

JANET FRAME'S FICTIONS: MADNESS AND THE SUBJECT OF WRITING IN THE NARRATION OF WOMEN'S LIVES

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ABSTRACT

There is a certain resistance to engage in the discourse of and about madness and woman, and we have to wait until feminist criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s opens up a space where theorization and social and critical debate may arise. My essay is an attempt to examine in what way madness does account for what we call literature and what is the relation between women and madness in our reading of contemporary texts. This paper aims at rethinking women's madness approaching a selection of Janet Frame's fictions, especially her two novels, *Faces in the Water* (1961) and *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1963). Both narratives pose several crucial questions such as the relationship of silence to confinement, death and madness, the subject's acquisition of existential guilt, and the characters' interrelations within an Oedipal configuration. After a retreat into silence, tropes, images and symbols all seem to contribute to Frame's breaking through the wall of language to finally discover that it opens into darkness. And what is the oracular message of woman in these narratives where madness is so poignantly thematized?

If this subjectivity of the insane is both a call to and an abandonment of the world, is it not of the world itself that we should ask the secret of its enigmatic status? Is there not in mental illness a whole nucleus of significations that belongs to the domain in which it appeared —and to begin with, the simple fact that it is circumscribed as an illness?

Michel Foucault, *Mental Illness and Psychology*

COMING TO MADNESS

On a first reading we find in Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* (1961) the thematization of a certain discourse about madness, which asserts madness as the meaning of the text, as the fundamental question of the text. This paper attempts to examine in what way madness does account for what we call literature and what is the relation between women and madness in our reading of contemporary texts.

Discourse about madness is a way of saying "I" —identifying with the first person and claiming thus to be exceptional, to have a history of one's own— or a way of saying "(s)he", of projecting madness outside and locating it in the Other. This is precisely the dialectics whose movement and strategies we will attempt to delineate and characterize in the text of narration and in (auto)biography, in the project of writing a woman's life.

Janet Frame is one of New Zealand's most prestigious contemporary writers. She is best known for her stunning autobiography *To the Is-Land* (1982), *An Angel at My Table* (1984), and *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1985). Frame was born in Dunedin in 1924, the third of five children (four girls and one boy). While she was in high school, in the summer of 1937, her elder sister Myrtle drowned, perhaps after a heart seizure. In 1942 Janet took a two-year course at Dunedin Teachers' College as preparation for teaching in an elementary school. She began teaching in 1944 but did not stay long at it. She then earned her living in a variety of occasional jobs and started to write stories that were later to be published in *The Lagoon*. In 1947 her younger sister Isabel drowned in circumstances similar to those in which Myrtle had drowned ten years before. Janet was overwhelmed by the repetition of the family tragedy, and not much later she entered first Seacliff and then Avondale mental hospitals, where she remained almost eight years. Her biography has been marked by these periods of internship in psychiatric hospitals after being diagnosed of schizophrenia, diagnosis that later was considered a doctors' mistake. Her experiences there form the basis of Istina Mavet's experiences in *Faces in the Water*.

After leaving hospital and moving for one year to the outskirts of Auckland where she devoted herself to writing, she won a State Literary Fund grant to travel overseas. She left New Zealand in late 1956 and did not return until the end of 1963. These years were the most productive of her writing career. In a relatively short period of time she wrote *Faces in the Water*, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, all the stories in her collections *The Reservoir* and *Snowman*, *Snowman*, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, and *The Adaptable Man*.

Faces in the Water (1961) is a narrative about woman and madness, about confinement in mental institutions, about the fear the 'sane' have of the 'mad' and the ways in which that fear operates separation and reaction on the side of those exercising power. On the front page of *Faces in the Water* (1961), there is an epigraph that runs as follows: "Although this book is written in documentary form it is a work of fiction. None of the characters, including Istina Mavet, portrays a living person". It is nonetheless quite obvious that Janet Frame's long and traumatic experiences in mental institutions are present and woven into her narrative. Istina, the protagonist of *FiW*, declares most likely as Frame's *alter ego*, "I didn't feel ill; but I was afraid" (75).

Linking reading and writing as therapeutic processes, the narration of women's lives, madness, and the history of social exclusionary practices in the West, we will

attempt to rethink women's madness approaching Janet Frame's *FiW* (1961) and *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1964).

In *Writing and Madness* (1985) Shoshana Felman states: "But even though the discourse on madness is not a discourse of madness (is not strictly speaking a mad discourse), nevertheless there still exists in these texts a *madness that speaks*, a madness that is acted out in language, but whose role no speaking subject can assume" (252) She speaks of a rhetorics of madness that can be grasped through the metaphor of the *madness* of the text. Although as early as 1977 Felman was writing, "[S]exuality is rhetoric, since it essentially consists of ambiguity(...) Sexuality is the *division and divisiveness of meaning*," (112), a considerable shift can be appreciated in her last book (1993) when she attempts to read sexual difference taking a feminist stance and understanding feminism, "as a bond of reading: a bond of reading that engenders, in some ways, the writer.." (12), from a position she defines of *becoming* (somewhat interminably) a woman and *becoming* a feminist. In this last work, Felman is interested in the question of autobiography, in "reading autobiographically", and drawing from Adrienne Rich's idea of revision—"...for women more than a chapter in cultural history...an act of survival" (1979)— she underlines the fact that "[S]urvival is, profoundly, a form of autobiography" (13).

