the novel, Edelman reflects on what he has done to his dog:

> I had changed her, broken her bones, mutilated her, transplanted her, stolen half her quota of breath by collapsing one lung. I did everything to her, except make love. I even removed her ovaries. I tampered with her. That's the word. Tampered, made corrupting changes. (1973: 141)

This is quite the litany, for which Edelman is indeed responsible. Turnlung notes that Edelman has "mutilated" Sally as well as "tuned her toward her death" — a proposition which Edelman accepts (1973: 141). He has never "made love to her", Edelman confirms (1973: 141). Before we think too highly of this, though, he adds that he does "have fantasies, at times, of penetrating, not always in the habitual places" (1973: 141).

Evans himself has suggested there is a connection between these materials and the Shoah, and in particular to the mutilation of children and adults at the hands of Josef Mengele and other Nazi physicians (See Evans, 2011b: 96–97). Lenore, we note, is the daughter of "a Nazi official during the Second World War", specifically a doctor (Frame, 1973: 16, 130), while Edelman is from a Jewish family (his father "had been brought up in a Jewish ghetto in Brooklyn" (1973: 8)). On the same page that Edelman reflects on what he "had heard of the concentration camps" and "what my race experienced", Sally has a fit, which we know to be a consequence of her owner's macabre treatment of her (1973: 127). While thinking about shopping, Edelman recalls how "time and motion studies" had been "put into effect to enable an inmate [of concentration camps] to go from one place fully clothed" and "arrive at the end-place with nothing, yet with an economic

completeness for death" (1973: 127). He reflects that it is a "miracle" that Sally "had lived so long, especially after the strain of the cardiology experiments" (Frame, 1973: 127). While all of this is taking place, Edelman's mind is turned to the "abortion brains" that he carries in a "plastic bag" (1973: 126).

Frame in these passages, after a fashion at least, is engaging with Holocaust historiography. Her reference to "time and motion studies" highlights the Taylorist dimensions of Holocaust perpetration, the idea that industrial modernity saw its ultimate manifestation in the gas chambers of the death camps. This view was in vogue around this time, in particular as a consequence of the work of Herbert Marcuse, who in the widely influential *Eros and Civilization* (1955) linked concentration camps, killing fields, and the like, with technological advancement (rather than barbarism).[10] Nazi experiments on prisoners, including the murder of twins and studies on inmates involving low pressure, seawater, and infection, were on this view part of the same guiding rationality. Frame's term to describe where Edelman's father comes from, "Jewish ghetto", is carefully chosen, as it seems to recall the Jewish ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe, which were then recent history, rather than the more ordinary language one may use to describe the Jewish community of New York City.[11]

These are remarkably unsettling passages, however, not so much because of their subject matter but because of how she inverts moral positions. At their heart is a kind of mirroring: it is the *Jewish* character who becomes a Mengele figure, as he plays out camp dynamics on his own dog. In the tightly connected passages that move between what Edelman's "race" has experienced and his depraved treatment of Sally, the possible victim becomes the actual perpetrator. This inversion is clearly a strategy of Frame's, as she insistently represents a connection between sadism and Edelman's capacity to care. As he leans down to check Sally's pulse, for example, his "penis cocked its head, as if listening" (1973: 127). In these moments we are confronted with uncomfortable reflections: to what extent can we really licence Frame's representation of a Jewish

character becoming the perpetrator of a violence that is clearly meant to be a re-enactment of Nazi experiments on victims of the Shoah? What does Frame offer us in her writing to reckon more deeply with the ethically challenging materials she is presenting? The resistance that we experience in such thoughts is inseparable from the wider array of textual effects in Frame's work, ones which critics often want to find meliorative, but which in fact often dramatically transgress normative values.

