Chapter One

The Frame Function:
An Inside–Out Guide

THE ADAPTABLE MAN

THIS IS NOT AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE to the novels of Janet Frame. It does not present "Janet Frame" in easy-to-swallow capsules. Frame's novels, notoriously, aren't readily consumable, and to insist on making them so is surely to misrepresent their nature. Frame's novels are instead addictively – at times deliciously – indigestible; and that characteristic lies at the heart of this study. This is a guide for those who have acquired or are in the process of acquiring (albeit under duress) a taste for the novels of Janet Frame. It is a guide for readers who are intrigued and stimulated by her work (as I myself have been for over a decade now), rather than for those who maintain that Frame's novels should come with a health warning, or at most be partaken of in consultation with a licensed professional. This guide is concerned with the nature of Frame's work: what her texts are, how they work, how Frame works as a writer, and the impact these fundamentals have on the process of interpreting and engaging with Frame's work. At the root of these issues lies the operation of what I am terming an authorial presence within Frame's novels, and the resulting dynamic between prescriptiveness and elusiveness in her work (i.e. the way the work seems to "lay down rules for its usage",[1] while the "whole" continues to elude us). This is a guide to the operation of that authorial presence: how it impacts on interpretation, and how it facilitates our exploration and understanding of both the nature of Frame's texts and ultimately her compositional processes.

What do I mean by authorial presence? Let's begin with an extreme example. Consider the following scenario from Janet Frame's 1965 novel *The Adaptable Man*. The scene is the morning breakfast table. The village dentist, Russell Maude, and his wife, Greta, are suffering the presence of Russell's convalescent clergyman brother, Aisley. Their son, Alwyn, is a good deal less tolerant. The reader is told that when Aisley 'set out for Little Burgelstatham he was careful to pack his book of Anglo-Saxon poetry' (*AM*, p. 23). At the breakfast table, then, Aisley sits reading from his volume aloud:

> 'The ashes of the oak in the chimney are no epitaph of that oak to tell me how high or how large it was; it tells me not what flocks sheltered while it stood, nor what men it hurt when it fell. The dust of great persons' graves is speechless too, [. . .] who will undertake to sift those dusts again, to pronounce, This is the patrician, this is the noble flower—' (*AM*, p. 52)

Alwyn responds with:

> —Beautiful prose [. . .]. But it shelters behind couldst, wouldst, hath; it's easy these days, when you know the trick, to think a fancy trite thought and make it sound meaningful by adding a few wouldsts dosts haths thous and thees. (*AM*, p. 52)

At first glance, a conspiratorial relationship between author and reader is in the offing. The reader, who knows that Aisley is reading a translation of an Anglo-Saxon piece, is in a position to smugly note Alwyn's mistake as he misinterprets a translation of a genuine antique for a contemporary piece of cod-philosophy. However, the joke is at the expense of this reader. If we look more closely at Aisley's quotation, we notice that the extract he has recited is not a translation of Anglo-Saxon poetry, but is in fact from one of Donne's seventeenth-century sermons.[2] Frame, though, has chopped the Donne extract at 'This is the patrician, this is the noble flower', with the result that the cadence echoes the metre of Anglo-Saxon verse. Such mischief is just for starters.

> Aisley turned the pages again. 'Maeg is bw me syklum sogied . . . calde grfrungen waeron fet mine forste gebunden caldum climmum.'
>
>   'Whither has gone the horse, whither has gone the man? Whither has gone the river of treasure? Whither has gone the place of feasting? How that time has passed away, has grown dark under the shadow of night as if it had never been!' (*AM*, pp. 52–53)

These two pieces are clearly posited on the page as extracts from original and translation. However, any readers who know their Anglo-Saxon poetry will spot that the initial Anglo-Saxon quotation is from 'The Seafarer' (and translates as 'I can utter a true song about my self, [. . .] Afflicted with cold, my feet were fettered by frost, by chill bonds'),[3] while the English translation, 'Whither has gone the horse', which immediately follows the Anglo-Saxon extract in the text, is a partial translation of an entirely different poem from the Exeter Book entitled 'The Wanderer'. There is no question of Frame simply having made a mistake with her Anglo-Saxon translations. Later in her text, she repeats some of the same 'Wanderer' translation and this time furnishes the correct (albeit partial) Anglo-Saxon original: 'Hwaer cwom mearg. Hwaer cwom mago? Hu seo prag gewat genap u der nihthelm, swa heo no waere!' (*AM*, p. 77).

What we have here is the crafty assertion of an authorial presence within the text. For someone like me – a closet deconstructionist – this authorial presence was both intriguing and deeply troubling when I confronted it in a 2009 essay on *The Adaptable Man* and riddle and enigma.[4] This guide grows out of that particular confrontation; and the relevant analysis is revisited and redeployed in the course of this introductory chapter. My sense, during that earlier engagement, was that my long-cherished ideals of textual autonomy were being corroded by this authorial presence, which seemed all too closely related to the empirical author.[*] I could not avoid the fact that behind this mischief was a flesh and blood writer manipulating both text and reader for kicks: the refrain of the novel is, after all, 'who wants fun?'. Rather than simplifying the interpretative process, this empirical presence complicated proceedings, as its parameters were notably tricky to distil. Any reader familiar enough with Old English to have noted the mix-up of translations will have noticed that the spelling in the above Anglo-Saxon quotations (which is common to all 1965 editions of the novel) is corrupt beyond the limitations imposed by typesetting, and that 'maþþumgyfa' is incorrectly rendered as 'river of treasure' instead of 'giver of treasure' (the correct translation is furnished later in the text on p. 263 of the original edition). Is this merely sloppy copy-editing or is the corruption of the spelling a deliberate extension of the mischief with the translations and originals? How do we decide where the operation of this authorial presence begins and ends?

