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Perceiving the Vertigo: The Fall of the Heroine in Four  
New Zealand Writers

by

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## Abstract

In this study I analyse the role of the heroine in the work of four New Zealand writers, Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme, starting from the assumption that such a role is influenced by the notion of the fall and by the perception of the vertigo entailed in it. In order to prove this I turn to the texts of four New Zealand writers dedicating one chapter to each.

In the first chapter a few of Katherine Mansfield's short stories are analysed from the vantage point of the fall, investigated both in the construction of the character's subjectivity and in the construction of the narration. In the second chapter a link is established between Katherine Mansfield and Robin Hyde. A particular emphasis is put on the notion of subjectivity in relationship developed by the two writers, highlighting the link between this kind of subjectivity and the notion of the fall. In the third chapter the focus is subsequently shifted to Robin Hyde's work, in particular one of her novels, *Wednesday's Children*, which is read in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. In the fourth chapter the notion of the fall is analysed in the fiction of Janet Frame, which is related to the treatment of the notion of the fall present in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*. The fifth chapter is dedicated to the analysis of *The Bone People* as in the novel the notion of the fall and the vertigo perception find their fullest expression, whilst in the sixth chapter a significant parallel is drawn between Janet Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind* and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* and links are established with their predecessors.

Finally in the seventh chapter the critical perspective is broadened to comprise those common elements in the writing of Katherine Mansfield, Robin

Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme that have been neglected by focusing uniquely on the notion of the fall, and thus to contribute to a more complete overall picture of the comparison presented in this study.

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## Introduction

The untenable sense of the uncanny, which haunts the image of the spiral in all its artistic representations from Gian Battista Piranesi's drawings, *Le Carceri*, to Robert Smithson's sculptures, has been the source of inspiration for this study. From Edgar Allan Poe's supernatural vision in *The Fall of the House of Usher* to Queequeg's spirals, ancient symbols of death and rebirth, tattooed on his body according to Polynesian customs, in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the spiral has exerted on the mind the same inexplicable fascination.

Seen as a deviation from the norm in that it contradicts the linear sense of direction, the spiral reconsiders distances by gauging them in a different way so that the far away becomes the near and vice versa. In temporal terms the spiral can either know the past or the future, but not the present as its projecting quality prevents it from lingering in the present, which accounts among other things for the sense of tautology the spiral is endowed with. Its curling, winding shape hints at the meandering the traveller has to undertake once the journey has started. A precondition of the journey is the loss of any direction, and the willingness to succumb to the vertigo that such a loss of direction engenders. Similarly the journey within the spiral of literary texts I invite the reader to embark on has no end, as the point of arrival is a vanishing point.

The choice of Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme has been dictated to me by the sense of the journey as a form of initiation,

which evades direction and linear time, present in their writing. Recurrent in their works is the image of the boat associated with water, elements of mythological descent reminiscent of the journey to the nether world. By moving away from the notion of direction as straight path, going from one point to another, their writing creates its own rules, and it is thus perceived as innovative and subversive. The movement away from “the proper path of reason” which Michel Foucault identifies with the movement engendered by the vertigo suggests furthermore a dimension of folly, where the word folly must be understood in the literary context in which it is used and not as a psychiatric term aimed at defining insanity. Folly as a form of resistance to direction, to the established and the pre-conceived, represents one of the major features in the works of the four writers.

Therefore, in the first chapter of this study I want to argue that Katherine Mansfield’s writing courts madness insofar as her short stories are moulded on the perception of the vertigo, entailed in the notion of the fall, which is perceived by her characters in that moment of suspension when the sense of direction is lost to them, and they are allowed to cast a glance at themselves as if from above. The perception of the vertigo makes Katherine Mansfield’s characters aware of the divided nature of their self, and enables the writer at the same time to represent, through what I have defined in the second chapter as the fragmented wholeness of the self, that moment of crisis which characterizes the moment of the fall. The notion of the fall is investigated in Katherine Mansfield’s short stories both in the construction of the character’s subjectivity and in the construction of the narration, showing how the perception of the vertigo permeates the narrative text on the level of the content and on that of the form.

Folly regarded as a loss of the sense of direction permeates the work of Robin Hyde, and in particular characterizes the peculiar use of the fantastic present in one of her most neglected novels, *Wednesday's Children*. The perception of the vertigo is exemplified in the novel, as it occurs in Katherine Mansfield's short stories, both in the depiction of the characters and in the construction of the narrative text where it achieves its most hyperbolic expression. This partly explains my decision to read the novel in the light of the theory of the carnivalesque as treated by the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In these texts a definition of madness as a deviation from the official path of reason is achieved. Madness is furthermore considered to be the revitalizing kernel of the carnivalistic permeating literary genres, and its power is associated with that of the imagination. In her use of the fantastic Robin Hyde subverts the rules of verisimilitude regulating the realistic novel as the carnivalistic subverts the rules regulating society by bringing the low high and vice versa, and thus succumbing to the vertigo of complete anarchy and misrule. Bakhtin's menippeia, the literary genre which best delivers the idea behind the carnivalesque, reveals furthermore a similar use of the fantastic to that featuring in Robin Hyde's novel.

The spiralling journey I have initiated the reader into draws to the third point, which is the turning point of the study, where Janet Frame's fiction is analysed in the light of her predecessors. In Janet Frame's works madness is still to be considered, though putting more emphasis on it, as a form of resistance to the establishment; yet the term, despite the writer's personal experience, must be regarded as part of the literary context in which it is inserted, and her novels, in particular those hinting at her life, must be seen as independent literary creations.