Gilbert & Gubar's classic formulation in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) clearly establishes the way nineteenth century women writers confronted a largely hostile patriarchal culture by telling a different story—a woman's story—beneath the apparently conforming surface of women's narratives. They analyse the sense of anxiety and the debilitation and distortion imposed on women's literary productivity by masculine insistence that artistic creativity is male, while female writing was linked to pathology and madness. Gilbert & Gubar thus notice that:

As we explore nineteenth-century literature, we will find that this madness emerges over and over again from the mirrors women writers hold up both to their own natures and to their own visions of nature. Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all patriarchal structures which both their authors and their author's submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatise their own self-division, their desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them. (77-8)

In *FiW*, Frame presents us with the fact that the doctor's (patriarchal) authority was much greater than that of the lawyers, civil authorities or asylum keepers because they possessed the ability to "cure"—the *truth* about their patients was in their hands. This doctor/patient relationship was unsymmetrical. From the patient's point of view, the doctor became what Michel Foucault has called a "thaumaturge". It is striking that the dichotomy Reason/Madness, as well as Speech/Silence, exactly coincides in *FiW* with the dichotomy Men/Women. Women as such are associated both with madness and with silence, whereas men (doctors) are identified with the prerogatives of discourse and of reason. In fact, men appear not only as the possessors, but also as the dispensers of reason which they can at will give to, or take away from, others.

Thus, on part three of the novel, during the episode of the patients' dancing, Istina feels surveyed by Dr. Steward:

There's Dr. Steward, he's watching me, he's seeing that someone has asked me to dance, that I'm not a wallflower, he's seeing that I'm well, that I needn't be in Ward Two spending all day shut in the dayroom or the yard or the park; he's deciding about me. Deciding now. (190)

Only with Freud does the patient-doctor couple itself become the object of therapeutic interest, mainly through the concepts of transference and counter-transference, by which the doctor-patient relationship repeats—or better re-enacts—a version of the events that caused the patient's trauma. Freud completed the long task of taking madness out of confinement, but he did so only by exploiting to its maximum the image of therapist as thaumaturge. The psychoanalyst who listens silently becomes “the mirror in which madness, in an almost motionless movement clings to and casts off itself” (Foucault 278) But the psychoanalyst cannot “liberate” or “explain” what is essential to *déraison*. For Foucault, it “flashes forth” only in the literary counter-canon, in Hölderlin, Nerval, Nietzsche, Artaud.

Foucault's early ideas in *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1962) and *Madness and Civilization* (1961) are an inexcusable pretext to reflect upon these issues. His history of madness is a history both of the way madness is defined and produced within society and of madness itself as an “experience” which precedes its “significations”, that is, the signs by which it is recognized by history. Foucault's work tells of a huge division acted out in the modern history of Western culture—the split between reason and its other, madness.

In *Madness and Civilization*, he sets forth his views on the transformation of *la folie* into *la déraison* that will be important for our argument. This shift is more or less coincident with the great confinement of the insane that comes after the Renaissance, over *l'âge classique* of European historiography. He argues that the great confinement is basically a result of economic circumstances—the seventeenth century being a period of special economic severity in which leading people massively off the streets into institutions was a means of dealing with the long depression, both by constraining them and by attempting to inculcate them with economically productive habits.

According to Foucault, since the seventeenth century madness has taken the form of *déraison* in the West. Once the subject of reason (that of androcentric Cartesian rationalism, “I think therefore I am”) can no longer communicate with madness, *la folie* (madness) becomes *la déraison* (non reason) There is an “I” who is reasonable and knows *himself* not to be mad. And after Descartes the oppositional hierarchy by which the rational is placed against the non rational or the “mad” tends to replace the older moral and religious oppositions, good versus evil, redemption versus guilt.

Foucault's notion of *unreason* will necessarily bring us to consider the shift from *folie* into *déraison* and its connections with literature. The long story of madness is deeply embedded in the history of literature. As literary *déraison*, madness contests humanism; it drags the human away from the centre of the world picture. It is an adversary of the *Enlightenment*. *Déraison* stays inside and outside of history, remaining in the shadows of that light of classical Reason which illuminates the development of *mankind*.

There is a whole tradition of writers that keep some memory of the tragic meaning of madness alive in which women are rarely (or never) mentioned with their own names, even though paradoxically they have a pervasive presence in history, critical theory and literature. Women writers and their texts remain, in this respect, unnamable.

The production of madness from the split between Reason and its Other, resonates with the production of Woman in the binary opposition of Man and its Other, Culture and its Other, Light and its Other. In the wake of the events of May 1968 and the nascent *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément decisively contributed to the social and philosophical debate about women and feminism(s) co-authoring *La Jeune Née* (1975), in which they added an indispensable, and yet thus far, unwritten volume to the history of women and madness.

Cixous and Clément reminded us in their book that the roles of sorceress and hysteric, traditionally assigned to the female sex, are also inextricably bound to evil and madness. We tend to forget that there were thousands of sorceresses burned throughout Europe for which the ecclesiastical power was legally responsible. As regards the hysteric, Clément writes, "The history of the hysteric, several centuries later, takes place in half-confinement; the hysteric, dolefully reclining, tended and surrounded by doctors and worried family, is a prisoner inside the family; or else, in crisis, she bears the brunt of producing a medical spectacle" (8).

