Reading *An Autobiography*: Michael King, Patrick Evans and Janet Frame

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Patrick Evans, the novelist and literary critic, remembers sitting outside the former Frame residence on Eden Street, Oamaru, staring at something that did not exist. He knows that it did not exist thanks to Michael King’s biography, *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame* (2000). What he was *not* seeing was a veranda at 56 Eden Street: Michael King, by then Frame’s authorised biographer, had ‘established, once and for all, that there [was] no veranda […]’.¹ Yet, as Evans recounts, ‘somehow one got tacked on in my biographical account, even though I had visited the house in Eden Street a couple of times’;² what he discovers is that memory has no veracity in the face of Michael King’s positivist history: the veranda he remembers did not exist.

Yet he did see something in the vanishing veranda: a way of reading Janet Frame. In its absence he began to see that *An Autobiography*

is held together by a web of words and images spun from a central pun on the word ‘remember’ that derives from mention of the restored photograph of her late older sister in which a missing arm has been airbrushed back in by a photographer, thereby ‘re-membering’ her and validating all the constructed memories Frame supplies in the work.³

The missing veranda, like the disappearing arm that is reattached in representation, is the absence at the centre of these sets of
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memories and representations: for Evans, creative re-imaginings, rather than strict positivist accretions of knowledge—that is to say absence rather than presence—can lay the foundations for literary exegeses in the world of Janet Frame. This paper places Michael King’s authorised biography alongside Frame’s reflexive autobiographies (1982-5) and Evans’s re-imagining of Janet Frame and Frank Sargeson’s fraught co-existence in his novel Gifted (2010). It reads for each text’s philosophies of subjectivity, language and hermeneutics, which in the case of Evans and Frame arise from the apprehension of absence, and in the case of King arises from a positivist belief in retrievable history.

‘Do I not know that in the field of the subject, there is no referent?’, asked Roland Barthes in his 1975 autobiographical work, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes. This query—one that is central to Frame’s autobiography—establishes a central contradiction: on the one hand, Barthes seems to admit that he is unable to cease narration, to stop talking about ‘I’ as a referent, and, on the other, he attacks the apparent fiction of a referential ‘I’, from which autobiography begins. This contradiction is present from the very outset of the text, when in the epigraph he invites the reader to consider the words of ‘R. B.’ as though ‘spoken by a character in a novel’, yet writes in his own handwriting.

Frame too deliberately constructs a retrospective autobiographical subject through memory; hers are texts that similarly centre upon what cannot be known and what has been forgotten, upon the absent, unfinished yet deeply familiar central referent of autobiography—‘I’. Like Barthes, she is drawn to the opportunity that autobiography offers to seal the narration of her history, and thus to close her public memory. She claimed in an interview with Elizabeth Alley that in To the Is-Land

I wrote the story of my life—my story, and this is me which comes out. There is pain, things happen, but
whatever comes out is ordinary me without fiction or characters.8

This bold declaration aligns with the traditional referential project of autobiography, in which the author seeks to display herself as she ‘really was’. Yet perhaps Frame recognised the loss of privacy and control entailed in uniting her autobiographical self with the person holding the pen: later in the interview she effectively retracted her statement, claiming

I am always in a fictional mode, and autobiography is found fiction. I look at everything from the point of view of fiction, and so it wasn’t a change to be writing autobiography except the autobiography was more restrictive because it was based in fact, and I wanted to make an honest record of my life. But I was still bound by the choice of words and the shaping of the book, and that is similar to when one is writing fiction. I think that in writing there’s no feeling of returning to or leaving a definite form, it’s all in the same country, and within view of one’s imaginative home, so to speak, or in the same town. They are different and each has its own interest.9

