

Daphne's Metamorphoses in Janet Frame's Early Novels

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And metamorphosed Daphne
Now that she feels a laurel wants you to turn into a wind.¹

O *WLS Do Cry*, Janet Frame's first novel, begins with a message in italics signed "Daphne from the dead-room." Other such mysterious and poetical messages by the same hand are scattered throughout the story which introduces us to Daphne as a child and tells us about the circumstances which led her to the madhouse. Daphne is the first version of a recurrent figure in Janet Frame's early novels which I propose to examine in the present article. The other versions are Istina Mavet in *Faces in the Water*, Thora Pattern in *The Edge of the Alphabet* and Vera Glace in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. They form a complex pattern of overlapping features, cross-references and recurrent motifs which gradually completes itself and out of which a more or less complete image of the character as a whole finally emerges.

Daphne is one of the four Withers children. She has two sisters, Francie and Chicks, and a brother, Toby, an epileptic. One day, while the children are playing in the rubbish dump of Waimaru, looking for "treasures" thrown away by grown-ups, Francie falls into the fires lit by the council men to hasten the destruction of their material cast-offs and she dies. It is immediately after Francie's death that Daphne shows the first symptoms of insanity. The accident breaches the wall of her self and leaves her confronted with the basic situation of her human predicament. For the rest of her life she will remember the rubbish dump with "the sun shining through the sacrificial fire to make real diamonds and gold."² But her "wonder

currency" is not legal tender in the world of the grown-ups and her vision — the awareness of death which brings about a greater insight into life — is called madness by the "normal world." She must be cured and the vision be dimmed so as not to blind her: "Your eyes out, like Gloucester, to save your sight of the cliff" (p. 55).

Daphne lives in the "deadroom" where the transitoriness and negativity of all beings is revealed to her. She is not afraid of death because she sees it ontologically as part of life. When Flora Norris comes to inform her of her mother's death she knows the news before being told. She has given up the mere babble of the world and only speaks the true inspired language of the poet, the true language of being which passes through her like the wind through a tree. Her messages sometimes succeed in piercing the walls of Chicks' conformity so that strange reveries are let in and her sister wonders what spell has come over her. But society won't let Daphne knit for long the "unintelligible pattern of dream": they force her to conform and to become a useful citizen. A doctor practices a lobotomy on her brain which turns her into an exemplary factory-girl. She is then offered a watch with three diamonds inside it: the instrument in which time is safely caged again and the wonder currency of dream converted again into the fake values of the world.

Although she escapes the lobotomy and goes back with her old self to the normal world Istina Mavet, the narrator and protagonist of the next novel, *Faces in the Water*, is clearly another version of Daphne. She alludes to the visit of her father in terms that remind us of Tom Withers' visit to Daphne in *Owls Do Cry*: "my father journeyed up north to make the first visit he had ever made me in hospital" (p. 124). She stays for a while with her sister who, like Chicks, lives "up north," her mother is now "in a region of snow and ice" (p. 226) and with her face "like that of a witch with her nose meeting her chin" (p. 226) Istina's mother is obviously the Amy

Withers described in almost the same words by Toby in the next novel.

Though *Faces in the Water* reads more like a documentary images of holes and traps which had been used already in *Owls Do Cry* and will be used even more abundantly in *The Edge of the Alphabet* also appear here, sometimes under a scientific guise. Everything begins with "a great gap which opened in the ice floe between [the protagonist] and the other people" so that she remained "alone on the ice" (p. 10). The lobotomy is seen as a hole bored in people's skulls and E.S.T. — Electric Shock Treatment — a fall into a trap. This treatment is an extremely powerful metaphor for the way in which people are forced into the recognition of being in everyday life so that instead of "curing" the patients it leaves them even more alienated than before:

I feel myself dropping as if a trap door had opened into darkness. I imagine as I fall my eyes turning inward to face and confound each other with a separate truth which they prove without my help. Then I rise disembodied from the dark to grasp and attach myself like a homeless parasite to the shape of my identity and its position in space and time. (p. 26)

The same is true of the injection of insulin after which the patients are overtaken by a double vision and confusion: they pass from the brilliant whiteness and intensity of snow to an utter blackness "like love which overstrains itself into hate, or like the dark side of our nature which we meet most suddenly when we believe ourselves to be journeying furthest from it" (p. 227).