Referring to both of these *mad* figures, Clément states,

She is innocent, mad, full of badly remembered memories, guilty of unknown wrongs; she is the seductress, the heiress of all generic Eves. Both sorceress and hysteric, in their way, mark the end of a type (...) It is the demonic figure that comes to its end with the sorceress — the end sanctioned by the group in death by fire. The "matrix" alienation, that which fixes the guilt of reproduction on the ill female organs, comes to term with the hysteric (...) Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is that zone we must try to remember *today*. (6)

In her brilliant introduction to *La Jeune Née*, Sandra Gilbert reminds us of a few memorable names of women who were considered ill, anomalous, or deeply disturbed back into history,

The illness or "anomaly" of womanhood in a culture governed by the invisible but many-legged tarantula of patriarchal law takes multiple forms, but its one energy derives from the singular return of the repressed. Dora (...) is simply a little witch. Speaking in tongues, hallucinating, gagging, accusing Breuer of illicit paternity, Anna O. is another witchy woman. And [Emily] Dickinson too (...) isn't she a bit like a witch? Even as she transforms herself into an "it", "it" cries in her: seeking refuge in writing, she finds a place where as Cixous says "it writes itself...it dreams...it invents new worlds. (XII)

If, as art comes closer to madness, the modern world is, in Foucault's words, "arraigned by the work of art" (288) madness itself remains too disruptive, too other, to be framed within art: "where there is a work of art, there is no madness" (288-9).

Faces in the Water is the narrative of Istina Mavet's internment in psychiatric hospitals over a period of several years. Istina was formerly a teacher of literature who now tries to find reasons for her internment in Cliffhaven, a quasi Victorian asylum where patients are massively treated with electroshock and lobotomies practiced, "I was put in hospital because a great gap opened in the ice floe between myself and the other people whom I watched, (...) I was alone on the ice (...) I was not yet civilized; I traded my safety for the glass beads of fantasy" (10-11) Facing patients, treatment is many times used as a repressive instrument in the hands of an implacable staff, and dread is the rule, "And the fear leads in some patients to more madness" (23) In those days, "[T]here was no voluntary admission; we were all insane under the Mental Defectives' Act, 1928" (43).

FiW traces the evolution of psychiatric institutions, from "mental hospitals", to "psychiatric units" (72) In her narrative, Janet Frame launches a devastating critique against the methods of traditional psychiatry, especially in those days when there was no treatment for women—as occurs in the case of Hillsie, most likely a case of puerperal psychosis (72)—, especially for poor women and men who could not support themselves or pay for their treatments outside the asylum. Frame's picture of doctors, therapists, nurses and the rest of staff verges on the inhuman.

The structure of Cliffhaven is organized in different wards according to the severity of the illness of their patients (disturbed, very mentally disturbed...) Both Cliffhaven and Treecroft—the second asylum where Istina finds herself in the second part of the novel— appear as inexpugnable fortresses where one could never run away from. There, Istina loses the sense of time (37) and even the sense of her own identity, "I did not know my own identity. I was burgled of body and hung in the sky like a woman of straw" (65).

To Istina's demand for recognition (on the part of her family and some other characters like Sister Bridge and Doctor Portman) and for the restoration of identity through language, through the authority of proper names, she opposes, in the figure of her madness, the dislocation of any communicative language, of "propriety" as such, of any correspondence or transparency joining "names" to "things", the opacity of a lost signifier unmatched by any signified, the pure recurrent difference of a word detached from both its meaning and its context. "I knew the mad language which created with words, without using reason, has a new shape of reason; as the blind fashion from touch an effective shape of the sight denied them" (107).

The "tarantella of theory" that gives title to Sandra Gilbert's introduction to *La Jeune Née* is taken from Catherine Clément's extraordinary tale of women in the Italian Mezzogiorno who can be cured of imaginary spider bites only by doing a ceremonial dance, the *tarantella*. This dance sometimes lasts for twenty-four hours. At the end of this woman's *mad* dancing, she transcends "the divine bite" and "leave[s] the risk behind...to settle down again under a roof, in a house, in the family circle of kinship and madness...the men's world" (Clément 22). To this, S. Gilbert adds, "But she has had her interlude of orgasmic freedom" (XI).

This "tarantella" is also present in *FiW* in a troubling and painful episode that Istina contemplates. Her distant gaze liberates her from being subsumed into the frenzy of *clinical* madness:

I watched from the special table, as from a seat in a concert hall, the raging mass of people performing their violent orchestration of unreason that seemed

like a new kind of music of curse and cry with the undertone of silence flowing from the quiet ones, the curled-up, immovable and nameless; and the movement was a ballet, and the choreographer was Insanity; and the whole room seemed like a microfilm of atoms in prison dress revolving and voyaging, if that were possible, in search of their lost nucleus. (90)

In *FiW* there is an immense gallery of mad women of all ages. Many of them will die in the institution. There, “The mortuary is faceless (...) and begs that patients conform to the rule of loneliness by dying one at a time” (34).

With respect to the woman’s madness, man’s reason reacts by trying to appropriate it: in the first place, by claiming to “understand” it, but with an external understanding that reduces the madwoman to a spectacle, to an *object* that can be known and possessed. To analyse and explore in order to “know”; to “tame” in order to “cure”: such are the methods used by masculine reason so as to *objectify* feminine madness, and thereby to master it.