Frame here reconsiders her claim to referential truth, suggesting that the autobiographical ‘Janet’ cannot be simply conflated with the author: the writing of an autobiography shares too much with the writing of fiction to be the final and authoritative truth. Yet she is still unwilling completely to decouple the Janet Frame of the text from the person holding the pen, finding that the autobiography is still ‘based in fact’. It is these connections and disconnections that constitute her autobiographical method; while keeping faith in a connection between narrative and an external referent, she signals that this story of her life is constructed out of language and fictional techniques.
Frame’s is a (meta)autobiography, in which writing, memory and narrative voice are denaturalised, analysed in the process of construction, rendered increasingly speculative and contingent. This unwillingness, in the text at least, to be the authority on the life that she is narrating comes as little surprise: authoritative accounts of Frame’s life had been used to incarcerate her for extended periods in psychiatric institutions in the 1940s and 1950s. Her first major biography, it could be said, was written by the doctors at Dunedin Public Hospital, who recorded in Frame’s clinical notes that she ‘lies in bed with her head buried in the bed clothes and grins foolishly when addressed’, shows ‘an undue interest in psychology’ and has no ‘realisation of her present condition’ (original italics).\(^1\) Out of these interviews and notes—an incipient biography—Janet Frame’s diagnosis of schizophrenia was mooted and later ‘confirmed’. As she describes, she ‘had what was known as a “history”, and ways of dealing with those with a “history” were stereotyped, without investigation’ (An Autobiography, p. 221). Acting now as the writing subject, part of her project in An Autobiography entails undermining the authority she wields as author, contesting the certitude of history and stabilised language that limit the agency of the individual, and inscribes her as both the object of knowledge and the site of power.

Frame undermines objective enquiry in the autobiography by focusing her text upon an absent centre: the enabling dynamic of the text is more misremembering and forgetting than straightforward memory and recall. Patrick Evans explores this in his article ‘Dr. Clutha’s Book of the World: Janet Paterson Frame, 1924-2004’, noting:

> Memory, after all, is what constructs subjectivity, and autobiography is a form of written subjectivity: you write out who you are by writing out what you remember.\(^1\)

This is straightforward in traditional autobiography: memories, like history, are assumed to be wholly retrievable, and can be
recorded to tell the truth. Yet Frame signals from the very outset of *To the Is-Land* that hers is not to be a traditional autobiography, opening the first chapter with a startling paragraph:

> From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth (*An Autobiography*, p. 7).

The seemingly organic ‘I’ acknowledges the birth of the subject both of and for narration—and thus the birth of the book—as a movement from a womblike origin (the first place) to ‘the world after birth’, the second place, and finally to the Third Place, ‘where the starting point is myth’. The ‘I’ that lays down the record is soon to be made up by it, but never with any finality: the final ‘I’ will be not a simple accumulation of facts, but a mixture of ‘fact and truths and memories of truth’. It is out of this that the narrative of the self—the ‘myth’—is to be constituted.

This frees Frame to wreak havoc with the world of fact, departing from it to tell her account of the traumatic experiences in her young adult life. She never truly recollects that which she lost from having her ‘memory shredded and in some aspects weakened permanently or destroyed,’ after ‘over two hundred applications of unmodified E.C.T’ (*An Autobiography*, p. 224). Frame is reconstituting myth all the way down, fashioning a narrative in which the textual ‘Janet’ descends from childhood innocence into the world of suffering. She reflects that

> time past is not time gone, it is time accumulated, with the host resembling the character in the fairytale who was joined along the route by more and more characters, none of whom could be separated from one another or from the host, with some stuck so fast that their
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presence caused physical pain. Add to the characters all
the events, thoughts, feelings, and there is a mass of
time, now a sticky mess, now a jewel bigger than the
planets and the stars (An Autobiography, pp. 191-2).

This vision enacts the process set out in the first paragraph,
transforming ‘fact’, ‘truths’ and ‘memories of truths’ into a myth
structure, or a narrative, that does not find the ‘essential’ Janet
Frame in history, but instead mobilises her-story of both
forgetting and remembering, trauma and pain, where history is
an amorphous ‘sticky mess’, so vast that it resists reduction. This
re-representation of her life-story, in which she notes the
shortcomings of the very representation she is composing, is
finalised in her conclusion to The Envoy from Mirror City, where
the last paragraphs are not those of her ascent into language and
writing, but are instead a lament for the inability to tell the full
story of her ‘books written and books planned, of friends made
and kept’ (An Autobiography, p. 434). The self will never be
finalised in a grand moment of integration; Frame’s ‘I’ is a
journey rather than a destination: the reader discovers not an
inert essential self, but an identity or a myth both constituted by
and interior to narrative and language. Leaving the story
unfinished, misremembered and forgotten, also leaves the person
holding the pen yet again occluded. This renders Janet, as the
protagonist in the novel of her life, subject to literary exegesis,
rather than Janet Frame, excavated and laid bare.

