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Parodic manoeuvres and differentials in Janet Frame's The Carpathians

Abstract
As has long been established, Janet Frame's work raises questions about representation, creativity and the limits of language. This paper singles out The Carpathians *to review such a claim in the context of the 'imposture of language', and more specifically in terms of parody as creative practice. With its Russian Doll structure, repetitions, recycling of facts told from different narratorial points of view, this text celebrates the power of creativity. As such, it engages in a performative parody of the creative process that defies the constraints of literary criticism and theory to affirm the force of art as a human practice. This paper explores the ways in which* The Carpathians *stages the work of creativity as a constant bridging of the gap between world and word, self and other, fact and fiction, science and art, sanity and insanity in order to re-assess the epistemological thrust of such a gesture. It will do so by examining the parodic manoeuvres and differential rapports deployed in the book to ascertain Frame's understanding of creativity in its distinctive relation to language.*
Keywords: creativity, language, Janet Frame, (post)structuralism, narratology

The universe is a flower of rhetoric
– Freud (2001 [1905])

(Un)necessary? preliminaries

Janet Frame's work has been repeatedly scrutinised for its engagement with the problem of representation, including the part played by the workings of language in her work. This engagement with representation, including the possibilities and limitations of language, underpins two questions central to the corpus of her writing. The first question concerns the enigma of being, while the second concerns the relationship between alternative modes of being and art-making. Such questions betray a preoccupation with the nature of creativity – and, in synergy with Lacanian thought, of creativity as necessary to being (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]). This preoccupation is present in incipient form in Frame's first novel, *Owls Do Cry,* first published in 1957,where children seek fairy tales in the 'burning shell' of a rubbish tip (Frame 1985: 11) and grows in the body of her work right through to *Living in the Maniototo* (Frame 1981) and *The Carpathians* (Frame 2005), respectively released in 1979 and 1988.

The latter works are overtly concerned with the creative process – in particular with perception, memory and composition as rendered in the manipulation of narratorial position and point of view. Unsurprisingly, this preoccupation with the nature of creativity recurs in her posthumously published fiction, including *In the Memorial Room,* where the mischievous author Harry Gill disappears (Frame 2013) in sympathy with Barthes' late Author (Barthes 1972 [1968]). This paper will focus on *The Carpathians,* the last novel published in Frame's lifetime as it concludes what I see as her self-conscious interrogation of the question of language, being and creativity.

In *The Carpathians,* I want to argue, Frame's appreciation of imagination, her rendition of the role of memory in the creative process and probing of the limits of language constitute a homage to human creativity as a labyrinthine process that curiously follows both narrative and blood lines. The gestation, composition and production of the book are fictionalised as parodic manoeuvres that may cancel each other and yet are also paradoxically *embodied*. Further, fictionalisation itself entails encounters between binary opposites and the filling of gaps that exist between these binaries at the level of representation and being. Indeed, words not only cover 'the invisible gap in the fabric of space and time' (Frame 2005: 135), they cover 'everything' (Frame 2005: 65), including the differential rapports inherent in the signifying process. This is no novel claim: the vast corpus of Frame criticism reveals that her work defies all categorisations, even that of literary genre. What intrigues me, though, is what this suggests about Frame's creative process and what we can learn from her performing of it. What strikes me in *The Carpathians*, is that creativity and composition stem from a peculiar relationship to language, one that is 'extimate'. [1] As such, it operates both from *within* and from *without*. This is best exemplified in the construction of Mattina as a character who 'really' comes to writing away from home and in the ways in which she puts together other people's narratives and points of view.