In *FiW*, Istina Mavet’s personal madness swallows her life, coming from nowhere, compelling her to write and threatening the “sense” of her writings but also disappearing in her writing. Nonetheless, as the constant threat of her moment of collapse, madness grants her story its force of contestation. By the end of the story, Istina finally becomes a subject through the therapy of her reading—she keeps her copy of Shakespeare (113)—and writing. By writing what she calls her “document” (254), she tries to follow the advice of one of her nurses, “when you leave hospital you must forget all you have ever seen, put it out of your mind completely as if it never happened” (258).

Finally, one of the tasks of feminist criticism, when analyzing *mad* literary works, is to insist upon the importance of the writers’ lives and upon the disappearance of lived madness in its written expression. We should bear in mind the historical construction and control of *madness* as a social signifier and as a way of acting and thinking. It is crucial to be aware that to treat madness as a literary *topos* rather than as a sociohistorical event, would perpetuate women’s exclusion from the sphere of a Symbolic that opposes Reason to an Unreason that has no name, that inflicts a violence and a suffering that has no name, bearing only the mark of an absence. Insignificant and yet the most significant of it all.

MYTHS OF LANGUAGE

Madness is only Open Day in the factory of the mind *SGfB*, 160.

It is a delicate matter to choose one’s boundaries of words *SGfB*, 177.

We have asked so many things and people to speak for us—like the waves, we knock our foreheads against the shore, pleading for the word; we listen to the syllables of nonsense uttered by streams and birds and trees and by the objects we ourselves have built and made tenants of our lives, all in the hope of discerning the message placed between the layers of babble *SGfB*, 202-3.

The terms “Woman” or “the feminine” tend to collapse distinctions among women and to suggest that “Woman” and so women are necessarily outside language, but it is no accident that woman or women or the feminine tend to fall on the “unsaid” of a said/unsaid opposition.

Margaret Homans has provided an account of the myth uniting the discourses that construct the said/unsaid opposition as homologous with a male/female pairing. Homans locates a tradition in Western culture (exemplified for Homans by the *Oresteia*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Prelude*) that identifies woman with the literal, with nature or matter or the absent referent, and identifies men with the figurative. Although one might, by using different texts, outline a Western tradition that associates women with the figurative and men with the literal, Homans’s version is forceful (as well as problematic) because of the way she uses the terms literal and figurative, and compelling for contemporary critics because she locates the most recent powerful retelling of this myth in the works of Lacan, supplemented by the work of Nancy Chodorow. Homans’s synthetic approach to the divergences between French and Anglo-American psychoanalytic feminist theory unifies the two approaches by treating them both as ideological patterns, powerful narratives of the dominant Western culture. Homans calls them myths, they have a notable heuristic applicability to *SG/B*.

In the myth Homans outlines, mother and infant communicate through body language and nonrepresentational sounds. Symbolic language arises in reaction to absence, specifically the infant’s pain at the mother’s absence and the need to call for her. The system of differences that constitute language depends on seeking something like the mother’s body, on seeking figures for the mother. Since to return to a plenitude of fusion with the mother would obviate language, language depends on the permanent absence of the mother: her death, her murder. Homans notes the Luce Irigaray cites the murder of Clytemnestra as the mythic account of the founding of culture: the exonerated son corresponds with the establishment of the rule of law.

The cost of the masculine myth to women is not merely figurative. If woman is the literal object grounding language, Homans notes, “Women who do conceive of themselves as subjects—that is, as present, thinking women rather than as ‘woman’—must continually guard against fulfilling those imposed definitions by being returned to the position of object” (5). Thus women confronted with this scheme have difficulty positioning themselves, literally, as writers.

In counterpoint to the masculine myth of the institution of language and culture, Homans proposes Nancy Chodorow’s theory as an account of women’s experience of this structure. Because women have a more sustained, ongoing bond with the mother, women have an ambivalent relation to the literal. Homans argues that male writers value the figurative and devalue the literal. They articulate myths of language through instances of what Homans terms “bearing the word”—articulations that include representations of the Virgin Mary and of women characters carrying messages, transformations of metaphors into narrative, or other translations of the figurative into the literal.

Valuable as Homans’s account is, her terms present some problems. It is important to note that being the literal can be quite distinct from having the literal. Etymologically, “literal” refers to the letter, the written language that was long denied to most women (women still have a higher illiteracy rate than men). This is not only not the sense in which Homans uses the term, but also contrasts jarringly with the gendered accounts

Homans gives of the "literal," in which identification with the literal can facilitate access to the literal. The contrast is telling, however, for a notable feature of the masculine thematics of gender Homans outlines is the possibility of its division from a plotting of gender, as in *SGfB* and elsewhere. That is, women may be closer to the literal in Homans' sense, but are often literally excluded from the exercise of linguistic power.

When we look at the ways Homans does use the term "literal" we find three different senses: it means, by turns, non-referential language, purely referential language, and the absent referent. Homans's elastic terminology here reminds us that theory is myth that both describes and reinscribes the narrative it discovers. "The literal" stretches to encompass conflicting linguistic approaches to an original mother-daughter bond. While the absent referent is the mother, and non-referential language is the language of the original mother-daughter dyad, purely referential language is that which functions "as literally as possible within the frame of symbolic language" (35).