The high-wire autobiographical act that closes the first
volume brings together both Frame’s avowal and disavowal of
reference, situating herself in the world of fact, while also
denying her referential location through focusing upon
representation, binding the person holding the pen and the
protagonist in the text within a signifying loop. Like the
handwriting that opens Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, Frame’s
italicised apostrophe focuses reader attention upon the network
of subjectivities at play in the conventions of life-writing:

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I, too, practised my signature. It was a habit my father had, too, for signing his time sheets in an impressive way. [...] He would sit at the kitchen table, writing on the backs of old time sheets, G.S. Frame, George Samuel Frame [...]. Janet Paterson Frame, I wrote, looping carefully.

In early February, as a member of a Railway Family with a privilege or priv. ticket, I travelled south on the Sunday slow train to Dunedin and my Future (An Autobiography, p. 140, original italics).

The ‘I’ is overloaded here: ‘I’ both practices a carefully looped signature and knows that ‘I’ will travel south on a Sunday slow train to Dunedin; ‘I’ is both character and narrator, linked by name, but temporally forty years apart, fractured amid the collision of past and future. The careful displacements that mark life-writing are at issue as layers; selves and time become a garbled ‘sticky mess’. Representation, ultimately, pulls the temporal rug from under our feet, tripping up those in search of the ‘real me’; in the author-narrator-character relationship, Janet Frame slips away again, the very idea of locating essence occluded in the ostensible process of revelation.

Despite Frame’s metafictionalising of the autobiographical process, however, Michael King’s Wrestling with the Angel does not retain a critical distance from An Autobiography. The biography begins with an Author’s Note outlining the limitations of the work, as Janet Frame herself asked that the work ‘not be a critical biography’; she asked that it contain ‘just the facts’.13 This suited King’s expertise: he came ‘at biography out of the discipline of history, not literary criticism’, after all, and he was ‘best equipped to write’ a traditional ‘life and times’ biography.14 The result, however, is that the biography relies upon a foundational misreading of Frame’s autobiography for its theoretical and material operations; indeed, in abdicating the
right to examine critically the literary textures of Frame’s writing, he both passes over the possibilities of carefully reading Frame’s fiction for biography and transforms the autobiography into an historical document, one subject not to literary analysis, but to the ordinary problems of historical exegesis.

Following one of Frame’s carefully-worked tropes—women wearing slacks—is instructive in this regard. Slacks feature heavily in Frame’s fiction, as well as in her autobiography. Francie’s slacks in *Owls Do Cry* signify both her rebellion and her growing up, just as they are the material of Myrtle’s rebellion in the autobiography. Slacks return in *An Angel at My Table*, promising not freedom this time, but re-entrainment within another normative system; that is, Sargeson’s patriarchal rejection of ‘feminine fripperies’ and the female body more generally (*An Autobiography*, p. 276). Frame writes:

> In all his conversation there was a vein of distrust, at times hatred, of women as a species distinct from men, and when he was in the mood for exploring that vein, I listened uneasily, unhappily, for I was a woman and he was speaking of my kind. [...] I felt constantly hurt by his implied negation of a woman’s body. [...] He preferred me to wear slacks rather than dresses (*An Autobiography*, pp. 249-50).

Frame here invites us to consider Sargeson as a gay patriarch, one who is strictly normative and who inscribes the female body as a site of threat or absence; slacks stand in for this construction, as their shape denies the female body and contains the protagonist’s heterosexual femininity. Slacks return again when Sargeson arranges for Janet to meet his lesbian writer friend, Paula Lincoln, who gives to Frame a pair of her signature grey flannels:

> I tried them on. They fitted. I could not tell her that I disliked wearing slacks, that I thought these were ugly
with baggy legs, and the grey flannel reminded me too much of our old junior high uniform (*An Autobiography*, p. 276).