If Frame's novels can be read as allegories (Panny 1991), they are first and foremost allegories of a coming into writing. Frame is obsessed with a going back to a (non)origin as birth and death of meaning. Like many (post)structuralist thinkers – Lacan, Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida and others – she insists on the first and last, on a thinking of apocalypse that relays earlier negative troping just as Jake, Mattina's husband, is 'surprised to find that his thoughts always contained the negative' (Frame 2005: 265-266). Frame's writing is an unrelenting uncovering and covering up of the gap between world and word, self and other, fact and fiction, madness and sanity and nowhere is this more obvious than in *The Carpathians*, the last book published during her lifetime. Mimicking the constantly shifting points of view that circulate across time and space in this book, her writing is in constant metonymic displacement. As such it is a writing of desire. Yet the locus of writing itself is in proximity with death, and in particular with the death of the mother. Writing, the telling of the story, brings about the birth of the 'author'. In *Owls Do Cry* it is the birth of the daughter. In *The Carpathians* it is the birth of the son. Thus in Frame's universe the 'author' is born out of a fusion of opposites in the gap between signifier and signified. And although sexed, the 'author' is curiously asexual. This is particularly obvious in *The Carpathians*, where the 'author' is a composite – involving males and females bridging two generations.

The real and the unreal withholding a truth in need of transcription [2]

The Carpathians is a complex text, a novel, we could say, which incorporates the tropes of poetry, the conventions of multiple narrative approaches and the

discourses of cultural politics to interrogate the question of 'accepted knowledge' (Delrez 2002: xv). As such, it dismantles the 'certainty of truth' (Frame 2005: 83). At the literal level it tells the story of Mattina Brecon, a rich New Yorker, wife of failed novelist Jake Brecon and mother of fledgling novelist John Henry Brecon, who travels to Puamahara, a country-town in the South Island of New Zealand and 'finds herself caught up in a catastrophe of identity and cultural disintegration' (West 2006: 9). The novel is in four parts. Told in Mattina's words, the first part is mimetic and the point of view is omniscient. The second part is the work of Dinny Wheatstone, a local of Kowai Street who may be seen as Mattina's alter-ego; it mainly consists of visual descriptions of daily events in Kowai Street told in first person limited point of view linking Mattina to Puamahara. The third part records a '*folie à deux*' (Frame 2005: 179), questioning whether Mattina is dreaming or awake, herself or her alter-ego, sane or insane. In the fourth part Mattina is back in New York and the narrative is seemingly given over to Jake after her death, and finally, to John Henry, who may have made up the whole story.

Frame's wager in *The Carpathians,* it seems to me, is not only to explore diverse creative modes and create a metafictional novel which defies narrative conventions, but also to highlight two types of relationship to language. Frame achieves this through parodic manoeuvres that inscribe a series of dichotomies *as* differential rapports between signifier, signified; literal, figurative; metonymy, metaphor; fact, fiction; self, other; animate, inanimate; singular, universal; myth, science; tragedy, comedy, etc. These differential rapports are exemplified in phrases such as 'the human country of birth, meeting, parting, and death' (Frame 2005: 83), which describes human life in metonymic terms, and 'the near distance downwards and far away' (Frame 2005: 121), which conjures up the work of metaphor. These differential rapports are inscribed in the gap between signifier and signified, word and world, self and other that highlight the dichotomy between 'the small words linked in deadly persuasion' (Frame 2005: 80) and those never spoken that withhold a truth (Frame 2005: 114), or those 'composed of the real and the unreal that also withhold a truth in need of transcription' (Frame 2005: 176).

The title of the novel already underscores the gap between signifier and signified. The Carpathians are a chain of mountain ranges that stretch in an arc from the Czech Republic through Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and the Ukraine to Romania in the east and on to the Iron Gates on the Danube between Romania and Serbia in the south. The word – which incidentally also conjures up the opening of *Dracula* (Stoker 1897) – is mentioned by one of the characters, Hercus Millow who speaks 'wistfully' of his memories of the war, words being 'enough' as they 'covered everything' (Frame 2005: 65). Mattina Brecon, a 'reader of non-fiction manuscripts' and 'writer of sorts' (Frame 2005: 68) listens and faithfully records his words. As such *The Carpathians* has nothing to do with its accepted signified. In the novel the narrating voices are also divorced from the notion of a traditional narrator. Indeed, multiple narrative voices take turns assuming the role of narrator, including Mattina, who records the tales told her by the inhabitants of Kowhai Street, Puamahara, New Zealand and the self-proclaimed imposter writer, Dinah Wheatstone, Dinny for short. Upon Mattina's death in Chapter twenty-eight, the reader assumes that the novelist is probably her husband, Jake Brecon, once a best-selling writer, but finds out on the last page of the book that the 'author' is her son John Henry. Interestingly, the son bears the name of Mattina's lover and before signing his name on the manuscript declares that both his parents died when he was young, that he never knew them and that Puamahara may never have existed. This series of fictional narrators describing memories and experiences beholden to multiple points of view becomes an analogy for