The construction of the novel — Cliffhaven, Treecroft, Cliffhaven — indicates that Istina covers the whole distance from a more or less "normal" state to the last degree of schizophrenia and back. The word "cliff" contained in Cliffhaven is one of the minor motifs binding the first novels together. It appears in connection with King Lear in both *Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water*. In the first novel Daphne compares herself to Gloucester forced

to take out her eyes "to save her sight from the cliff" (p. 55). Here Istina alludes to the same scene:

And I thought of the confusion of people, like Gloucester,
being led near the cliffs,

Methinks the ground is even.

Horrible steep . . .

Hark, do you hear the sea?

And over and over in my mind I saw King Lear wandering
on the moor and I remembered the old men at Cliffhaven
sitting outside their dreary ward, and nobody at home,
not in themselves or anywhere. (p. 114)

In the next novel Zoe Bryce will plunge from her little cliff at the outskirts of communication.

Thora Pattern is clearly another of Daphne's metamorphoses. Unlike her, however, she plays no active part in the plot; she is the creator of three characters who exist only in her mind and like her live "on the edge of the alphabet." Neither really alive nor dead she dwells in a kind of no-man's land between being and non-being:

And I, Thora Pattern, living — no!
in a death-free zone (p. 118)

We know nothing about her except what can be deduced from the imaginary lives of Pat, Zoe and Toby. She herself is a void, unattached — "Am I plugged into the sky?"; surrounded with light — "Is it a waste of light out here?" and not far from the sea — "with the mauling sea so close" (p. 30). Actually she lives in a hospital somewhere in London, awaiting death in solitude and silence. We know nothing about the nature of her illness. It is the proximity of and familiarity with death, this permanent dwelling in what Heidegger calls the "shrine of non-being"³ which reveals to her and to the characters she creates the basic instability of all things including her own actions and existence.

The book largely deals with problems of identity. Who is Thora Pattern? Is she Zoe, Pat or Toby? Do these characters have no life of their own? Is she nothing but them? Again and again the reader, like the characters themselves, is confronted with lost boundaries, confusion,

reflections in mirrors (another version of the "faces in the water"). Even the game played aboard the ship that takes Toby and Zoe from the antipodes to England is a search for identity: Toby is supposed to be Orpheus and must find his partner. His quest leads him to the ship's library where the officer in charge gives him a book on a war-ship of the same name as the legendary poet. Toby is completely lost. The death of his mother had already made a whole wall of himself tumble down but now he is full of confusion. Past, present and future blur, images of people, living or dead, superimpose themselves in his mind, people keep shifting "like lantern slides inserted when no one is looking" (p. 129) or like "panels or lantern slides or cards mysteriously removed and replaced and one person is another, and people do not stay" (p. 34).

It is not death but love — there is no difference: "the alphabet, the grammar are the same" (p. 22) — which opens a breach in the wall of Zoe Bryce's identity. She goes to the antipodes to forget her unrequited love but while she lies seasick on the ship's hospital bed she is kissed by an unknown sailor who does not even remember her the next day. The gap enlarges and the sea leaks in. Before the kiss — the first in her life — she believed that "people were separate with boundaries and fences and scrolled iron gates, Private Roads, Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted; that people lived and died in shapes and identities with labels easily recognizable, with names which they clutched, like empty suitcases, on their journey to nowhere" (p. 107). After the kiss she is frightened to realize that "people were all the time being extended, distorted, merged, melted . . . like pictures on a television set when the tube is broken or worn out and no one will repair or replace it" (p. 261).