The notion of the fall entailed in the vertigo perception is achieved here as in Katherine Mansfield's stories and Robin Hyde's novels through the construction of the character's subjectivity, and at the same time through the construction of the narrative discourse. Particular attention is given to one of her novels, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, which is analysed in relation to Robin Hyde's *Wednesday's Children* and to Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, though the notion of the fall is not limited to this one novel, but it is investigated in other novels as well.

The notion of the fall and the vertigo perception find their final and most exhaustive expression in the analysis of Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, where the writer not only draws upon the notion of the fall, but makes it the pivot of both the narrative structure and of the novel's characterization. The loss of the centre which engenders the journey of initiation subsequent to the fall is investigated in full detail, and is put in relationship with the spiralling movement informing the novel, as in *The Bone People* for the first time the heroine does not only fall into the abyss but traces her way back in a double movement which is simultaneously concentric and excentric.

Having supported my argument about the perception of the vertigo and the notion of the fall with the analysis of the texts in question, I come back to the beginning of this study where the reflection on the writing of Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme sparked off my comparison. I dedicate the last chapter of this study to their writing and its form, which is cyclic, looking at the same time back and ahead, back to the past and ahead to a utopic future where the present is effaced by the moment of artistic creation in accordance with the projecting movement of the spiral and its vanishing point.

## **CHAPTER I**

**Losing direction:**

**the subversive writing of Katherine Mansfield**

## A hidden country still to be explored

Whilst engrossed in the difficult task of reviewing Virginia Woolf's novel *Night and Day* Katherine Mansfield made an important comment on the general state of the novels of her time. To Mansfield, they failed to realize that a radical change of perspective followed the tragic events of the First World War:

[...] the more I read the more I feel all these novels will not do [...] And yet I feel one can lay down no rules. It's not in the least a question of material or style or plot. I can only think in terms like a 'change of heart'. I can't imagine how after the war these men can pick up the old threads as though it had never been.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere in her *Journal* dealing specifically with Woolf's novel Mansfield criticizes the "utter coldness and indifference" of her friend's prose calling the novel "a lie in the soul,"<sup>2</sup> blind to the new tragic reality artists had to confront. Travelling through warring France in 1918 and staying in a hotel in Paris in the April of the same year during unnerving air raid attacks, Mansfield managed to form a complete and frightening picture of the war and its dehumanizing effects. Looking down in the street from the window of her hotel bedroom she observes two workmen clearing away the debris after a bombardment:

Two workmen arrived to clear away the débris. One found, under the dust, a woman's silk petticoat. He put it on and danced a step or two for the laughing crowd...That filled me with such horror that I'll never get out of

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<sup>1</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume III, 1919-1920, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 97

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 82

my mind the fling of his feet and his grin and the broken trees and the broken house.<sup>3</sup>

The war could not be simply left out of literature as it would not leave untouched, either, the life of those who refused to allow their glance to rest upon it. Ironically enough, Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941 after the nerve-racking bombardments of London by the German airforces during World War Two. Katherine Mansfield was in Vincent O'Sullivan's words "among that group of writers who understood early on how the First World War was a permanent fragmentation of what living in Europe implied."<sup>4</sup> Europe was not to be the same any longer as the access to the "treasures...of civilised humanity," as Sigmund Freud remarked, had been for ever denied by the Great War.<sup>5</sup> The relentlessness of the situation required, according to Mansfield, a radical change of perspective deeply affecting the way writers wrote:

I feel in the *profoundest* sense that nothing can ever be the same - that, as artists, we are traitors if we feel otherwise: we have to take it into account and find new expressions, new moulds for our new thoughts and feelings. Is this exaggeration? What has been, stands, but Jane Austen could not write *Northanger Abbey* now - or if she did, I'd have none of her.<sup>6</sup>

The need for "new expressions, new moulds for new thoughts and feelings" corresponds to a change of perspective due to the historical reality coeval to Mansfield, and gives voice at the same time to the writer's general sense of

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<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume II, 1918-1919, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 150

<sup>4</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent, *Finding The Pattern, Solving The Problem. Katherine Mansfield the New Zealand European*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1989, pp. 7-8

<sup>5</sup> Freud, Sigmund, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", *Civilization, Society and Religion*, the Pelican Freud Library, Vol.12, 1980, p. 63

<sup>6</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume III, 1919-1920, p. 82

restlessness in relation to the medium of prose which she felt had yet to be discovered:

I do believe that the time has come for a 'new word' but I imagine the new word will not be spoken easily. People have never explored the lovely medium of prose. It is a hidden country still - I feel that so profoundly.<sup>7</sup>

This sense of restlessness emerges now and again throughout her *Journal*, taking alternatively either the form of a deep dissatisfaction with the appearance of things, or a questioning of her identity as a writer, or the bold certainty of being up to something completely new, something like an invention of her own more than anything else, a fresh start marked by what posterity recognized to be the signature of genius and originality.<sup>8</sup> As Virginia Woolf remarked after one of their meetings, Katherine Mansfield gave the impression of "someone apart, entirely self-centred; altogether concentrated upon her 'art': almost fierce to me about it..."<sup>9</sup> This impression is furthermore confirmed by the recurrence in Mansfield's journals and letters of thoughts concerning writing, and the haunting role played by it in her life until the very end. Constantly dissatisfied by her achievements, she thrust writing ahead as if in permanent exploration. In a review of 1919 she stressed the importance of experimentalism as the very characteristic of a true artist:

There is a little which the amateur novelist shares (but how differently !) with the true artist: it is that of experimentalist. However deep the knowledge a writer has of his characters, however finely he may convey that knowledge to us, it is only when he passes beyond it, when he begins

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<sup>7</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume II, 1918-1919, p. 343

<sup>8</sup> Stead, C.K., "Katherine Mansfield: The Art of the 'Fiction'", *In The Glass Case. Essays on New Zealand Literature*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1981, p. 29, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1920-24*, 31 May 1920, Anne Olivier Bell, ed., London, Hogarth Press, 1977-84, vol. II, p. 43

to break new ground, to discover for himself, to experiment, that we are enthralled. The false writer begins as an experimentalist; the true artist ends as one.<sup>10</sup>

And yet together with that constant dissatisfaction peculiar to many craftsmen Katherine Mansfield seemed to be conscious of - as if it were a kind of inexpressible foreboding - something lying at the very bottom of her writing bound to come to the surface, like the sudden flowering of a late bud in the form of 'the new word' which would make, as she said it would, what had been written so far pale all at once, as if it were nothing but a prelude to what was still to come:

And yet one has these 'glimpses', before which all that one ever has written (what has one written?) - (yes, all) that one has ever read, pales [...] <sup>11</sup>

## **Bound To Fall: moments of suspension in the fiction of Katherine Mansfield**

In February 1920 Katherine Mansfield wrote in her *Journal*:

The waves, as I drove home this afternoon, and the high foam, how it was suspended in the air before it fell...What is it that happens in that moment of suspension? It is timeless. In that moment (what do I mean?) the whole life of the soul is contained. One is flung up - out of life - one is 'held', and then - down, bright, broken, glittering on to the rocks, tossed back, part of the ebb and flow.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *Novels and Novelists*, J. Middleton Murry, ed., London, Constable, 1930, p. 32

<sup>11</sup> Middleton, Murry John, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, London, Constable, 1962, p. 202

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 202-203

Through the suggestive image of the waves and the high foam suspended in the air, Katherine Mansfield powerfully delivers the central idea underpinning her fiction, determining the fate of many of her characters, and the very quality of her writing which is so peculiar and unmistakably unique. In many of her short stories that timeless moment of suspension makes its appearance and cries out, casting heroes and heroines into a sort of voiceless despair. The writer's question ("What is it that happens in that moment of suspension?") echoes - to give an example - Bertha Young's cry of despair at the conclusion of "Bliss" (1918) that coincides with the climax of the short story:

"'Oh what is going to happen now?' she cried"<sup>13</sup>

Bertha's question remains unanswered, yet one is haunted by the feeling that an answer has been provided and passed unheeded, the key to it lying in the very fabric of the short story and in the long shadow cast by the pear tree as the very focus of the narration. Bertha's cry of despair marking the turning point, the climax of the short story, presents the narration as a pretext, a prelude to that moment of suspension that Bertha's cry ultimately suggests, and to which the pear tree in its almost supernatural stillness bears witness. Apart from its possible sexual implications revealed by a Freudian reading of the text,<sup>14</sup> the pear tree has technically speaking a strategic relevance to the structure of the narration as it enables the story to achieve its climax. Its presence is felt already at the very

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<sup>13</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, London, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 105

<sup>14</sup> Nebeker, H., "The Pear Tree: Sexual Implications in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss", *MFS* 18 (1972-73), pp. 545-51

beginning when the pear tree is described in its overwhelming splendour as “tall,” “slender,” “in fullest, richest blossom” and further in the text as the mysterious link between Bertha and the other woman, Pearl Fulton. Yet it is only at the very end, when the focus is shifted from Bertha to the pear tree again, that one fully understands its meaning within the text. Its stability, its unchanging quality throughout the narration (“as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still”) serve to dramatise the moment of suspension experienced by Bertha, and to make it timeless. By shifting the focus from Bertha, as a character, constructed according to time-logic rules, to the physical reality of the pear tree, the writer replaces time with spatialisation, forwarding the background image of the tree in a sort of close-up until it almost outgrows the image of Bertha standing behind the windows, overshadowing it, and hinting at the same time at an *ur*-image of universal significance.

The passage between temporal and a-temporal dimension, the shifting from time to “spatial form,” which are, as Joseph Frank<sup>15</sup> points out, the very characteristics of Modernist literature, enact the moment of suspension when the character is in Mansfield’s words “flung up, out of life,” is “held” to fall down and break. In one of her reviews Mansfield significantly underlines the importance of that “blazing moment” which is responsible for the replacement of external crisis with internal crisis of plot in modern fiction, warning against the loss of all sense of crisis which she detected in some modernist novelists:

Without [the sense of crisis] how are we to appreciate the importance of one ‘spiritual event’ rather than another? What is it to prevent each being

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<sup>15</sup> Frank, Joseph, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, *Sewanee Review* LIII (1945), pp. 221-40, 433-56, 643-53

unrelated - complete in itself - if the gradual unfolding in growing, gaining light is not to be followed by one blazing moment?<sup>16</sup>