different ways of apprehending '*really* and its parent noun' (Frame 2005: 79), accepted 'reality' or the 'real' that, for Lacan, escapes representation.[3]

Mattina, whose 'dislike of pet names for her' (Frame 2005: 228), incarnates the gap between signifier and signified. Her name is a pet name for 'Mattie', itself already a pet name referring to two possible names with conflicting meanings, namely the Arabic derived Martha for 'mistress' and Teutonic Mathilda for 'brave little maid'. Identity is elusive in *The Carpathians* and so is 'reality'. The book begins with Mattina's recounting her trip from New York city to Puamahara, where she rents a house at 24 Kowhai Street. The story becomes stranger as she becomes acquainted with her neighbours and meets Dinny Wheatstone, an artist and self-proclaimed 'imposter' (Frame 2005: 73) whose typescript Mattina reads. It begins with a paradoxical statement about the seemingly imposture of being:

> 'The human race is an elsewhere race and I am an imposter in a street of imposters. I am nothing and no-one: I was never born. I am a graduate imposter, having applied myself from my earliest years to the study of the development of imposture as practiced in myself and in others around me in street, town, city, country, and on earth. The imposture begins with the first germ of disbelief, in self, and this allied to the conviction of the "unalterable certainty of truth", produces the truth of disbelief, of deception of being, of self, of times, places, people, of all time and place.' (Frame 2005: 83. Use of quotation marks as reproduced from the novel)

In the eyes of Dinny Wheatstone, whose name also incarnates dichotomy – in particular the contradictory notions of wheat and stone, the organic and the mineral, life and death – self-doubt clashes with the certainty of truth and in turn pits the personal against the universal. This dichotomous articulation is at the root of the 'imposture' of being.

Delivered with the certainty of one whose point of view hinges on what she 'has merely "seen"' (Frame 2005: 83), as opposed to Mattina's, who looks, listens, and feels, the point of this opening is to announce that 'yet always there is no guarantee of truth' (Frame 2005: 83), a theme approached from multiple points of view in the novel. Dinny goes on, linking the imposture of being to the imposture of language, thus emphasising the elusive quality of meaning as a signifying process, ontological anchoring and communicative principle:

> In an imposter, all points of view are burgled because the imposter has no point of view. Locked within the language of my imposture I further bind myself with every word I use, and yet I acknowledge the treasure of my deceit because it is within the human country of birth, meeting, parting, and death – the sanctuary of the imposter. (Frame 2005: 83-84)

Dinny's dilemma is the artist's dilemma as it runs through Frame's work, that is to seek a truth of representation and being which is bound to elude her by dint of the fact that she is a speaking being. As an artist, she has attempted to portray the flaws in the surface of representation, but the novel does not convey whether this was achieved; even less, how this might have been achieved, for Dinny speaks a language that is incapable of signifying how elisions between birth and death, meeting and parting are being filled in. Hers is a language that fails to account for ontological truth and communicative efficiency. These are the two components of her 'point of view'. As an artist, she has understood her role to be to reconcile these opposite points of the compasses of ontology and

communication. As a writer, she has done so by exploiting the metonymic axis of language.

Consequently, reminiscing about early self-doubts, Dinny extrapolates on the imposture of language, that is language understood as an act of communication:

> I questioned all replies, demanding proof, and proof came dressed in words, was identified by words; even the marvel of proof within music, painting, dancing, science, all art, came always dressed in words, while that mass of proof attainable only through the listening, watching heart, the language of feeling, that too became words, continuing to build the language of imposture. (Frame 2005: 84)

The language of imposture in this instance is the recycling of words gleaned from the din of existing discourse and set in the conventions of the traditional narrative style of first-person limited point of view. Incidentally, it is the narrative style of the early Frame short-stories, one that is questioned from *Owls Do Cry* onwardsthrough its double point of view and double narration (Frame 1985). It is tempting to see Frame's gesture here as a distancing from her early work.