Both Toby and Zoe engage in "private research" to escape dissolution. Toby wants to write a book on "The Lost Tribe" but never goes further than the three words of the title. Zoe wants to give shape to the little silver

vision which the kiss has revealed to her. After she has finally done so by building a shape in the silver paper of an empty cigarette packet, she commits suicide. When he hears of Zoe's suicide Pat Keenan, the third character who had always wanted the other two to invest "in something clean and safe" decides to take a job in stationery because "one thing you learn in stationery is to keep things in their place; things and people" (p. 293). Pat does not engage in "private research" and reacts to the news of death by hiding his face even more deeply than before in the blue robe of our Lady or under the white wing of the mother swan.⁴

It is not difficult to understand that the novel itself is Thora Pattern's little "private research," the "pattern" — her name is significant — which she imposes upon a world of confusion and lost boundaries, the silver shape or written message which she feels bound to deliver from her privileged place in the shrine of non-being. In the last pages of the book she stands alone, like Zoe Bryce on her little cliff, considering committing suicide and making "a little kite to follow the tides of death in the sky" (p. 279). Just as Zoe and Thora are often undistinguishable from each other these characters are in turn undistinguishable from Thora Pattern, their creator. A single example will suffice to illustrate this. Here is Thora Pattern soliloquizing in her "death-free zone":

Cherish your interest, pursue your private research. My interest is in the maps of roads, underground cables, the terrible hoover that works here upon the stairs, sucking identities into the steel tube so that I watch floating and grasping vainly at the pegs and hooks and niches of air, the people I have known — Toby, Zoe, Pat, and others you do not know yet — and myself, and the creature, the member of the crew who stood apart like a god shaking the mixture of fate and pouring out in that cool room your necessity. (p. 98)

Here is Zoe Bryce in the next chapter:

I am interested now in traffic lanes, in byways, highways, in the terrible hoover at the top of the stairs, and the way my identity has been sucked in with the others

so that in the dust and suffocation of the bag which contains us all I cannot tell my own particles, I am merely wound now with the others in an accumulation of dust — scraps of hair and bone welded in tiny golf balls of identity to be cracked open, unwound, melting in the fierce heat of being. (p. 107)

The demarcation line between Janet Frame's different novels is as blurred as the contours of her characters' identities. Toby is the Toby Withers of *Owls Do Cry*, Daphne's epileptic brother. He and Zoe Bryce have so much in common that they are said somewhere in the novel to be brother and sister. Since Zoe is a projection of Thora Pattern, the latter is also Toby's "sister" and hence another of Daphne's metamorphoses. The same is true of the most important images which recur from one novel to the next with only slight alterations. We have already mentioned the cliff. The rubbish dump is another of them. In *The Edge of the Alphabet*, which begins and ends with Thora Pattern's obsession with "the litter and refuse associated with human lives" (p. 301), it becomes the "terrible hoover at the top of the stairs," an appropriate metaphor for the confusion of people's identities whose individual particles of dust are finally reunited in the indivisible whole. The dust in turn becomes people ash in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, the next novel.

Whereas Thora Pattern expressed herself through her creation while retaining a life of her own Vera Glace is completely empty and has exploded into three "selves" which have no existence except as projections of herself. This the reader does not know before the last pages of the novel in which he suddenly realizes that Erlene, Edward and Vera have never existed in their worldly functions of daughter, husband and mother and that there is only one Vera Glace, a spinster of sixty, who has been silent for thirty years and whose sole companion is a Clara Strang on whom she seems to have grafted her life: "Two torn people grafted together in secret life and growth" (p. 250). She has never left her native town where she worked as a librarian until she was suddenly struck dumb at

the age of thirty. This is the "objective," "scientific" reality as seen by two doctors who exchange reflections about her: a shrivelled creature, hardly human at all, given to posturing and to stereotyped and incomprehensible actions — a hopeless cause of schizophrenia.