---

[*] My use of the adjective 'empirical' throughout is commensurate with the narratological terms 'empirical author' and 'empirical reader', which denote the actual author (e.g. Janet Frame, 1924–2004) and the living, breathing reader.

A simple exercise (charted in my earlier essay) demonstrated that the reader could not rely on the empirical author to set such parameters. When I consulted a final manuscript for *The Adaptable Man*, I found that, on the first page, Frame had written a note which reads: 'Spelling wrong in O.E. quotations'.[5] Are we to interpret this as "the Anglo-Saxon spellings are deliberately incorrect" or as "The Anglo-Saxon spellings are a residual error"? The most recent edition of the novel (Vintage, 2007) goes with the latter interpretation, based on the 1993 Vintage edition.[6] This seems a safe bet, given that if one looks at the main Anglo-Saxon passage in the manuscript, one finds that Frame has taken a pen (post-publication) and corrected three of the errors.[*] However, she leaves further errors in that passage uncorrected,[†] and, in a particularly strange omission, does not amend 'river' to 'giver'. This last error, deliberate or otherwise, survives in both the recent Vintage editions. In an interesting twist, the 1965 New Zealand and English editions maintain the errors that are in the uncorrected manuscript but indicate an ellipsis, so that the break between 'sogied' and 'calde' in the 'Seafarer' extract, which is unacknowledged in Frame's manuscript (and in the 1965 American edition),[7] is apparent in the published copy.[8] This means that prior to the novel's publication someone checked the quotations and registered the ellipsis but either deliberately or carelessly did not revise the spellings. Why take the trouble to indicate an ellipsis in that section but not at other points in the Anglo-Saxon material and furnished translations in the text? We know that Frame was consulted regarding corrections to the 1993 Vintage edition of *The Adaptable Man*, but the correspondence appears to have gone astray. Hence, I concluded (admittedly to my relief) that the reader could not rely on the empirical author to clarify the text in relation to the above quandary. Yet, at the same time, I remained conscious that the wilful authorial presence within the text was such that it wouldn't allow the reader to disregard it when engaging with the work; and this bind intrigued me.

I began to think about the nature of this authorial presence and its impact on the process of interpreting a Frame novel. Janet Frame is well known as a playful writer, but it seemed to me that the havoc wreaked with originals and translations in that scene from *The Adaptable Man*

went beyond properties of playfulness and manipulativeness and gestured towards something altogether more prescriptive. I use the term 'prescriptive' here, as at the start of this chapter, with reference to its *OEED* connotations of 'laying down rules of usage': in this case, curbing the reader's free rein, controlling the terms of the text, even, possibly, to the exclusion of the reader. For instance, the reader who is in the know regarding the Anglo-Saxon material finds that recognition of this authorial presence inevitably dictates the direction of his/her engagement with the scene: Frame's subversion of the originals and translations clearly stages some point about the perils of distinguishing translations from originals and identifying the relationship between them. But the reader who remains blissfully impervious to these authorial shenanigans doesn't even know s/he has been duped. It's a private authorial joke.

Outside of my 2009 article, the authorial mischief with originals and translations in *The Adaptable Man* has gone undetected in Frame studies. However, in thinking about the implications of that mischief, I was reminded very much of what Patrick Evans, in a short literary obituary of Frame in 2004, termed the 'Frame effect'. Evans defined this effect as 'the sense that her writing conceals A Secret, some private fact or facts, even some kind of scandal, which, if known, would make her oeuvre suddenly complete'.[9] Although this assertion cannot help but resonate with Evans's earlier interest in trawling through Frame's life and work for some biographical 'aboriginal "secret"',[10] it also entails a highly astute observation. Evans continues that this 'effect' 'came out of her control of [. . .] how the writing was to be read, something more ruthless and efficient than I have found in any other writer and involving a fundamental contract with the reader which was always basically adversarial'. He went on:

> How this worked I began to realise 20 years ago when I [learned that] [. . .] [e]ach night [. . .] Cawley [Frame's London psychiatrist and champion] was obliged to play a game of her devising, in which she would give him a baffling sentence to unscramble – presumably something like [. . .] cryptic crossword clues [. . .] – which Cawley was expected to have 'solved' for her each subsequent morning. [. . .]
>
> There, in a nutshell, is Frame the Writer. As readers, each of us is caught up in the same contract she had with Cawley, under her control whenever we read her and required to perform – to *solve*. Each successive work she wrote was increasingly like a chess master class, apparently seamless to read on a first go, quite baffling at times, and not at all helpful.[11]

---

[*] 'bw' is circled; the first 'r' in 'grfrungen' is overwritten with an 'e', and the 'i' in 'climmum' is overwritten with an 'o'.

[†] The 'is' remains 'is' instead of 'ic' and 'syklum' is not altered to 'sylfum'. These corrections are made in the recent Vintage editions. '[S]ogied', I would imagine, reflected a typographical challenge for Frame, which has also been met in the recent editions.