Ironically, because of Dinny Wheatstone's reliance on chronological time – which she achieves despite a proliferation of points of view wittily presented as acts of 'dream-light robbery' (Frame 2005: 177) – Mattina loses her grip on time: 'the runaway time, influenced by this imposter typescript, seemed to have removed the guiding presence from each day' (Frame 2005: 121). As she is done, she is completely disconnected from time's constraint: 'Her emergence from the typescript confus[es] her' and in particular she feels 'that her hold on the passing time ha[s] been lost' (Frame 2005: 169). Mattina's relationship to language is changing from one of 'inhabiting' to one of 'being inhabited' by it.

Deeply affected by the narrative, Mattina emerges from the typescript with a paradoxical sense of being, 'at once meeting and parting, of being and non-being' (Frame 2005: 169). Mattina's literal disorientation due to jet-lag, the need to acclimatise to unfamiliar skies and to attune to different linguistic usage in part one has been unsettled by the embedded narrative of Dinny Wheatstone, whose Janus-like vision of reality and of the invisible real behind it she is now compelled to adopt. Mattina is both within and without language, and soon to experience language itself as both imposed from within and from outside – in one word, as 'extimate'.

In part three, Mattina partly regains her point of view, but as the Gravity Star begins to exert its influence on Kowhai Street, 'bearing its overwhelming unacceptable fund of new knowledge from millions of light-years and centuries of springtime' (Frame 2005: 180), her place of being appears to be invaded from the outside by another reality divorced from her own. The residents of Kowhai Street – although mostly strangers – have mastered the local idiom, which makes them imposters in the eyes of both Dinny and Mattina. However, under the influence of the Gravity Star, they regress to a pre-linguistic state which renders them inarticulate. Ultimately they are reduced to a state of speechlessness and lack of being, which culminates in their being expelled from Kowhai Street, Puamahara, New Zealand and all memories associated with this small town.

Told from Mattina's point of view, this section is effective at a literal and mimetic level because the reader is aware that Mattina has been deeply troubled by Dinny's 'imposter' narrative. As a result, Mattina fluctuates from

states of alertness and consciousness to states of dreaming, hallucinating and loss of consciousness. Mattina hears things. It is 'midnight when Mattina was awakened by the cries' of her neighbours (Frame 2005: 180).[4] These cries operate as a Greek chorus from which Mattina and Dinny Wheatstone are excluded. However, the voices are not recognisable and their utterances make no sense:

> no part of the chorus had words of any recognisable language. The sounds were primitive, like the first cries of those who had never known or spoken words but whose urgency to communicate vowels, consonants; yet within and beyond the chorus, recognisable as long as the human brain held some stem … there came a hint, an inkling of order, a small strain recognisable as music. (Frame 2005: 181)

Mattina sees things, too: she sees 'the faces, the bodies, the clothes of the people of Kowhai Street' (Frame 2005: 182). Everyone looks distorted, with eyes 'bright like animal eyes' (Frame 2005: 182). And soon it is raining letters from all alphabets known to men and women in all languages imaginable, highlighting that the people of Kowhai Street – bar Mattina and Dinny (Frame 2005: 181) – tricked themselves to have *inhabited* a local language that they had appropriated, wrongly assuming some identification between word and referent. In contradistinction, Mattina and Dinny never had such pretension. As aspiring artists they are only too aware of the extimate dimension of language, which they have experienced just as Toby in *The Edge of the Alphabet*, dreams that he is a tree or 'an entire forest, with the Lost Tribe inhabiting him' (Frame 1962: 4). Further proof of this mirage that one could ever inhabit language is the pile of letters that Mattina finds on her table-cloth in the wee hours of the morning when the rain has ceased and all is quiet again.