The duality in Homans' terminology (between non-referential and purely referential) is telling, reminding us of women's dual exclusion from culture: both above and below it. The usefulness of speaking about woman's double exclusions as one exclusion is that it emphasizes that they are both equally exclusions. But in accounting for women's place in language and women's relation to language each mode of exclusion has a very different valence and different consequences. A focus on women's place in language concentrates on women's relegation to the non-represented and non-representational, and leads to the French feminist view exemplified by Kristeva's focus on the semiotic as maternal, a focus that endorses a concentration on male writers (Joyce, Artaud), and defines women as perhaps necessarily excluded from the languages we speak and know. In contrast, a focus on women's relation to language can take account of this threat of exclusion and examine the way writers have coped with it. Judith Fetterley, working from Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, focuses on women's relation to language, and uses "literal" to designate the referential in the sense of the everyday aspects of experience, potentially including the material and economic (30). Fetterley's description is historically specific and her use of "literal" is therefore amenable to varied constructions according to what the quotidian involves at any given time and in any given social stratum.

Homans argues that women literalize figures, thus bringing that which is not named into the sphere of the named and challenging this very inside/outside duality. Such a gesture can add the material or economic to the apparently literary or linguistic, thereby emphasizing that the literary is material and economic.

All this theorization resonates with Janet Frame's insights in *SGfB*. Frame is deeply concerned with the question of subjectivity and its relationship to language. Within Frame's novels the subject is always already divided, alienated, lost. It is only subsequent to their entry into the social order that such characters as Istina Mavet in *Faces in the Water* and Vera Glace in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* are able to reject and deny the positions offered them by society, choosing instead to remain closed in the silence of the dead room.

In *SGfB*, the three points of the Oedipal triangle provide the tripartite structure that governs the narrative. The child Erlene is silent; she has lost her power of speech. Once she had been able to speak, but, she says, "[she] is not allowed to speak anymore"

(82). Her entry, or rather re-entry into language is the motif that provides the focus of the text's action as the other characters attempt to persuade her to speak.

Whereas Erlene has elected to become a mute, Edward, her father, who has voyaged away from New Zealand to England to research the genealogy of a family, hears "voices" in the street, next to him in a bus, before him in a doorway, at home, abroad, day, night. Edward abandoned his wife and child and now, eleven years later, on the other side of the world, he still devotes his sterile efforts to study and objectify the private lives of these others that act as a screen to his own family history. Edward's family name is Glace, the paternal metaphor to which Erlene must submit to gathers all the connotations of glass and ice associated with it throughout the text [*NT: Frame writes that when Edward arrives in New Zealand, Erlene will speak and it will be winter. Erlene says, "My father is coming to visit us in the winter..My father has promised to save us, that is why he went away and left us, so that he could return and save us...My father is very powerful" (189)].

In *SGfB*, Frame narrates the breakdown of her central woman protagonist, Vera Glace, from inside her mind. In the West, women have if anything been reduced to mere interiority; it is their restricted and privileged domain. In Frame's story, Vera is a sixty-year old inmate in a psychiatric asylum. She has never married, has never had children, has never even left her home town where she worked as a librarian until, at the age of thirty and for reasons unknown, she became mute and insane. Frame narrates the experience of going mad as an inmate in an asylum and then transforming that madness into writing.

If, as it seems, it is madness we are talking about throughout the text, then communication in its most obviously understood sense —the dynamic flux between speaker and addressee— is exactly what we cannot take for granted or assume. Frame writes a fictional account of what she herself describes as an impasse, a breakdown in which there is in fact too much communication —voices inside the mind, voices enveloping the whole atmosphere of the narrative. Simultaneously, *SGfB* explores the terrorising potential of any verbal command. This is recurrently thematized in the characters' injunctions to Erlene: "[Vera:] Why don't you speak? Why don't we just sit down together like ordinary people and speak? I'll say something to you, and you reply, and I'll reply to your reply" (222); "So Edward believed that if he were to visit Erlene and talk to her, then she would naturally answer him, as if she had been never deprived of her speech. She would talk to him; how could she do otherwise?" (107).

The questions of who is speaking in the text and how the readers should listen carry an anxiety that the text might be speaking with a strident and even hostile voice, one which is alien or unfriendly to us. From the beginning, Frame, or her character Vera, turns the tables on her reader, issues an invitation of a very specific kind: Enter my (inner) world.

Even when *SGfB* does not deal explicitly with issues of mastery and control in political terms, in the context of the novel, paranoia —voices in the head— is of course the perfect metaphor for colonisation —the takeover of body and mind. Frame's insistent juxtaposition of the northern and the southern hemispheres serves to question one of the prevalent myths —Savages do not go mad— of colonisation itself. Her southern hemisphere is totally different from the northern hemisphere, even the hostile winter takes a different turn: "Winter will soon be here, not the panic-stricken darkness of the northern hemisphere, ...but a more optimistic southern season where

a remote light plays about the upper sky" (159). Reality and phantasy intermingle in the South: "Here in the southern hemisphere we realize the humour of death, the tricks it plays, the need not to take it too seriously when we find it standing near throwing stones into the darkness...Those stones are people dying. But here in the south we laugh and remind ourselves, Stones are stones, the nightmare is the nightmare and not the reality" (159-60).