Lincoln’s gift threatens to take away Janet’s new-found freedom ‘from the ceaseless opinions about my hair and my clothes and the behind which showed through my skirt’ (*An Autobiography*, p. 250): as with her school uniform or her hospital gown, she is yet again subject to normative opinion, prescribing what she should wear in an attempt to determine how she should act.

King performs not a literary reading of the slacks, however, but an historical one, firmly emphasising material history over literary textures. He quotes from the autobiography, noting Dawson’s masculine taste in clothing and her dislike of ‘frills and fripperies’ (*Wrestling*, p. 141), and recounting, albeit without any critical commentary, the exchange of the slacks:

Frame tried them on and they fitted. She could not bring herself to tell the older woman [Elizabeth Dawson] that she disliked both their shape and their colour (*Wrestling*, p. 142).

King here omits the comparison Frame draws between the slacks’ colour and her former school uniform, using her writing to demonstrate only that she disliked the specific shade of the pants (grey) and their cut (baggy). The sequence stands alone, the story of a material incident, rather than the story of Frame’s emergence from subject to agent, able finally to reject nominative prescriptions and live in the freedom of her mind.

Teeth are another crucial unifying trope in the autobiography, metaphorising a philosophy of language predicated upon absence, and standing in for Frame’s emotional condition. One of her earliest memories in the autobiography is of a dentist removing a tooth. This first example marks Frame’s fall into language:
The visit to the dentist marked the end of my infancy and my introduction to a threatening world of contradictions where spoken and written words assumed a special power. […] I was taken to the dentist, where I kicked and struggled, thinking that something dire was about to happen to me, while the dentist, in the midst of my struggles, beckoned to the nurse, who came forward holding a pretty pink towel. ‘Smell the pretty pink towel,’ she said gently, and unsuspecting, I leaned forward to smell, realising too late as I felt myself going to sleep that I’d been deceived. […] How could a few kind words mean so much harm? (An Autobiography, pp. 22-3).

The removal of the tooth signals the irrecoverable decoupling of words from things, while the world of language itself is imagined for the first time as the world of deceit. She wakes up toothless, aware of what is absent: both her tooth and her faith in language—full presence literally and figuratively have been permanently lost. King, though, recounts this passage rather more simply:

Then, on her first visit to the dentist, Janet was persuaded to ‘smell the pretty pink towel’ which in fact felt smelt acrid and put her to sleep. She awoke to the realisation that she had been deceived and had lost a tooth (Wrestling, p. 22).

In this account, a philosophy of language is of marginal interest: what is important is that Janet Frame went to the dentist, had a tooth removed and felt deceived.

Both King and Frame recount another harrowing visit to the dentist, this time when Frame was twenty-three. The autobiographer represents the dentist as a messenger of state power: her rotting teeth a source of constant embarrassment, she is afraid of him, but also aware of this fear’s Freudian
implications: ‘guilt over masturbation’ (An Autobiography, p. 202). When she finally relents and has her teeth removed, she wakes up, toothless, and is immediately ‘admitted to Sunnyside Hospital’ (An Autobiography, p. 213), her psychological defences, too, rendered toothless. In this account, the removal of her teeth is the first in a series of increasingly horrific operations that inscribe normative state power upon her body, with the aim of transforming her into a ‘normal’ person without ‘fancy intellectual notions about being a writer’ (An Autobiography, p. 222). King’s account, in contrast, simply places the event in its chronological location, without citing any evidence:

There was one decisive thing that Grete Christeller was able to do, however. She arranged for Frame to have all her top teeth removed under anaesthetic at Christchurch Public Hospital. The operation was performed in December 1947. […] Late in February 1948, accompanied by Grete Christeller, Frame went back to the Christchurch Public Hospital for an assessment of her mental health; and from there she was admitted as a voluntary patient to Sunnyside Mental Hospital (Wrestling, pp. 95-6).

This account separates the visit to the dentist and her admission to Sunnyside, noting both the temporal and causal gap between the events. King thus recasts Frame not so much as the unwitting and unwilling victim of a series of paternalistic medical professionals, but as somebody at least partially complicit in her admission and the processes that led to it. Again, his account transforms Frame’s experience, performing the task of cataloguing her life and putting it into linear order, but without explicating the episode’s significance to the subject. Janet Frame, the subjectivity, remains out of the biographer’s reach.