Denouncing the imposture of language in this novel is finely modulated so as to suggest that language is an imposture only in its *communicative* dimension, and this includes the way we read a text as complex as *The Carpathians*. This ultimately draws attention to two types of relationship to language: either we are *inhabiting* or we are *being inhabited* by language – but as we shall see, there is a third way. These two types of relating to language hint at different creative modes, one aligned with the mimetic axis of language and the other gesturing to the metaphorical. The former, epitomised by Dinny's writing and Jake's ideal of narrative 'cocooning' favours the gathering and recording of facts, while the second favours the absorbing and synthesising of facts imbued with feelings and ontological questions which take on a life of their own in the process. As such the latter is more interested in the butterfly than in the chrysalis inside the cocoon, or to put it more literally its concerns exceed the dimension of language as linguists understand it, for it comprises the legacy of love implicit in 'chittering' (Frame 2005: 174) and loyalty to questioning 'certainty' (Frame 2005: 174). Frame's way, by contrast, suggests another possibility, or a third way. This is the artist's way in Frame's universe. Ironically, this blurs the boundaries between ethics and ontology. For the artist in Janet Frame's world, the other is doubled by the Other and both are two-faced by dint of their capacity to relate to language in two modes encapsulated in the Lacanian adjective 'extimate'.

In her quest for discovering the 'invisible gap in the fabric of space and time' (Frame 2005: 85) Mattina seems to be confronted with that which has filled the 'crevice' (Frame 1985: 170) at the heart of being, words that she has taken in – words that her body has incorporated, absorbed, processed and secreted back into the world:

> She noticed a small cluster like a healed sore on the back of her left hand. She picked at it. The scab crumbled between her fingers and fell on the table into a heap the size of a twenty-cent coin. Examining it, she discovered it to be a pile of minute letters of the alphabet, some forming minute words, some as punctuation marks; and not all were English letters – there were Arabic, Russian, Chinese and Greek symbols. There must have been over a hundred in that small space, each smaller than a speck of dust yet strangely visible as if mountain-high, in many colours and no colours, sparkling, without fire. (Frame 2005: 185-86)

What Mattina's body has produced are the raw materials of art. As such they partake of mimetic dichotomies staged as differential rapports between signifier, signified; literal, figurative; metonymy, metaphor; fact, fiction; self, other; animate, inanimate; singular, universal; myth, science; tragedy, comedy, etc. However, these dichotomies and differential rapports are intertwined at the level of the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. Indeed, they fuse as this passage hints at the fire that is necessary to ignite not creativity, but rather the synthesising part of the creative process as 'the runaway time, influenced by this imposter typescript' (Frame 2005: 121).

Re(a)lativities of narratological rapports

This process and the transformation of these dichotomies are epitomised in the fusing of the two metaphors of the novel, namely the Memory Flower and the Gravity Star, a fusing that in itself constitutes a fortunate 'mixed metaphor', possibly hinting, metaphorically, at Frame's definition of the creative act as a crossing over of binary opposites, apparently distinct discourses, and modes of being.

Frame's invention of 'the legend of Maharawhenua or Memory Land with its town of Puamahara' (Frame 2005: 29) tells the story of a woman who retrieves the memory of the land and eventually evolves into a tree bearing the Memory Flower that 'grows always from the dead' (Frame 2005: 35). The Gravity Star, an actual scientific discovery, is described in the introduction as 'a galaxy that appears to be both relatively close and seven billion years away, a paradox understood as 'being caused by the focussing of light from a distant quasar (starlike object) by the gravity of an intervening galaxy' (Frame 2005: 9). The conjunction of this invented myth and that scientific fact augurs:

> the prospect of the sudden annihilation of the usual perception of distance and closeness, the bursting of the iron bands that once made rigid the container of knowledge, the trickling away of the perception of time and space…yet if you examine it you see the widening crevices in what was believed always to be the foundation of perception. (Frame 2005: 34)

Belonging respectively to the world of myth and science, the Memory Flower and the Gravity Star are made to co-exist in a creative process that requires its own mode of apprehending the 'real', its own way of conveying it in language, and its own fictional conventions.