What is interesting to note is that the moment of suspension which marks the internal crisis of plot in modern fiction entails in Mansfield's writing both the achievement of a climax within the story and the hint of the subsequent sloping down of the line, drawn by the narrative hyperbole, which is the prelude to the character's atomization. In Mansfield's stories such a downward movement is rendered through the usage of the vertigo effect as if the writer, in flinging her characters out of life and holding them before the precipice, would allow them a glance at the void far below. In "Bliss" the vertical presence ("tall and "slender") of the pear tree is evoked among other things to suggest the vertigo perceived by the character in the short story, a vertigo that is rendered stylistically by the reiteration of the word "pear tree" as it is first uttered by Pearl Fulton on leaving Bertha ("Your lovely pear tree!" she murmured") and the phrase keeps echoing hypnotically in Bertha's mind after Miss Fulton has left ("Your lovely pear tree - pear tree - pear tree!"). The perception of the vertigo entailed in the moment of suspension cannot be conceived without the presence of the tree whose absolute stillness makes the fall of the character only more inevitable. The heroine is bound to fall, the pear tree is bound to bear witness, the stillness is bound to speak without telling. Similarly in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958) it is the vertical structure of the mission tower with its spiralling staircase that suggests the imminent fall of the heroine, Judy/Madeleine, played by a mysterious Kim Novak.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *Novels and Novelists*, p. 32

<sup>17</sup> White, Susan, "Allegory and Referentiality: *Vertigo* and Feminist Criticism", *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 106, 1991, pp. 911-932

movement engendered by the spiral which is both centrifugal and centripetal is responsible for the perception of the vertigo. The mission tower, like the pear tree in Mansfield's short story, is both the passive scenario where the perception of the vertigo as desire to fall is eventually sparked off, and at the same time the element actively responsible for the moment of recognition. Mansfield's shifting distances and perspectives share something with Hitchcock's filmic techniques, especially in the peculiar use of the track-zoom shot which constitutes the main technical novelty of Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*.<sup>18</sup> Hitchcock achieved his vertigo effect not just thematically by representing spiral-shaped objects like Judy/Madeleine's knot of hair, the sequoia trees or the spiralling staircase of the mission tower, but also technically by trailing away from the subject of the shot while at the same time zooming toward it. An example of it is the repeated shot representing Scottie/James Stewart's gaze into an abyss far below. For the purpose of the analogy between Hitchcock's filmic techniques and Mansfield's narrative ones, as far as the vertigo effect is concerned, it is interesting that "trailing" in filmic terms implies a movement of the camera and subsequently of the director and the spectator in relation to the shot's primary subject, whilst "zooming" allows the same movement to take place and to appear on-screen with no actual camera motion, zooming in other words allows a sort of static movement.<sup>19</sup> By trailing away from the subject and zooming simultaneously toward it Hitchcock conveys the character's sense of vertigo as Mansfield, by slackening the rhythm of the narration, slowly drives the focus away from the subject suddenly to direct it to the near-by object as in a real

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<sup>18</sup> Sterrit, David, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 82-99; Wood, Robin, *Hitchcock's Films*, South Brunswick & New York, A. S. Barnes & Co., 1977, p. 78

<sup>19</sup> Sterrit, David, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, pp. 82-5

zoom-up. The subject-object device as it appears in Mansfield is the only possible device in narrative technique to render the shifting of distances and perspectives, the only device capable of combining circular motion with vertical progression as if in the form of a spiral.

This technique is used by Katherine Mansfield in a few short stories. In all of them the moment of suspension is veiled by the perception of the vertigo which seems to form a revealing feature of her characters. In "Miss Brill" (1920) the function of the pear tree, though modified, is taken over by Miss Brill's fur. The vertigo effect is created once again by shifting the focus from the subject, Miss Brill, to the object, Miss Brill's fur, bringing in to the foreground an otherwise irrelevant background detail. The spiralling movement which characterizes vertigo begins when the writer introduces for the first time that apparently irrelevant element which is in "Bliss" the pear tree and in "Miss Brill" the fur. Such an element will be reintroduced on purpose in the middle of the narration and finally at the end as a reigning self-sustained image permeating the short story:

Miss Brill put up her hand and touched her fur. Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again. She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the little dim eyes.<sup>20</sup>

Further in the text Miss Brill's fur will be mentioned again by a girl and a boy in the park, though in less exalted terms:

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<sup>20</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 331

'Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?' 'It's her fu-fur which is so funny', giggled the girl. 'It's exactly like a fried whiting.'<sup>21</sup>

The young people's comment overheard by Miss Brill sparks off what will be the moment of suspension perceptible by the slow-down of the narrative rhythm in Miss Brill's return home:

But to-day she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room - her room like a cupboard - and sat down on the eiderdown. She sat there for a long time.<sup>22</sup>

That moment of suspension is eventually enacted in the text, drawing the reader's attention, through the vertigo effect created by the sudden quick rhythm of the last image and furthermore highlighted by the fur's cry of despair:

The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.<sup>23</sup>

The shifting distance between subject and object employed by Mansfield's technique reminiscent of cinematographic art is chiefly responsible for the vertigo effect. By shifting simultaneously away from the centre and towards it, as in filmic techniques, the artist renders the movement of the spiral, and creates at the same time that vertigo effect engendered by the deformed perception of distances and heights. Vincent O'Sullivan highlights, in *Finding The Pattern, Solving The Problem: Katherine Mansfield The New Zealand European*, the writer's enthusiasm

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 335

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 335-6

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 336

for cinema, her acting in several movies, and furthermore the affinity of her mind and her narrative techniques with those of film:

She was an enthusiast for the cinema; she acted in several movies; her letters frequently took up such images as the months that 'stream by like a movie picture' and threw out such phrases as 'I am sorry we only saw each other for an interrupted moment; it was like a cinema!' One sees why the brevity of cinematic images, their sense of transitory vividness, could appeal to a mind which habitually thought in terms like this: 'How strange life is! One taps upon the counter and pays the waiter - pulls down one's veil - and goes.'<sup>24</sup>

At this point it could be argued, in order to counter what has been said so far, that the relationship between subject and object in the short stories taken into consideration could be one of mirroring, where the despair of the subject is projected on to the object. Yet such an oversimplified relationship cannot possibly account for that moment of suspension when the character is "flung - out of life" and "held" as if at the very edge of a precipice. To render that "flung" used by Mansfield the mere projection technique will not do. This can be gathered by considering an intriguing short story by Katherine Mansfield "The Wind Blows" printed in *The Signature* of 18 October 1915. It was one of the few early pieces to be included in the *Bliss* volume of 1920.