Generously, we may wonder if Frame is writing against the dominant tendency in post-Holocaust film and literature to sentimentalize victims of Nazi crimes for the purposes of a redemption narrative. Cynthia Ozick famously described the emblematic achievement of Holocaust writing, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, as a work in which "the end is missing" — it is celebrated, in part, for how it promotes seemingly universal humane values (1997: 78). The book, she writes, has been "bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; it has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized; falsified, kitschified, and, in fact, arrogantly denied" (1997: 78). There is still something of a prohibition on representations of Jewish rage about the Shoah, even if works such as Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970), in which a survivor comes to life only when he shoots a Nazi soldier in the head, or popular films such as Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), which centres on reprisals against Nazi soldiers, have sought to unrepress sources of Jewish anger. What makes Frame's treatment different, and harder to reckon with, is that the fantasy spaces she explores show a taint that result in Edelman becoming Mengele. It is not that the survivor comes to life in his anger, then, but that a Jewish American comes to life as a Nazi doctor. These are profoundly different matters.

While these passages may represent the most extreme of the risks that Frame takes in the novel, they are part of what we might think of as a more general strategy of extremity or gratuitousness. Sally's pain, for example, keeps awfully intruding: "she had not been able to walk quickly or to run since I broke and reset her two hind legs", Edelman says (1973: 82). For no

reason that is easy to discern, while in a men's room Turnlung and Edelman glance "down at each other like two schoolboys making the important comparison" (1973: 114). Someone keeps farting as Turnlung sits on a bus, and the smell spreads (1973: 99). Lenore is working with "sexually unfinished children", a project that recalls the work of Frame's first psychologist, John Money, but also has its own dark resonance (1973: 16). Dogs get stuck together after having sex: "when they had been together about an hour and a half and were obviously struggling to separate, we stopped joking and became alarmed" (1973: 57). Edelman reflects that he likes to "stare at the animals" and "surprise them in the midst of sex" (1973: 112). And seals are said to be like "human mongols with their plump appearance, tight-fitting skin and small eyes, and their frank expressions of pleasure" (1973: 113).

I want to be clear: my interest is not to proscribe the strangeness of this fiction, nor indeed to offer a moral criticism that simply inverts existing positions, but rather to note how insistent the novel is in its efforts to force us to encounter depravity, and, at the same time, how seldom such moments have truly been part of our critical purview. *Daughter Buffalo* presents material that feels strange and wildly unsettling, subjecting us over and over to things that we do wish to encounter, while at the same time not developing them into fully fleshed out ethical or historical examinations. These moments remain blank spots in Frame's reception. It is as though turning our attention to them would undo our erstwhile efforts to find in her fiction something of value for a wider public. It should be recalled that what is attended to and what is not is a key concept for Frame; we might think that Edelman's Nazi enactments have not become part of the critical manifold. To force such materials into a literary-ethical framework, in which Frame's more troubling strategies engender ethical consideration, is to refuse them in favour of our own acts of critical domestication. The fantasy spaces of the novel offer a ready supply of objectionable materials, ones that are anything but utopian, but we have not yet figured out what to do with them. Indeed, we have barely acknowledged their existence.

Frame herself never really had a developed response. *Daughter Buffalo* ends with a severing of communication and new forms of isolation. Edelman's parents die in a car crash, and he cannot contact Turnlung, the reality of whose existence becomes ever more doubtful after his death. There is also a series of references to a painting that belonged to Edelman's father, "Noon", which Turnlung is now living in. To understand what Frame has been up to throughout the novel, with her insistence that we endure representations of the worst of human depravity, requires a mode of reading that is less interested in the good and more willing to countenance the kinds of experiences that Evans describes in *The Back of His Head*. That is, that we have to follow her into "hell itself."

4. Conclusion

Frame criticism is now entering a new era. The publication of posthumous and archival materials promises a proximity to her life and circle of readers that was not possible in her lifetime. *In the Memorial Room* (2013), for example, is the subject of an exciting new reading in this issue by Janet Wilson. Elleke Boehmer has made extensive use of *Towards Another Summer* (2007) in her work, both in her article in this issue and in her forthcoming book. Both of Frame's posthumous novels also helped me to understand *The Adaptable Man* (1965) and *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) in my own writing. Meanwhile, the opening up of the Frame papers at the Hocken Library is giving scholars the opportunity to access her archive — even if there remains the issue of gaining permission to quote from previously unpublished material.