The Carpathians not only raises questions about the relation between world and word, the imposture of language, but also about the validity of mimesis in the so-called traditional novel which is particularly made clear in a satire of mimesis in the first part of the novel (Frame 2005: 52). And yet later on the

reader is led to understand that life itself depends on language as Mattina remarks of one neighbour:

> The life of Gloria James appeared to depend on a concept and its word, and the fragility of this dependence was horrifying, but was it not merely the usual dependence of anyone upon the language, spoken or written? (Frame 2005: 116)

Being itself is defined in terms borrowed from literary criticism: to experience 'completeness of point of view' (Frame 2005: 52) is a pre-requisite to experiencing wholeness of 'self' (Frame 2005: 52) and therefore a sign of being; a failure to do so is a sign of madness or impending death. The loss of accepted categories is perceived as the loss of familiar words: 'Near and far, then and now, here and there, the homely words of the language of space and time appear useless, heaps of rubble' (Frame 2005: 141).

The catch is not so much that language is an imposture in this novel. The catch is that for those who are comfortable 'inhabiting' language, both world and words are subject to change. Change is emblematised by the Gravity Star and the discourse of science it represents, a discourse exemplified by information technologies and its capitalistic underpinning. As the world becomes increasingly governed by technology so does language increasingly become commodified. As a result, the communicatory aspect of language becomes eroded and eventually erased.

But let us see how it is shown to be eroded first. In Chapter five, for example, the elderly Madge and her grand-niece Sharon can no longer understand each other, so different have their respective ideologies become. When Madge offers Sharon her diamond wedding-ring as 'a keepsake from her death-bed', the girl is prompted to remark that 'Great-aunt Madge [is] talking like a Victorian novel' (Frame 2005: 57). On her own death-bed, Mattina is read poems by Stephen Spender who is described as 'one of the "golden" poets of Jake's younger days at the end of the age of the golden cocoon, and at the beginning of looking, feeling, describing events as they were' (Frame 2005: 240). Thus *The Carpathians* is about looking, feeling, describing events as they are when words and their referents no longer coincide.

This is particularly made clear in Chapter twenty-two in which the two contrasting relationships to language mentioned above are not only highlighted, but dramatised:

> The people of Kowhai Street had experienced the disaster of unbeing, unknowing, that accompanies death and is thought by man to mark the beginning of a new kind of being and thought and language that, in life, is inconceivable, unknowable. (Frame 2005: 186)

Mattina and the people of Kowhai Street had entered the time of the coexistence of dream and reality; had absorbed and explored the principle of the Gravity Star (Frame 2005: 188 - 89). But as an artist Mattina has experienced this before, just as Dinny has. Therefore both are spared the fate of those who thought they knew, but didn't know – that is those who revere knowledge in the guise of information, but not knowing. This validates Delrez's argument that in Frame's world the surfaces of reality are 'signposted with the markers of an external dimension felt to exist beyond the frame of representation' (Delrez 2009: 141).

Narration, myth, story – before, between, beyond? Frame's abiding quest(ion)

Despite some of the aspects of the Carpathians glossed over above, one of its most puzzling aspects concerns the position(s) of the narrator(s) and the attending challenges this poses for the reader. The move away from an all-knowing narrator would seem to imply a corresponding shift away from the assumption that stories pre-exist, by which I mean that they exist before they are spoken or written. To know and then to tell presumes an already formulated story which can be uncovered and relayed, but texts such as *The Carpathians* which scrutinise knowing/telling posit that a story is the product of the telling, or more accurately, of the enunciating, rather than an entity awaiting discovery. The multivocal text where there are variations on a theme, questions and answers, recyclings of facts and suppositions thus becomes the enabling condition for narratorial production – or story production.