As the title aptly suggests, the wind is the *leit-motif* of the short story. The story actually opens with the description of a windy day, but what is more relevant is that it opens with a question we have already encountered in other short stories by Katherine Mansfield: "Suddenly - dreadfully - she wakes up. What has happened?"

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<sup>24</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent, *Finding The Pattern Solving The Problem. Katherine Mansfield the New Zealand European*, p. 6

Something dreadful has happened.”<sup>25</sup> There is a distinction to make: the question we are referring to, similar to Bertha Young’s cry of despair, (“Oh, what is going to happen now?”) marks that moment of suspension which usually coincides with the climax of the short story, and thus is placed by the writer at the conclusion of the narration, whereas here it seems as if the story started from the end. Something has already happened, most likely in the sleep of the heroine, Matilda, who is just waking up. What has happened, has happened in the unconscious of the heroine, and will be eventually brought to the surface again by the writer’s narration. To Matilda’s relief nothing dreadful has apparently happened; only the wind is furiously blowing outside. Yet what the writer suggests is that something dreadful must have really happened, otherwise Matilda’s fingers would not shake in the morning whilst she tries to plait her hair nor would her bedroom and especially her bed look so frightening. In linking these impressions with the music lesson scene the reader is prone to tinge them with the sexual implications they undoubtedly have. At this point the description of the wind is indicative; it is a spiralling force whose whirlpool is hard to resist: “Leaves flutter past the window, up and away; down in the avenue a whole newspaper wags in the air like a lost kite and falls, spiked on a pine tree.”<sup>26</sup> The wind seems to be more fierce to human beings, almost viciously unsympathetic, somewhat sexually charged, and therefore harder to resist:

Marie Swainson runs in the garden next door to pick up the ‘chrysanthus’ before they are ruined. Her skirt flies up above her waist; she tries to beat it

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106

down, to tuck it between her legs while she stoops, but it is no use - up it flies.<sup>27</sup>

The wind can thus be considered as another image for the vertigo perceived by Mansfield's characters in proximity to some revelations. In "The Wind Blows" the vertigo effect is used both to characterize Matilda's rite of passage from childhood to girlhood's sexual awareness and her spiritual growth. Matilda's awakening into adulthood is symbolized by the mysterious ship she and her brother, Bogey, see putting out to sea whilst walking on the esplanade:

A big black steamer with a long loop of smoke streaming, with the portholes lighted, with lights every where, is putting out to sea. The wind does not stop her; she cuts through the waves, making for the open gate between the pointed rocks that leads to...It's the light that makes her look so awfully beautiful and mysterious...<sup>28</sup>

The passage of the ship marks in the story that moment of suspension when time can either be erased or be disposed of with more freedom, that is considering it in Henri Bergson's terms as interior time. Yet, unlike Proust in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, there is no past to be recaptured, no narration outside what has been narrated so far in the short story but the shift of focus from Matilda and Bogey to the object of their gaze, the mysterious ship. When the shift of focus takes place and the writer directs her "zoom up" toward the ship, it is still the ship trapped in the children's gaze we are looking at. That accounts for the apparent change of perspective (from the esplanade to the ship, from the ship to the esplanade) and the use of "They" in italics to indicate that the shift has occurred though it has taken place only in the children's gaze. It is a false shift capable nonetheless of suggesting motion like in a

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106

very sophisticated optical illusion. The children have fallen into the vertigo where time is only a convention, a segment in a curve, an image alongside others. They are there on the esplanade, and at the same time they are on the ship, adults, leaving New Zealand and their childhood memories behind:

*They are on board leaning over the rail arm in arm.*

*'...Who are they?'*

*'...Brother and sister.'*

*"Look Bogey, there's the town. Doesn't it look small? There's the post-office clock chiming for the last time. Do you remember? I cried at my music lesson that day - how many years ago! Good-bye, little island, good-bye..."*

*Now the dark stretches a wing over the tumbling water. They can't see those any more. Good-bye, good-bye. Don't forget...But the ship is gone, now.*

*The wind - the wind.<sup>29</sup>*

In tune with the spiral, cyclic structure of the short story the wind is evoked at the conclusion as in the beginning, confirming the notion of a wind-vertigo dualism permeating the story, a notion which is buttressed by the emphasis put on rhythm whose task is often to emulate the quick, random spiral motion of the wind:

*They cannot walk fast enough. Their heads bent, their legs just touching, they stride like one eager person through the town, down the asphalt zigzag where the fennel grows wild on the esplanade. The wind is so strong they have to fight their way through it...*

*'Come on ! Come on! Let's get near.'*

*...'Quicker! Quicker!'<sup>30</sup>*

In this short story the treatment of the vertigo perception is emblematic: it embodies both the desire and fear to fall, inseparable from a sense of guilt which

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110

characterizes the sexual impulse, and that painful moment of recognition, of awareness when the character catches a glimpse of himself and his condition as if standing at the brink of the void, or to put it in more existential terms as human being thrown out on to the earth and scattered at random by the blind force of fate. At least that is what the writer seems to suggest in the short story, when describing the dark stretching of a wing over the tumbling water which blots out the image of the ship. Furthermore in "The Wind Blows" the vertigo effect seems to affect writing itself as the wind disrupts the voices of the characters, blowing their words away: "The wind carries their voices - away fly the sentences like little narrow ribbons."<sup>31</sup> It is as if the wind wanted to carry words as quickly as possible to that moment of suspension which would eventually free them from the yoke of their time-logic segmented structure in order to make them undertake, together with the characters of the story, a journey of exploration.