As we reimagine Frame for a new generation of readers, I am suggesting that we can better attend to the dimensions of Frame's writing that have long eluded our attention. Evans's turn to fiction in the 2010s emerged in part out of a frustration with what he felt he had not been able to achieve as a critic. His creative reimaginations of scenarios from Frame's life and his own

experiences of reading has allowed him to make account of the effect her writing has had on him. Reading Evans in the terms that I have offered also encourages us to refocus on Frame's writing, as we seek not new structures of interpretation, but, old-fashioned as it may sound, creative ways of letting the deep challenge of her texts be heard. If sometimes Frame's fiction may not say the kind of thing that we want to hear, reading in these terms at least entails a confrontation with her distinctive textuality — its rebarbative capabilities, its presentation of fantasy and darkness. It makes Frame a more interesting writer, even if not necessarily a better one.

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[1] The miniseries/film has also received significant scholarly attention. See: Fox, 2011: 88–106; McHugh, 2007: 65–78; Polan, 2001.

[2] The *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* featured a "special section" of three articles in 2015. A 2011 issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (33.2, eds. Lorre and Dvorak) focused on Frame's short fiction.
[3] See *Janet Frame in Focus* (ed. McQuail; McFarland, 2018), and *Frameworks: Contemporary Criticism on Janet Frame* (ed. Cronin and Drichel; Brill, 2009).
[4] A sample of these include: Judith Dell Panny's *I Have What I Gave* (1994) and Gina Mercer's *Subversive Fictions* (1994) in the 1990s; Marc Delrez's *Manifold Utopia* (2002) and Simone Oettli-van Delden's *Surfaces of Strangeness* (2003) in the 2000s; and Jan Cronin's *The Frame Function* (2011), Paul Matthew St. Pierre *Janet Frame: Semiotics and Biosemiotics in Her Early Fiction* (2011), and Patricia Neville's *Janet Frame's World of Books* (2019) in the 2010s.
[5] See: Evans, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b.
[6] I have written about this elsewhere. See Dean, 2021: 71–115.
[7] Evans's interest in the relationship between official culture and depravity in literature clearly ranges beyond Frame's corpus. He has noted, for example, how the protagonist of *The Back of His Head* can be connected with mid-century New Zealand writers, such as James K. Baxter (Evans, 2015b).
[8] It should be noted that this is not Evans's only approach in his fiction to the legacies of Frame. In *Gifted*, he portrays a "Janet" figure who is able to reconnect alienated forms of language to things themselves. In the Author's Note, he writes that "Frame's use of Rilke's theory of language, and particularly of naming, is at the core of the novel" (2010a: 351). In that spirit, the book shows various examples of the world of language finding its way unexpectedly into the world of things. The novel finishes with a hawk – perhaps one of Frame's "kind hawks" she has been invoking throughout – taking flight. "Released from Janet's words it hung above us in truth and fact, watching us, being watched, looking out for things, ready to take over and in turn be overtaken", the Frank character writes (2010a: 348–9). For Evans at this moment, Frame is teaching us something about the world, whereby the division of experience under modernity (what Hegel calls "diremption") is undone in language's capability to find its way into the world. This is not a register of thought that is recognizable in the more skeptical mode of literary criticism, but it is nonetheless a way of conceiving of ourselves in language that is present in *Gifted* and *Salt Picnic* in particular.
[9] Vincent O'Sullivan has described what he calls Frame's 'aesthetic sadism' in *Owls Do Cry* (1957). See O'Sullivan, 1992: 27.
[10] I am indebted to Patrick Hayes for highlighting this point, in a forthcoming article on J. M. Coetzee's novel *Dusklands* (1974).
[11] Note that the term 'ghetto' has a long history that predates National Socialism by many centuries. For more on the term, see Schwartz, 2019.