Frame's manipulating of the narrating voices, extimate as these mostly are to the narration – except in straight parodies of the mimetic mode of the so-called realistic novel exemplified in Dinny's narrative and incursions such as the one pointed out earlier (Frame 2005: 52) – and the varying and shifting points from which they necessarily speak raises the problem encountered in attempting to fix and account for the narrating voice, not only in her own works, especially *Living in the Maniototo* and *The Carpathians*, but also in the conventional novel. It would be relatively simple to establish the narrator's position if the role, involvement and consequent point of view of the narrator could be categorised according to some formula. Deixis, for example, can produce an analysis via grammatical structures of the relative position of speaker and addressee. Charles Fillmore presents discourse deixis as an analysis of conversation, the mechanics of conversation such as pacing, pauses between and within contributions as well as how the speakers affect each other (Fillmore 1975). This can be extended logically into social deixis by means of analysis of the devices of conversation which establish or reflect information about the social context in which the utterances occur and this is tempting, given the literal framework of *The Carpathians.* But the phenomenon of storytelling and the position of the storyteller vis-à-vis the receivers of the story remain unaccounted for by this kind of scrutiny. Narrative grammars do not offer a solution either. In proposing a grammar of stories, Gerald Prince remarks that:

> such a grammar, properly refined, would … characterize explicitly and formally the most essential features of stories and provide a powerful tool for the description of the story. (Prince 1973: 15)

In *Narratology,* which came out one year after *Living in the Maniototo* and five years before *The Carpathians*,he lists some of the limitations of narrative grammars, including their failure to account for the point of view or aesthetic force of a narrative (Prince 1982). He then proposes a narrative grammar of his own, which he ends up criticising, in a fashion reminiscent of Jake Brecon's thinking process: 'He was surprised that his thoughts always contained the negative' (Frame 2005: 265-66). Prince's point is that even if the grammar was thoroughly examined it would be unable to tell us everything, or even anything, about such important aspects of the narrative as its characters or themes, claiming that these are more properly the domain of a theory of reading because they need to be explained in terms of a receiver. The position of the narrator would also fall into this category and therefore remains unaccounted for by a grammar of this kind.

This is to suggest that the question of the position of the narrator is far from being new. Referring to such 'classics' as Dickens' *Bleak House* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, EM Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (Forster 1927) points out how the storyteller in the former initially appears to be omniscient, only to become less knowing before finally vesting the storytelling powers in one of the characters. Thus, even in relation to the nineteenth-century 'traditional' novel, it is impossible to ascribe to the narrator a fixed, readily identifiable and unchanging point of view, a problem that Wayne Booth examines in what has become a classic of narratology, namely, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Booth 1961). Booth gives an exhaustive summary of the many and varying narrators, narrator-observers, narrator-agents in the novel and the consequent range of reliability, self-consciousness, points of view, distance, etc. (Booth 1961). What seems to happen more often in the traditional narrative than in Frame's, however, is that the narrator is part of the story, or has a discernible connection with it. Either the narrator is part of the story or its connection with the story is established by its knowledge and, consequently, its ability to tell the story. In some way and to some extent, the position of the narrator is 'naturalised' by virtue of a relationship with the story being, or becoming, apparent. What Frame appears to be doing is highlighting the non-specified position of the narrator by 'denaturalising' the narrator: John Henry appears to have been recycling many stories following incestuous faultiness; Jake has been suffering from writer's block for thirty years; Mattina is no writer, and Dinny is crazy (Frame 2005: 47). In this novel, Frame increasingly detaches the teller from the story in ways which defy the urge of a reader with traditional reading practices to relate one with the other. Although this process begins mimetically in the first part with Mattina's jet lag and disorientation, it is compounded in the second part with Dinny's Janus-like vision and reaches its apex in the third part where language itself is denaturalised. Although the fourth part of the book returns to 'traditional' story-telling despite shifting narrators, the reader, having experienced the materiality of language in chapter twenty-two, has lost faith in mimetic processes, yet marvels at Frame's *tour-de-force,* which consists in having uncovered 'the memory of events known and imagined' (Frame 2005: 278) only to cover them with words so as to perpetuate 'the memory through centuries … to a future when today … will be known as our past' (Frame 2005: 278). Whether the last narrator in the Brecon line is one of 'the Housekeepers of Ancient Springtime' (Frame 2005: 287) is up to the reader to decide, but it is obvious that for Frame he is, being a poet living in 'unimaginable reality' (Frame 2005: 31).