But what is it that counts as mad in *SGfB*? We may say that Vera's symptoms grossly correspond to the criteria for paranoid schizophrenia. On the other hand, Edward's profession as a genealogist brings us close to the cult worship of the dead, the belief that each family is indebted to its ancestors in every respect. To some extent, Edward believes in the survival of the dead. In the case of Edward it is not absolutely clear whether we are dealing with paraphrenia or ghosts. When Vera attempts to describe his symptoms, she says: "The affair of a voice in his left ear is troubling, and a case for jealousy on my part, for I know that the air is full of voices speaking to us, uttering platitudes and wise sayings, yet so few of us have the knack of switching on to this extra source of information, amusement, inspiration, annoyance, and fear. I can't help asking why Edward should profit from these voices when most of us hear nothing but silence in the air around us...Is Edward mad, then? Or is he a reject running in and out of the single file of the Strangers?" (156-7, 160).

SGfB is also a novel of transgenerational haunting where the woman becomes the repository of an unspoken and unspeakable history. The personal drama—the mother's confinement, insanity as stigma—passes into the daughter where it reemerges as the history of a people.—"What had come over them? Why were they all now mere calculations, adjustments of silence? They were no longer people. They were tiny pieces torn from a vast white sheet of *blotting paper*, and flicked across the face of the earth. They were all silent now... [T]here was only Death" (235). In this respect, Wilson Harris has written: "To speak of ghosts figuring in Vera's reports is in no way to underestimate their mass and weight—the accumulation of lives through which a mid-to-late twentieth century reporter moves as if they are the renescent surf of abortive expeditions in the past as well as the faltering spirit of given bodies in the present (renascent/faltering pressures that seem to lie halfway between the unborn and the not-yet-killed or soon-to-be-killed dead" (94-5). Vera Glace goes through something we could call her own talking cure. Depending on our perspective, the same form of behaviour can be madness or cure. Persecution is a form of interiority wherever, finally, we might decide that the presences who visit the protagonist—whether real visitants or the figments of her mind—belong. In *SGfB* it is not clear whether we are dealing with an outside in or inside out situation; the writing doesn't let us decide. Vera's nightmare is her privilege. It is both alien to her and something for which she is chosen outside and inside, invasive and utterly her own, "At the moment as I gaze out at the leftover summer and the torn circus-hangings of autumn, I am fit only for dreaming" (157).

In the narrative, the first ghost to appear—and the first invocation to madness—is the mother. The story is ambiguous: is Erlene to share only her mother's 'stigma', or is she to go mad? This may be another reason why it is so difficult, if not impossible, to decide on the question of madness in the book. Erlene's experience carries the weight and ambiguity of this original (mis)naming. Vera states: "Lately I have found myself suddenly hammering my fist upon the table, here, where I write this, or upon the panels of the door, as if a gesture of violence may help me to

break into the silence of everything around me, to ransack and spill the words which lie trapped there” (215).

The relationship to the land is at the centre of *SGfB*. Frame finds herself performing a peculiar shuttling movement between two lands, her mother land and the land where she met Edward. And one way of reading the book would be to say that this is in fact which drives Vera to her breakdown. Her profound love for her environment far exceeds her love for any human being: “This town is my lover, this house, this land; these provide an area, an accommodation of love which human beings have never been able to give me or which, lacking the constructive ability, I have never been able to build for myself from cut and measured blocks of flesh and blood” (155).

In the narrative, the question that gets repeated till exhaustion and which seems to be, Am I guilty? can also be read, Who carries the shame? Vera is obsessed with her burden of guilt within the context of the Oedipal family: “Edward seems to think that Erlene will open her mouth and pronounce like an oracle; I know that the first words she utters will be a statement of my guilt, a judgment upon me” (151-2). In some passages, Vera sets herself up as an analyst, as the subject who knows the truth of a misrecognised unconscious. And in the narrative, there is a process of ego shattering, a history of ego shattering. Vera has been deprived of agency and yet the circumstances seem to make her responsible for every misfortune that happens: “How can I take it upon myself to be responsible for the language of speech if the world is struck dumb? Oh, I must urge the furniture to speak, and the walls, and the trees; my clothes, my food, all objects must speak; it is a panic; anything to drown the final silence of the human race!” (216).

Towards the end of *SGfB*, we discover that the story is being told by Dr. Clapper, the psychiatrist, not by Vera at all. The voice of the woman is supplanted by the voice of the medical profession and, as it happens, it turns out to be a male voice. This male voice also believes it is the father that will prompt her into speaking: “Soon she may be speaking. And if, as you say, her father is making a visit to New Zealand, that may be the event which finally prompts her to speak” (170).

Kaja Silverman has traced what she calls “the fantasy of the maternal voice” in Hollywood cinema and psychoanalytic theory. The fully constituted male subject retrospectively perceives the maternal voice as a container of nonsignifying sound around the newborn infant; access to the symbolic requires the child’s transfer from “inside” to “outside” of this sonorous envelope, and the concomitant resituating of the mother “inside.” In this view, the narrative of the move from what Homans calls literal to figurative is repeated as the subordination of the female voice to the female body, enacted through a fascination with demonstrating the interiority of the female body and with demanding from the woman, “involuntary sound, sound that escapes her own understanding, testifying only to the artistry of a superior force. The female voice must be sequestered (if necessary through a *mise-en-abyme* of framing devices) within the heart of the diegesis, so far from the site of enunciation as to be beyond articulation or meaning” (77-8). This subordination of voice to body is clearly displayed in the accounts of Vera and her daughter Erlene in *SGfB*.

It is an obvious irony that it should be Vera and Clara —her fellow inmate— the women’s names that are used in the asylum, but the point of such names goes far beyond simple irony. Throughout the novel we are asked to consider the failure of communication —of existing signals and structures, and yet we are asked at the same time to recognize the degree of relationship that binds one character with another.