But the novel tells us another story. It tells us about the secret silent dreams people like Vera Glace held inside themselves "like irremovable stones at the bottom of their minds, mixed with the sediments of their lives" (p. 247). And the reader who had already noticed a striking similarity between the three "characters" is forced to read the novel again to understand it properly. He then realizes more clearly that there is only one series of events which are seen differently by each of the three "selves" and there gradually emerges from the apparently fragmentary book the three-dimensional structure of Heidegger's *Dasein*: being-ahead-of-itself, already being-in-the-world and being-with represented respectively by Erlene (future), Edward (past) and Vera (present). Seen from inside the little schizophrenic of the last pages becomes the authentic *Dasein* looping the loop not only of her whole being but of the whole existence of the historical period in which she lives, standing in the maddening light of being, free from compromise, given to the silence of those who have given up talking in the hope of discovering the true message "placed between the layers of babble" (p. 203), holding herself open to a continual insecurity and anxiety and free from all worldly ties because she knows that these will vanish for ever with death, the ever-present possibility of her existence.

The first of Heidegger's existentials, facticity or already-being-in-the-world, is represented by Edward, a new, more articulate version of Toby in quest of the lost tribe. Edward plays with plastic soldiers and his behaviour is described in terms of tactics and strategy. The enemies against which he wages a pitiless war are time and change. He would like to believe that man is timeless and eternal

and in order to prove this he traces the lineage of an ordinary family — the Strangs — hoping to find an uninterrupted line, a “private life belt which he dreams of throwing to the human race” (p. 153). But history presupposes the transitoriness of “history-making man” for it is the advent of being among beings which would not be possible if man were eternal. Everything is all right as long as Edward deals with the past Strangs: he can remain uncommitted and live “by remote control” (p. 61). But at the end of the line of Strangs he necessarily comes to the present and the living representatives and he can no longer escape contingency. His private research which had taken him to a remote past and to the antipodes ends in New Zealand with Clara Strang, the last of the line. In the room where he talks with her a sound can be heard in the distance as “of some thing raking and shuffling” and again the hero is confronted with the ineluctable and by now familiar Gloucester situation:

“The sea’s near?” he asked.

“Down the road,” Clara answered. “It’s not for bathing, there’s an undertow; you can hear the sea everywhere.”

She seemed to be listening.

“Yes, it’s close,” Edward said.

“Oh yes, it’s close,” Clara affirmed. (p. 244)

The second of Heidegger’s existentials, “existentiality” or being-ahead-of-itself is represented by Erlene, the mute “daughter” who wants to protect herself by an uninterrupted line of silence. Erlene is obsessed with death and like the opossums when she hears sniff-sniffing in the grass she feigns death in order to escape it. If she is already dead the soldiers who pass in twos in the night will not kill her and the hawks will not alight upon her, take away the embroidered cloth in which she wraps herself for the night and eat her inside. She feels that she can achieve some measure of safety by turning people into insects or animals and by transforming everything into its negative image. Thus she turns her mother into a sheep and Dr. Clapper into Uncle Blackbeetle who takes off his black

apron each time he starts telling a story. One day she forgets herself and says aloud: "You speak like Dr. Clapper." These are the only words she utters in the novel and when the psychiatrist exclaims gladly: "But I *am* Dr. Clapper!" she runs home to find Uncle Blackbeetle cut in two on the windowsill: she has been discovered and recedes further back into herself.

Love, comprehension and language are dangerous because they would distract her from the only thing that really matters: her constant watchfulness in the face of death. She must not be taken by surprise. Language is replaced by "secret signals" which people are too busy to notice. Like Arnold's scholar-gipsy Erlene is waiting for the fire to fall from the sky. She knows, however, that it will not be the spark of love but of destruction, that it is "too late for fire, unless it was the kind which enables the soldiers to fill their sachets with people ash and disease, which forced her father to invent the Strang family in the wild hope that it would survive, as dreams may be known to do, when all else is destroyed, which confused her mother to the extent of inducing her to blackmail furniture and to weep by the grass-grown beds of rivers that consulting no one had changed their courses and without the usual patronage of willows, flax, rushes, were taking the unplanned lonelier route to the sea" (p. 236).