This is where King is caught between two referential objectives: to display Janet Frame’s lived reality (what Eakin calls ‘psychic truth’), and to write positivist history. Eakin suggests
that these aims are not necessarily mutually exclusive: biographers can learn from autobiography that ‘simplistic notions of biographical fact need to be enlarged in order to include modes of fiction that often constitute the experiential reality of life history’. Yet, in this biography, King does not read An Autobiography as both literary text and historical document; rather, he reads the text through a strictly literal model, one that ultimately transforms the autobiography’s fluctuating relationship with the world of reference into ‘errors’ of fact and biographical lacunae.

How does one read for the author in An Autobiography? How should biographical enquiry be performed in the world of Janet Frame? Patrick Evans, in Gifted, provides a speculative response to these questions, crafting a novel that is at once a reading of the autobiography, Frame’s oeuvre more generally and an enactment of the reading process. Gifted invites and then frustrates organic readings, self-consciously asking its readers to crack codes, head down interpretive blind alleys and otherwise seek out the paranoid interpretations that are immediately familiar to readers of Frame, all with the promise that the keen literary sleuth can make the novel simply resolve. In doing so, Evans encodes his own experience of reading and researching Frame, one which led him to conclude in 1993 that he had come close to locating ‘some kind of uncomfortable aboriginal truth, some skeleton in the oedipal closet’. Writing eleven years later, in 2004, he was a little more reflexive, wondering whether his misreading was generated by the fiction itself, by what he calls the ‘Frame Effect’: ‘the sense which dogs her writing that there is more to be told, that it conceals a larger secret or secrets which, if known, would somehow explain her work to us’. This is deeply unfashionable as a critical approach, yet, as Jan Cronin notes, this is an uncomfortably accurate description of where Frame can leave her readers, seeking some fantasy of grand
resolution, only to find that it remains somehow just out of reach.20

This is the experience of reading Gifted. The text pulls focus upon a readerly search for oedipal skeletons and aboriginal truths: Evans's multi-layered 'Russian Doll' literary ventriloquism simulates readers' frustrated attempts to locate the single, true Frame of reference. In the text, the outside layer is a fictionalised Frank Sargeson, who becomes the text's 'Frame narrator' and is the amalgamation of Sargeson's writing voices, including his own autobiography (see Gifted, p. 301). This narrator describes his personal journey, as well as that of the fictional Janet Frame, the second layer, who is both a fictional character in the traditional sense, but who is also linked—to what extent remains uncertain—to the real subject who lived in Sargeson's army hut. Beneath all of this, as Evans writes, is a theoretical core, a reading of Frame's philosophy of language (see Gifted, p. 302), one that in criticism he has termed a 'spiritual, transformative process of re-enchantment'.21 Yet, while this 'core' patterns the text, it does not provide a simple path back to the biographical Janet Frame and her fictional world. This much is noted in the novel itself, when the Frame character suggests that the world of language cannot simply retrieve the world of things: words are not 'little donkeys that go out and bring back a load of facts for us' (Gifted, p. 53). Instead, Evans embarks upon a very different referential project, one that entails knitting fact and non-fact into narrative in order to re-represent Janet Frame—not the material life of the physical woman, but the author as we know her through her writing, the figure of the author made fictional, one who sees a language that helps to construct the world of things.