By the end of the narrative, we might say that, metaphorically, Edward's fable of the chair is a story in search of containment. He desperately looks for a contained narrative in a context where narratives refuse to be contained. [*NT: The story goes this way: "It seemed to Edward that he needed desperately and immediately a material impartial object to contain him, and as the time did not seem ripe (though it might have been) for either a cradle or a coffin, he chose to design and build a perfect chair" (1980b, 200)]. Edward builds a chair for himself and deep into his consciousness he can hear the echoes of Vera's reproach: "He could hear Vera's saying, 'I can't understand people who give up their ideal of changing the ways of the world to fit the men who live in it, and try to satisfy themselves by making cradles, chairs, beds and coffins to contain one person alone —themselves'" (206).

Vera, Erlene and Edward seem to be locked into a semiotic structure from which they can hardly disengage. Finally, we learn that Vera's subjectivity is associated with a blackout, a lacuna which it is a function of the reader to fill or to write.

In this triangular story, the maternal is once again placed as abject. In the course of the narrative, when Vera tries to embrace her daughter, Erlene's reaction suggests the revulsion of abjection: "[Her] skin went cold and her heart beat fast at the sight of her mother's tears. Obstinate she kept her arms over her breast, as if she were dead, and refused to embrace her mother" (91). Even when she remains bound to her mother, she is repelled by what she believes threatens her autonomy.

The mother-daughter bond is marked by aggressivity and violence. Vera wants her daughter to speak and at the same time, feels the urge to kill her for fear of what she may say. Erlene wishes to destroy her mother, thinking that if Vera were dead she would be able to speak (32). Edward appears as the third term, the name of the father, with his power to bestow speech. And Vera is terribly afraid since she feels she is policed both by her daughter and by her husband, "I dread that Erlene will make some remark to incriminate me, and no matter how deep my actual guilt may be, I need to preserve my seeming innocence" (1980b, 214).

Luce Irigaray has argued that women must reconceive language "*Otherwise than in phallogocentric terms*" (Grosz 110). The importance, for women, of disconcerting language follows from Irigaray's idea that language has material effects, that in fact there is a dynamic relationship between woman-as-subject in language and woman-as-subject in the social. The two domains share the same imaginary. We then begin to see why Irigaray argues for the necessity of creating a female symbolic (that is, a set of structures, representations, etc.) *not* based on a conception of identity as self-same, monological or unitary, but rather one based on multiplicity and difference. This set of structures that would/will ultimately comprise the female symbolic takes as its basis the female body [*NT: The most controversial model Irigaray provides for this idea of the female body is the notion of the two lips that speak together. I agree with Margaret Whitford's (1991) argument that they should not be taken either as a literal essentialist emblem for women, nor simply as a postmodern emblem of plurality and multiplicity, but rather as a metonymic evocation for women in the social contract.]. Its multiple sites of pleasure evoke the multiplicity of the female body and vice versa.

The female symbolic Irigaray envisions is based on the reconceptualization of the female body and is in keeping with her understanding of the relationship between bodies and language. In her analysis of Western discourse, she posits an isomorphism between male sexuality and patriarchal language: "All Western dis-

course presents a certain isomorphism with the masculine sex; the privilege of unity, form of self, of the visible, of the specularisable, of the erection (which is the becoming in a form). Now this morpho-logic does not correspond to the female sex: there is not 'a' sex. The 'no sex' that has been assigned to woman can mean that she does not have a sex and that her sex is not visible nor identifiable or representable in a definite form" (64).

Since the body, both male and female, "is structured, inscribed, constituted and given meaning *socially* and *historically*" within a discourse of phallogentrism, what must happen in order to begin to articulate the concept of a female symbolic is a (re)turn to an essentialized body but rather "the lived body, the experience of corporeality" (Grosz 111).

Irigaray theorizes on the unsymbolized mother-daughter relationship, which she names "the dark continent of the dark continent" (women being the original dark continent here) (16). Margaret Whitford glosses Irigaray's unsymbolized mother-daughter relationship as "an absence of linguistic, social, semiotic, structural, cultural, iconic, theoretical, mythical, religious or any other representations of that relationship. There is no maternal genealogy." (76) This unsymbolized relationship is seen as such partly through the received explanation of the girl's negotiation of the Oedipal complex and her entry into language. With the entry into language and the symbolic, subjectivity is obtained through a splitting off from, an "objectifying" of the mother. As Kaja Silverman explains, "subjectivity is thus from the very outset dependent upon the recognition of a distance separating self from other —on an object whose loss is simultaneous with its apprehension" (7). For the resolution of the Oedipal complex, the girl must also abandon her mother, while retaining an identification with her in order to process the appropriate feminine attributes. She ends up abandoning a phallic mother and identifying with the castrated mother, "the powerless mother who has submitted to and acts as representative of the symbolic father" (Grosz 119). Women have no representational system or signifier by which they can represent loss; they cannot represent loss or origin except in terms of the masculine. This impossibility of representation leaves women, within the existing dominant paradigms, in a state of what Irigaray calls *dereliction*, abandoned without hope outside of the symbolic order.