If Edward is obsessed with time and change, Erlene with death and silence, Vera is obsessed with light and guilt. She suggests the third of Heidegger's existentials, forfeiture or being-with. She assumes the role of the mother who is responsible for everything: "Which accident? Erlene wondered. There had never been an accident, except of birth" (p. 234). Just as Erlene plays possum in the hope of escaping death Vera pretends to be blind in order to protect herself against the dazzling light of being. When she was a child her parents used candles and kerosene lamps, a small, unobtrusive light which "did not search into far corners of each room." People still

had private places, little crimes which were left out of the searching glow. Now things have changed, everything is plunged too suddenly into light so that no crime escapes detection and she is more and more oppressed by the radiance. Though we know nothing about what, at thirty, led her to the madhouse, we know that everything would have been different if she had never taken her magnifying glass and discovered, like Daphne, that the currency of time was counterfeit:

It happened because somewhere at a certain moment one of us by chance picked up a genuine coin, judged it to be genuine, and thus could never recall the judgment. So the shining vision stays, expands, takes up room. The tiny threepenny truth melts and flows and silvers the entire view and runs down the edge of being, like moonlight; and all the time with the silver vision before us we judge, judge. (p. 151)

The keeper of the lighthouse on Waipapa beach is one of the central images of the novel. Each of Vera Glace's three "selves" remembers him in its own way. The mother, obsessed with light, remembers that she was picnicking on the beach when the man was taken to the madhouse and her father told her not to look at what did not concern her so that she never knew "whether the lighthouse keeper really changed to a bird, flying round and round under the sun" (p. 47). The daughter, obsessed with language, compares words with lighthouses "with their beacons roaming the seas to rescue the thoughts or warn them against perilous tides, cross-currents, approaching storms" (pp. 180-1). The father, obsessed with strategy, remembers a man who built himself a throne on the beach and controlled the waves. Each of the three "selves" can be identified with the keeper who became mad for having lived too long with the light: Vera would like to be blind to escape from the dazzling glow of light, Erlene waits for the flash in the sky and the wax of Edward's wings has melted because, in his attempt to escape from his human predicament he has, like Icarus, "tasted the sun" (p. 210).

The world of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* is a world of silent expectation. Nothing happens except that change creeps in, that time leaks through the breaches in the walls of the citadel in which Vera Glace has immured herself in the hope of escaping death. But even if the line of Strangs is traced back as far as Adam it finally ends up in the present, even if she refuses to speak for fear of being comprehended, the boundaries of Vera's territory are gnawed and eroded day after day with the inexorable regularity of a tide. The lighthouse keeper brings together the different threads of the novel as well as the different selves of the protagonist. He is a metaphor for authentic *Dasein*, the receptacle of being and the guardian of the house. But his fate indicates that the most complete authenticity is also the extreme limit of alienation. There had been some confusion in the minds of Toby and Zoe but here the divisions between people have vanished altogether: "the stirred smell of light [is] inseparable from dust" (p. 214). Vera Glace whose very name combines authenticity — *Vera* — and complete alienation — *Glace* or ice which is so clearly associated with madness in *Faces in the Water* — bears the burden of the historical period in which she lives. She is the guardian of language and when the message finally comes out with extraordinary force on the last page of the novel, after the atom bomb has destroyed Britain, it is the cry of a new-born species negating all humanity and all civilization and starting anew from the primordial cleft of the world.

Daphne, Istina, Thora and Vera are clearly different facets of the same character.⁵ I have pointed to a few motifs and cross-references linking the four novels together. One of these might easily be overlooked though it is the essential key to the Daphne figure. In *Faces in the Water* Istina Mavet reads Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* and quotes the first words of sonnet II, 12 — "Wolle die *Wandlung* — Choose to be Changed" — in connection with the operation on the brain with which they threaten

to change her personality. In *The Edge of the Alphabet* Toby is given the part of Orpheus in the identity game played aboard the ship. These two allusions are sufficient to remind us that Daphne, metamorphosed by the lobotomy at the end of *Owls Do Cry* is also the name of the nymph turned into a laurel at the end of Rilke's poem and that Vera was the name of the girl for whom the sonnets were written as a funeral monument.⁶