### **Courting Madness: the Gothic in Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude"**

The perception of the vertigo which has been analysed so far in some of Katherine Mansfield's short stories is poignantly present in "Prelude," the story which established Katherine Mansfield's reputation as a writer. Mansfield worked at its early draft *The Aloe* from 1915 to 1917 when, after much revising, it achieved its final form. The story was published the following year by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. Its form as Katherine Mansfield wrote to Dorothy Brett was something of her own invention ("What form is it?' you ask. Ah, Brett, it's difficult

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110

to say. As far as I know, it's more or less my own invention.'"),<sup>32</sup> and consisted of episodes whose organization, as Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr have pointed out, was not random as "each episode is played off against the next to form a complex pattern of thematic parallels and contrasts."<sup>33</sup> Deeply innovatory in structure, it revealed in its content a symbolist substratum influenced by the work of Arthur Symons and Walter Pater, and yet peculiarly different and original.<sup>34</sup>

In "Prelude" Katherine Mansfield tells the story of the Burnells' move from a house in town to a larger house six miles out in the countryside, a trivial event used to analyse in depth the characters of the Burnell family and their mutual relationship, focusing in particular on the female side of the family from the figure of the grandmother, through those of the mother and her sister, to that of the daughter, both independent of one another and at the same time tightly interlinked. The story can thus be considered in Susan Gubar's words "an anatomy of female development"<sup>35</sup> or, as I would rather define it, an anatomy of female malady, a peculiar sort of malady which Mansfield identifies with childbearing in relation to Linda Burnell, narcissism with Beryl, and with a sort of contented self-confinement within the house in the case of Mrs Fairfield, although what is really at stake in the short story is the incapability of women to act according to the rules constructed by

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<sup>32</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume I, 1903-1917, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 331

<sup>33</sup> Hanson, Clare & Gurr, Andrew, eds., *Katherine Mansfield*, The Macmillan Press, London, 1981, p. 51

<sup>34</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent, "The Magnetic Chain: Notes and Approaches to K.M." *Landfall* 29 (1975) pp. 95-131 and Hanson, Clare, "Katherine Mansfield and Symbolism: 'the artist's method' in 'Prelude'", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 16 (August 1981), pp. 25-39

<sup>35</sup> Gubar, Susan, "The Birth of the Artist as Heroine: (Re)production, the *Künstlerroman* Tradition, and the Fiction of Katherine Mansfield", *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonnet, eds., Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1983, p. 34

the patriarchal society they live in, epitomized by the male characters of Stanley and Pat.

Crucial in the story is the figure of the mother, Linda Burnell, especially in relationship with her little daughter, Kezia, whose feelings and emotions are often described as parallel to those of her mother. They are the two characters where the perception of the vertigo makes its first appearance, shedding an oblique light on the story and thrusting the character of Linda Burnell in particular to the very edge of madness. If it is true as Michel Foucault wrote in *Madness and Civilisation* that vertigos are a form of madness insofar as they respond to the classical definition of *delirium*, “a word derived from *lira*, a furrow; so that *deliro* actually means to move out of the furrow, away from the proper path of reason” and that “vertigo affords the delirious affirmation that the world is really ‘turning around,’”<sup>36</sup> then we might affirm that in Linda Burnell and her daughter Kezia, Katherine Mansfield courts madness by allowing her characters a frightening glance at their hidden selves. In the second episode of the short story, which depicts Kezia wandering alone in the empty house after the buggy with mother, grandmother and Isabel has left, leaving her and her sister Lottie behind, she experiences the “IT,” described as the hidden presence within the house similar to that of a frightening wild animal lurking in the dark:

Kezia liked to stand so before the window. She liked the feeling of the cold shining glass against her palms, and she liked to watch the funny white tops that came on her fingers when she pressed them hard against the pane. As she stood there, the day flickered out and dark came. With the dark crept the wind snuffling and howling. The windows of the empty house shook, a creaking came from the walls and floors, a piece of loose iron

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<sup>36</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 99-100

banged forlornly. Kezia was suddenly quite, quite still, with wide open eyes and knees pressed together. She was frightened. She wanted to call Lottie and to go on calling all the while she ran downstairs and out of the house. But IT was just behind her, waiting at the door, at the head of the stairs, hiding in the passage, ready to dart out of the back door.<sup>37</sup>