The language games that reappear throughout Gifted are the clearest response to the process of reading Frame. They frustrate mimetic interpretative schemes, requiring the reader to make the same leaps of faith with which readers of Frame are so familiar, in an attempt to crack riddles that are discovered through voyages in linguistic analogy rather than through objective,
systematic enquiry. As a critic, Evans lays bare his rudimentary associative method of enquiry, suggesting that Frame in *An Autobiography* transforms 'John Money' into 'John Forrest' through 'a series of implicit puns which goes Money/belt/belt-of-trees/forest/Forrest' (original italics). Yet the puns he finds are no more satisfying than any other; perhaps he could have looked at what was not there, at the fact that money does not grow on trees, even if it is made out of them, or that 'the love of money is the root of all of evil'; perhaps, given an infinite number of associative leaps, one could find an infinite number of viable paths on the road from Money to Forrest. It is surely out of the frustration—and joy—of finding constantly referring, signifying life in language that Evans comes to have Frame delivering mystifying notes to Sargeson, proclaiming, 'a fruit in the middle of its location' (p. 150), 'meaning all volume satisfies' (p. 178) and 'kind hawks kill' (p. 262). Each of these riddles breaks down to reveal a single word, although only some are resolved for us: the fruit, for example, turns out to be a 'loquat', which has seeds at the centre of 'its location' (p. 217). These 'uncreating words' point to a surprising relationship between language and the world: shimmering at 'the edge of meaning' (p. 285), the resolved riddles seem to be able to somehow impound or enclose reality in Evans's fictional world. The 'kind hawks', for example, turn out to be a kind of hawk, a 'harrier', which stands in for Sargeson's on-again-off-again partner Harry Doyle (p. 285); the Frame character thus suggests through her note that Doyle 'harries' and 'kills' Sargeson, while it also evokes his frequent hoicking. Extending the metaphor a little, she may be suggesting that Doyle acts like a hawk, swooping into Sargeson's life without warning and taking a part of Sargeson's life away with him. These language games are Evans's praxis: in criticism he has found that 'Anglo-Saxon language' in *The Adaptable Man* (1965) stands in for a language that not only 'means what it says', but also comes prior to the world and, more startlingly, 'actually creates'. Here the notes Frame leaves Sargeson act in the same
way, if not transforming the fictional world around them through the magical process of naming, then, at the very least, re-enchanting it with a deep sense of wonder and possibility.

In *Gifted* the word does not move away from the world of reference; rather, it moves into it, making it anew in unexpected and unaccountable ways. This experience is captured in the character Solomon—a character Evans constructed to stand in for the old men Sargeson looked after around Auckland—who disappears when Sargeson stops remembering him. Evans’s Frame warns Sargeson about this:

> It’s obvious, she said. It’s obvious what’s happened—
> It is—?
> It’s what happens when you forget people, she said.
> They stop existing—
> You mean they disappear—?
> No. No. They stop *existing*, they don’t *exist* any more—

(*Gifted*, p. 173).

This is exactly how the saga plays out: as Solomon falls out of memory and language, every trace that the man lived at all disappears, leaving Sargeson querying the man’s very existence. This leads to something of an epiphany:

> [Ben] listened very carefully as I explained about the riddles, and how they worked for Janet in helping her to understand the world—about the loquats, and that extraordinary moment when the word had seemed almost to *make* the object in my hand, as if it had created something out of nothing. I tried to tell him how, if you learned to think and see like this, according to Janet the world became a book itself, a world that you could read (*Gifted*, p. 297).

Sargeson’s earlier no-nonsense rationalist certainty is displaced by a moment of insight, where the world writes back in response
to language and makes the loquat in his hand the moment it is correctly represented: in this vision language has irrupted into the world, converting the world into a ‘book’ that may be read. Yet when the world-as-text returns in the closing paragraphs of the novel, as Ben and Sargeson swerve off a road to avoid running over a harrier hawk, its relationship to ‘Janet’s words’ is less immediately clear:

And it turned out that’s what [Ben had] been trying to avoid, as we came around the corner and caught it feeding in the road. It’d risen at the last moment from its carrion, he said, and all but hit him in the face—A harrier hawk, he said. He pointed up into the sky. It got away, he said—And there it was, hung in the air above us [...]. Released from Janet’s words it hung above us in truth and fact, watching us, being watched, looking out for things, ready to take over and in turn be overtaken. The meeting-point, it seemed in that small moment, of everything that might be said of the world, and everything that might become of the saying of it—("Gifted", pp. 298-9).

Janet’s words have not quite come true here: the ‘kind hawk’ almost kills Sargeson; the world of language is transforming the world of things, certainly, but it is not truly determining it. Thus the prelapsarian unity between word and thing is never truly achieved; rather, both representation and reality are writing into each other, unstable in their relationships of composition and interpretation.