While Frame's use of narrative positions as exemplified in the many points of view in the novel may not greatly differ from the traditional novel, her approach challenges the notion that there is such a thing as an omniscient narrator. She does so by making the narrator an object of scrutiny, thereby undermining the myth that we all use language in the same way, namely as an act of communication. The crisis that Mattina experiences in Chapter twenty-two in particular serves not only to disturb the established concept of the narrator to the point of questioning its very essence and function, but in so doing draws attention to the materiality of language and by default to the narrative axis of the novel, leaving an impression that where the narrative process is focused so relentlessly, the stories told are reduced to pretexts. Texts which expose the inadequacies of the narrator so insistently are more to do with the story of telling as an act of creative imagination embedded in culture than the telling of stories as such and therefore a new narrator is called for each time challenges are unsurmountable. Unsurprisingly, Frame performs here, quite flamboyantly, her rejection of the notion of an established, stable and consistent voice which can tell a story only from a single point of view and is instead creating a polyphonic text in which many voices are instrumental not only to the storytelling, but to a shifting construction of modalities of the real.

Because there is no such thing

Only the poets can counteract the effects of the new galaxy, for they have always lived in 'unimaginable reality' (Frame 2005: 92). They are liars and imposters only by virtue of the fact that language in its communicative and ever evolving dimension is a lure, or as Lacan would say, a 'semblant', that is an object of enjoyment that is both seductive and deceptive (Lacan 2001 [1971]: 14; Lacan 2006 [1971-72: 14]).[5] This synergy with Lacanian thought is remarkable, and yet unsurprising, for as Lacan reminds us, after Freud, the artist always precedes the anayst (Lacan 2001 [1971]: 193). Frame's understanding of the work of language in *The Carpathians* is a specific homage to human creativity: it suggests that artists entertain a dual relationship to language which they then synthesise and elaborate upon. Moreover, this novel suggests that, for Frame, the 'true' artist lives through and for the pretence that representation entails. As such it conveys a view of being that is both strangely (neo)classical and (post)structural :

> And although the inevitable deceit also of language has built for us a world of imposture, we do survive within it, fed by the spark, at times by the fire of the recognition of the hinterland of truth. (Frame 2005: 69)

Despite the paradox this entails, Frame's vision of the creative act and understanding of the creative process are Thesean in nature: for all its deceptive character, language remains the most valuable instrument of the human race. As such, it fulfils an ontological function, that of anchoring us in the world, and it also fulfils an ethical function, that of disrupting seemingly accepted certainties. This is especially made clear in the ways in which the narrative explores alternative creative modes, including narratorial ones, and highlights two types of relationship to language through parodic manoeuvres that inscribe a series of dichotomies *as* differential rapports between signifying practices and referential systems. More concisely and forcefully than ever before, *The Carpathians* casts new light on the parodic manoeuvres and differentials at work in Janet Frame's corpus of writing. In doing so, it also enriches our understanding of the creative process.

Notes

[1] The adjective 'extimate' derives from 'extimacy', a late Lacanian neologism derived yet not opposed to 'intimacy'. As such it denotes phenomena that impinge on the self / other, inside / outside boundaries. Extimité is bound up with the real as that which cannot be said. return to text

[2] After Frame: 'words composed of the real and the unreal that also withhold a truth in need of transcription' (Frame 2005: 176). return to text

[3] This reference to Lacan's 'real' is not gratuitous as it is also Frame's understanding of the word, playing as she does on the fragility of linguistic categories. See, for example Mattina's repressed comments in a conversation with Ed Shannon where she seemingly agrees to understanding what he means and answers 'I guess I do' … not admitting to him that most of her life had been spent on the trail of *really* and its parent noun (Frame 2005: 79). return to text

[4] This suggests that Dinny is Mattina's alter ego, a hypothesis worth exploring albeit beyond the boundaries of this essay. return to text

[5] For Lacan, the signifier is the 'semblant par excellence' (see Lacan 2006 [1971-72]). return to text

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