As W.H.New has suggested referring to Frame's 1965 autobiographical essay "Beginnings," Frame has, "A sympathy for the subtleties of language and an appreciation for insights that were not verbal, an understanding of both the power of language and the power that lay beyond and behind language, created tensions that affected her sense of her own relation with the world about her" (177). Frame deftly uses social metaphors in order to articulate the divided consciousness of an individual personality. She insistently repeats New Zealand's hemispheric position, notions of foreigners and home, genealogies and a specific use of language. In most cases, the "madness" of the characters consists in their being unable to live with the separation or to reconcile the various divisions in their inner and outer worlds.

In *SG/B* there is an undermining of representation, an erosion, an emptying of signification that confronts the characters at some time as an assault on subjectivity as the archaic container of the self. Vera's discourse is a marker of her anxiety on entering the socio-symbolic order.

Early on in the text Erlene recognises that there is no possible salvation through language. She is aware she will not be able to speak to anyone, that "she could not

speak [even] if she wanted to, because every time she opened her mouth to say something, her voice, in hiding, reminded her that there was nothing to say, and no words to say it" (31). Language for Erlene stands for the danger to identity that comes from the outside. However, there is also an acknowledgement of the positive value of language. Erlene wonders if words can also function as lighthouses, beaming messages along the edge, between the land and the sea: "Words with their beacons roaming the seas to rescue the thoughts or warn them against perilous tides, cross-currents, approaching storms?" (180-1).

Uncle Blackbeetle is Erlene's best friend. He lives on Erlene's window-ledge and builds coffins for the beans that go blind in their one black eye and shrivel and die (80). Blackbeetle also recognises the danger inherent in words, and he is the only one who is able to speak and communicate with Vera's daughter. Confronting this friendly figure, Dr. Clapper is a psychiatrist who attempts to negotiate Erlene's re-entry into language. In the course of their sessions, Erlene is offered a speaking position and social identity in return for the sacrifice of the bond with the mother. After her first meeting with Dr. Clapper Erlene is shocked by his familiarity. She is afraid that his eyes have made her pregnant and that she will have to carry his baby: "Had his eyes made her pregnant? Was it true that men could look at you in a special way and make you pregnant?" (101). Terrified, she is convinced that her baby will die inside her, that she will have to walk around in the world "with a smell of death surrounding her, and people [would] be afraid to come near her, in case they would be infected" (102). This fantasy of pregnancy and childbirth with its concomitant anxieties seems to point to Erlene's process of maturity on her way to give birth to language. But once again, by the end of the novel, her efforts to resume a speaking position still show a failure: "Nothing she [Erlene] uttered would ever reach anyone's ears; the words would merely beat themselves against the wall, and failing to penetrate it, they would circle her skin and grow old and stale, and cluster like flies about her, and lay little white eggs upon her, as if she were dead..." (227).

After Uncle Blackbeetle dies, there is no one to speak to. In Dr. Clapper's office, very little territory remains for Erlene, "almost her only possessions in the room were two feet of floor space and the door" (220). She is left alone to face her father. She chooses to go back to her room and closes the door behind her. Upon Edward's arrival, "Erlene closed her mouth tight and turned away..." (237). The promise of a new language is stillborn and the litany of Erlene's thoughts colors an apocalyptic landscape: "There was no longer need or power to speak...there was only Death...words falling all day and night blocking the doors of speech...falling in drifts of sound...piling against the houses and the walls of the cities, shrouding the whole world in silence" (235-37).

As we have pointed out before, the tripartite structure of the Oedipal triangle governs the narrative, alternating the voices or the insights from Vera to Erlene to Edward. In the last chapter this structure is broken when the readers find out that there has, in fact, only ever been one character, Vera Glace, "and that she has no family, she has never been married, [and] she has been without speech for thirty years" (247). Everything has taken place entirely within Vera's mind, and the narrative has been about Vera's struggle to re-enter language, not Erlene's. The text thus becomes an invitation to join Vera on an "Open Day in the factory of [her] mind", where madness dwells, joining her in her incessant questioning, "what is madness but a vivid glimpse into the human factory where the limbs are pasted to the body and the atti-

tudes stapled in the head, and the self labeled—all long before the inspection which decides the ‘perfects’, the ‘substandard’, the ‘rejects’” (160).

By the end of the narrative, Vera recognises that the only hope lies in finding a new language before it is too late. In the midst of her delirium, she realises that those “mounds of rotting words”, like compost, “generate their own fertile vapors and powers” (216). From the depths of silence, Vera imagines the growth of articulate speech. She is able to imagine herself walking all over the land, “scattering the dead words upon the soil and watching for the plants which grow from them” (216). When Vera does finally speak, she produces a primal sound born “Out of ancient rock and marshland, out of ice and stone” (252). She finally gives voice to the silence in a timidly assertive exercise. But this moment of revelation is linked to a post-holocaust experience. Vera’s final entry into language takes place, “just one week after the atom bomb had been dropped that destroyed Britain, and the world was still numb with fear, tasting people ash in their mouths and trying to whitewash the falling skies” (251). Vera, as a subject, is shattered into linguistic existence by a nuclear explosion and even when her first utterances seem to be no more than a primal grunt, they open up a space where speech and silence coalesce in a complex synthesis where there is not one without the other.

Frame’s explorations of madness, fear and death within a female consciousness transform her local landscape into a much larger one, involving the pressures and the social and imaginative constrictions of the West. The world of *SGfB* is one in which a woman is “trying to find the door into speech” (10), a woman whose humanity is questioned in the hands of the medical profession, in whose mind, “if there is anything human remaining; it is a cause for speculation...” (248).

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