Orpheus is the common denominator. Each of the different versions of Daphne possesses some of his features. Like him Istina wanders in the country of the dead. Thora imposes order on the confusion of the world, Vera turns the shelter into a temple and rescues language from complete annihilation. Like him they have visited the country of Eurydice and have come back alienated from the society of mankind and aware that the dead are as much part of their lives as the living. Like him — torn to pieces by the fierce Maenads — they have limbs loosely attached or are split into fragments of themselves — unifying and holding together by their very dispersion. Orpheus also helps us to understand the tree imagery which runs through the novels.⁷ Retrospectively we see better why Toby dreams that he is a tree or "an entire forest, with the Lost Tribe inhabiting him" (p. 4) and why the kiss is Zoe's "tiny precious berry from the one branch of a huge tree in a forest where the trees are numberless" (p. 239), why the central part of *Faces in the Water* is called Treecroft and why Edward cannot do without his genealogical tree of Strangs. Finally Orpheus also links Janet Frame herself with Rilke and Ovid⁸ and all the poets of the past whom she has assimilated and whose voice is part of her own.

All this, I hope, suffices to indicate that Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* play a more important part in Janet Frame's early novels than might appear at first sight.⁹ They are inseparable from the intricate form she has devised to express her Heideggerian concept of man as thrown into

an already existing world, incomplete in his basic structure and continually fulfilling himself by a series of metamorphoses until he comes to the final contact with being. Just as her novels never give us the last word on anything but continue all the time to illuminate each other in all directions Daphne is never fixed in a single attitude but she is continually in the making. There always remains something which she can become but is not yet. This is suggested by her reappearance in the four novels, each time under a different guise and each time confronted with a different "ending": the lobotomy (*Owls Do Cry*), the return to normal life (*Faces in the Water*), suicide (*The Edge of the Alphabet*) or incurable schizophrenia (*Scented Gardens for the Blind*).

Whatever the metamorphosis it is death that will put the last touch to the picture by making the final choice. But because she encompasses the whole network of existence and remains constantly on the watch Daphne-Istina-Thora-Vera, alias Janet Frame herself is, like Orpheus, the keeper of the lighthouse and the guardian of language, the torchbearer standing in the radiance of the perfect circle, the authentic *Dasein* through which being reveals itself and, like the wind in a tree, sends its message to the rest of mankind.

NOTES

¹R. M. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, II, 12 (13-14).

²The editions used are: *Owls Do Cry* (1960), *Faces in the Water* (1961), *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962) and *Scented Gardens for the Blind* (1964) (New York: George Braziller). Page references in my text are to these editions.

³"Death is the shrine of non-being, that is, of that which is never and in no way a mere being, but which nevertheless is present, indeed as the mystery of being itself." (Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, p. 177. Translated and quoted by James M. Damske in *Being, Man and Death*, (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 164.

⁴The swans are "a snow convention" (p. 247). In most of Janet Frame's novels snow is a symbol of death-in-life. It falls upon all things and people, covers the vision, muffles the voice of being and wraps everything in uniform whiteness.

- ⁵"Our bookshelf had Grimm's *Fairy Tales* with its dark small print enhancing the terror of many of the tales, and its occasional pages stiffened and curled as if they had been exposed to the weather, as they had been for Grimm's *Fairy Tales* and Ernest Dowson's *Poems* and George Macdonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* had been found in the town rubbish dump." Janet Frame, "Beginnings," *Landfall*, 19, March 1965, p. 43.
- ⁶R. M. Rilke wrote the *Sonnets to Orpheus* "als ein Grab-mal für Wera Ouckama Knoop," the young artist whose untimely death had made a lasting impression on his mind.
- ⁷Rilke's sonnets begin with the "high tree in the ear" with which he identifies both Orpheus and Wera Ouckama Knoop:
Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Uebersteigung!
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum in Ohr!
- ⁸The lyre of Orpheus also gives rise to a whole forest in the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
- ⁹In "Memory and a Pocketful of Words" Janet Frame writes: "Yet when I spent eight years in a mental hospital I was rich beyond calculation, I had no need to make words out of bread, for my companions, carried about with me in a little rose-embroidered bag, were Shakespeare and a translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Who could not help being influenced by writers whose works were physical companions in the fight for survival?" *TLS*, 4 June 1964, p. 487.