Yet, in a very different sense, ‘Janet’s words’ have indeed helped to found this world: the hawk itself seems to have dropped out of Frame’s fiction and into Evans’s novel. Mavis Barwell-Halleton, one of the multifaceted narrators in Living in the Maniototo (1979) feels that
language in its widest sense is the hawk suspended above eternity, feeding from it but not of its substance and not necessarily for its life and thus never able to be translated into it; only able by a wing movement, so to speak, a cry, a shadow, to hint at what lies beneath it on the untouched, undescribed almost unknown plain.25

Frame’s philosophy of language in Living in the Maniototo, as represented by the hawk, amounts to what Cronin refers to as a ‘quasi-Augustinian account of the proliferation of signification within the sign, blocking the transcendental vision’;26 language, in its attempts to transform the plain of ‘eternity’ into that which can be comprehended, succeeds only in shadowing or hinting at what lies beneath. In Gifted, the plain through which Sargeson motorcycles is not eternity, but the world-as-book, where the hints laid throughout the text briefly and unexpectedly irrupt into the fictional world. At the very moment Frame’s words seem to be making the world, however, it again escapes; the hawk, once released of its ‘carry-on’—the luggage of language that both sustains it and impedes its flight—becomes fully itself, finally free from ‘Janet’s words’.

Word and thing are only momentarily recoupled: it is through ‘wing movement’, ‘a cry’ and ‘a shadow’—that is to say another layer of representation—that language truly helps to interpret and compose the world.

This is where we may return to where we began, with Patrick Evans examining a veranda that did not exist. Gifted is now that veranda, connected to the Janet Frame story, in view of her ‘imaginative home’, but never within it. In this sense, Evans’s textuality is reminiscent of Frame’s. After recounting the death of her sister Myrtle, Frame remembers her sister’s photographic re-membering:

The photographer downtown was unable to extract Myrtle entirely from that family group, because he was forced to leave behind one of Myrtle’s arms that had been around Marguerite. Undaunted, the photographer
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fashioned for Myrtle a new photographic arm and at last presented us with a complete enlarged photo of Myrtle (*An Autobiography*, p. 87).

The veranda that Evans has grafted back onto the house in the form of *Gifted* similarly re-members a crucial period in Frame’s life through fiction, imaginatively repopulating what is in King’s account a dry facticity, one constructed out of the battens and beams of objective enquiry. While, for King at least, objective truth is accessed through historical enquiry, for Evans, ways of reading and remembering are to be sought fictionally, eschewing the question of what happened and when. His novel is his praxis: in *Gifted* he re-enchants language itself, placing Frame in the very fictional situations she constructed throughout her life, in order to tender a reading of her philosophy of language, suggesting that for Frame—and perhaps for us too—language may come prior to the world.

**Notes**

3 Patrick Evans, ‘Reaching for Rilke’s Angel: Janet Frame’s Translations’, *Journal of Post-Colonial Cultures and Societies*, 1.1 (2010), 22-33 (p. 31).

In *The Same Room: Conversations with New Zealand Writers*, ed. by Elizabeth Alley and Mark Williams (Auckland: AUP, 1992) p. 43.

In *The Same Room*, pp. 46-7. Susan Ash accounts for these differences by noting that the *Landfall* interview (which is republished in *The Same Room*) actually conflates two separate interviews, one in 1983 and one in 1988. By 1988, Ash suggests, Frame was more concerned with 'honest fiction-making' than 'factual truth'. See Susan Ash, "'The Absolute, Distanced Image': Janet Frame's Autobiography", *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 11 (1993), 21-40 (pp. 23-4).


King, ‘Compassionate Truth.’

'Paula Lincoln' is the pseudonym Janet Frame gives Elizabeth Pudsey Dawson. In this essay the name 'Paula Lincoln' refers to the 'character' in the autobiography and 'Elizabeth Dawson' refers to the real-life mutual friend of Frame and Sargeson.
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17. Eakin, p. 54.
24. Patrick Evans, seminar on *Gifted*, delivered as part of the University of Canterbury English Department Seminar Series. University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 2 August 2010.