Kezia is not just afraid of darkness as children often are. Before standing by the window she has played thoughtlessly with the squares of the coloured glass of the dining-room window watching the world changing colour at her whim, but now she stands before the window with her palms against the cold shining glass, and time passes by without her or the reader's reckoning. The temporal dimension is lost ("As she stood there, the day flickered out and dark came"): somewhere Kezia is suspended, trapped between the window and her perception of it through her finger tips, there and yet not there - intermittently - like the funny white tops on her fingers when she presses them hard against the window pane, there and yet not there. And, as usual in the fiction of Katherine Mansfield, the moment of suspension is followed by the perception of the vertigo that reaches Kezia in the form of the wind creeping with the dark and furthermore endowed with the fearsome connotations of an animal "snuffling and howling." As Kezia is frightened by "IT" so her mother Linda Burnell is frightened by "THEY," impalpable presences which nonetheless impose themselves on her, demand of her something she is afraid to give:

They knew how frightened she was; They saw how she turned her head away as she passed the mirror. What Linda always felt was that THEY wanted something of her, and she knew that if she gave herself up and was quiet, more than quiet, silent, motionless, something would really happen.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 15

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27

What Linda is afraid to give them is the same abandonment, the same unconditioned willingness to be disposed of that she requires from them. THEY are the things which she creates with her imagination out of nothing, like the poppy on the wallpaper. They are the things that come alive as if by some strange witchcraft of hers:

Things had a habit of coming alive like that. Not only large substantial things like furniture but curtains and the patterns of stuff and the fringes of quilts and cushions. How often she had seen the tassel fringe of her quilt change into a funny procession of dancers with priests attending...<sup>39</sup>

They are the things she transmutes herself into, thus endangering her own sense of identity, putting her existence into question in a very radical way. Once she had given herself up and become “quiet, more than quiet, silent, motionless,” she would free herself from the intolerable burden of her fixed identity by transferring herself from her to “their” dimension, and at the same time she would surrender herself to the frightening temptation of being led astray from the path of reason, of perceiving the vertigo, of yielding to it, and eventually of falling into it where “to fall” is synonymous with “to go mad.”

In “Prelude,” as in “The Wind Blows,” the fall of the heroine is not, however, without sexual implications. Stanley’s embraces are to Linda a way to loosen herself, a subtle act of self-effacement rather than an act of pleasure, a way to escape from the cage of her fixed identity into the spiral of the vertigo:

‘Good night darling.’ He slipped his arm under her neck and drew her to him.

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27

'Yes, clasp me', said the faint voice from the deep well.<sup>40</sup>

The children that result from sexual intercourse are seen as inevitable creations threatening Linda's sense of identity insofar as she feels she has no control over them. They impose on her in the same way as the things which she creates out of her imagination do. They claim her space, her sight, her attention. They want her to join in, to be part of their secret league. They want her to be one of them. They want from her that dangerous self-effacement she both craves for and abhors. By equating sex with childbearing, Linda is stating the terms of her bondage as a married woman of the middle class, and at the same time she is drawing an interesting analogy between sex as a source of creative power and the creative power of imagination. Both children and the things engendered by her imagination seem to have "the habit of coming alive like that" as if completely unexpected, the ominous proof of her guilt, of her fall, of her act of self-effacement:

But the strangest part of this coming alive of things was what they did. They listened, they seemed to swell out with some mysterious important content, and when they were full she felt that they smiled.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise in Linda's dream the tiny bird she and her father find among the grass, which is undoubtedly a phallic symbol, will swell and grow bigger and bigger whilst she strokes it until it becomes a baby who smiles at her as if in recognition:

She made a cup of her hands and caught the tiny bird and stroked its head with her finger. As she stroked it began to swell, it ruffled and pouched, it grew bigger and bigger and its round eyes smiled knowingly at her. Now her arms were hardly wide enough to hold it and she dropped it into her

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p.27

apron. It had become a baby with a big naked head and a gaping bird-mouth.<sup>42</sup>

Her reaction is in both cases one of fear mingled with desire: fear of the loss of her identity through her creative power as well as through childbearing, and desire to break free, to let herself loose from that “persistent yet mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent,”<sup>43</sup> and in falling to find an escape. Linda’s terrified daydreaming, lingering at the edge of madness, possesses the same subversive quality as the fantasies of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s heroine in “The Yellow Wallpaper”<sup>44</sup> though in Katherine Mansfield as in Walter de la Mare the gothic element is kept constantly in check as if only to suggest, to hint at the supernatural whose only possibility of survival is to remain concealed, unsaid, as the furthest most daring thrust of the creative imagination.<sup>45</sup>

The desire and fear of a loss of identity, epitomized by the perception of the vertigo which represents the threshold of madness, gives rise to that gothic element or dark nuance present in many of Katherine Mansfield’s short stories and in particular in “Prelude,” where the flowering of the mysterious and ambivalent aloe hints at that moment of suspension when the character perceives his self for the first time as united, unfragmented, undivided, and at the same time discovers the illusory nature of his perception. It is the time of flowering, a unique moment in a lifetime

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24

<sup>43</sup> Middleton, J. Murry, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 205

<sup>44</sup> Gilman, Perkins, Charlotte, “La carta gialla”, Milano, La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1996; Scharnhorst, Gary, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, c1985 and Gilbert, Sandra M & Gubar, Susan, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 89-92

<sup>45</sup> Punter, David, “The ambivalence of memory. Henry James and Walter de la Mare”, *The Literature of Terror. A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the present day*, London, Longman, 1980, pp. 291-313

and ironically enough the most tragic, the most cruel, the most frightening insofar as that moment of suspension, of total awareness, (“of direct feeling when we are most ourselves”) coincides with agony, destruction, apparent death. One is no more, or rather one is - in absence, the trap of identity being lifted and one is whole, part of the universe (“and least personal”) and yet out of the time of men, out of history. In “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” Raoul Duquette thus describes his moment of flowering:

There it had come - the moment - the *geste!* and although I was so ready, it caught me, it tumbled me over; I was simply overwhelmed. And the physical feeling was so curious, so particular. It was as if all of me, except my head and arms, all of me that was under the table, had simply dissolved, melted, turned into water. Just my head remained and two sticks of arms pressing on to the table. But, ah! the agony of that! How can I describe it? I didn't think of anything. I didn't even cry out to myself. Just for one moment I was not. I was Agony, Agony, Agony.<sup>46</sup>

That same moment of suspension, prelude to the moment of flowering, is described in similar tones in “A Married Man's Story,” written by Katherine Mansfield in August 1921 just after finishing “At the Bay”:

But while I played with the candle and smiled and broke off the tiny white peaks of wax that rose above the wall and floated them on my lake, a feeling of awful dreariness fastened on me - yes, that's the word. It crept up from my knees to my thighs, into my arms; I ached all over with misery. And I felt so strangely that I could not move. Something bound me there by the table - I couldn't even let the pin drop that I held between my finger and thumb. For a moment I came to a stop, as it were.<sup>47</sup>

The moment of suspension entails thus the final annihilation of the character's identity, prelude to the fall which will further highlight the divided nature of the self. Similarly in Baudelaire, as Paul de Man observes in his essay “The Rhetoric of

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<sup>46</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 64

<sup>47</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, pp. 436-37

Temporality,”<sup>48</sup> the recognition of the divided self, the *ironic* self, takes place “in immediate connection with the fall.” Baudelaire describes the unsettling power of irony as the *vertige de l’hyperbole*, the vertigo of hyperbole: irony is unrelieved vertigo, dizziness to the point of madness insofar as it reveals through the fall that man is factitious, a thing that can be converted into objecthood but lacks the power to convert a thing into something human. The man who laughs at himself falling, laughs, according to Baudelaire, at the false assumption he was making about himself, at his feeling of proud superiority in relation to the non-human world which surrounds him, and that he thought he was dominating. The fall thus ironically reminds him of the brittle nature of his belief as he is not endowed, as nature is, with the power to animate inanimate things. In this sense the notion of the fall can be related to the loss of the Garden of Eden epitomized in Adam and Eve’s desire for knowledge and for creative power. In Katherine Mansfield that power is not completely denied to human beings as it partially coincides with that of the imagination. The perception of the creative power becomes manifest to her characters once they have surrendered their identity in a frightening moment of self-effacement which acts as a sort of ceremony of initiation or rite of passage from the real to the unreal world. It is the perception of the unreal world lurking behind the surface of the real that conveys to the story that dark nuance which in gothic literature contributes to the building up of fear.<sup>49</sup> In gothic literature, that is, the more the unreal is perceived to be anchored into the real, everyday world, the more

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<sup>48</sup> de Man, Paul, “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, *Blindness & Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 221- 228

<sup>49</sup> Punter, David, *The Literature of Terror*, pp. 1-21

it becomes frightening.<sup>50</sup> Katherine Mansfield seems to be aware of the severed yet mutually dependent nature of these two worlds when she writes in a letter to Richard Murry dated 17 January 1921, the same year in which she wrote “A Married Man’s Story,” about the unfathomable dimension of the unknown, and the frightening gap existing between the unknown and the known:

I had a moment of absolute terror in the night. I suddenly thought of a *living mind* - a whole mind - with absolutely nothing left out. With *all* that one knows how much does one not know? I used to fancy one knew all but some kind of mysterious core (or one could). But now I believe just the opposite. The known is only a mere shadow. This is a fearful thing and terribly hard to face. But it must be faced.<sup>51</sup>

It is no surprise then to discover that Katherine Mansfield felt somewhat frightened whilst writing “A Married Man’s Story” as it is shown in a letter to Dorothy Brett where almost certainly she refers to it: “I am at present embedded in a terrific story but it still frightens me.”<sup>52</sup>

The gothic element present in the story is far more overt than in “Prelude” and reveals itself through the usage of ambivalent images like that of the pack of wolves to whom the married man seems to belong, the ghostly apparition of the dying mother, the poison, the premeditated murder. Yet the link between the two short stories is undeniably strong. In “A Married Man’s Story” what in “Prelude” is only hinted at happens: the aloe comes into flower and “They,” “the silent brothers” step forward:

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<sup>50</sup> Cornwell, Neil, *The Literary Fantastic. From Gothic To Postmodernism*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 25

<sup>51</sup> O’Sullivan, Vincent, and Scott, Margaret, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume IV, 1920-1921, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 165

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 271

Then the shrivelled case of the bud split and fell, the plant in the cupboard came into flower. 'Who am I?' I thought. 'What is all this?' And I looked at my room, at the broken bust of the man called Hahnemann on top of the cupboard, at my little bed with the pillow like an envelope. I saw it all, but not as I had seen before...Everything lived, everything. But that was not all. I was equally alive and - it's the only way I can express it - the barriers were down between us - I had come to my own world!<sup>53</sup>

The world the married man is referring to is not the world of human beings but that of a mysterious entity which he defines as his silent brothers ("I did consciously turn away from the world of human beings; I had never known it; but I from that night did turn towards my silent brothers")<sup>54</sup> compared earlier in the text with a pack of wolves which he furthermore describes as "the grey brothers" to whom he feels he is tightly connected. Similarly in "Prelude" Linda describes "They" as "the members of a secret society" to whom, unlike in "A Married Man's Story," she does not surrender although she is torn by a mixture of fear and desire. In "Prelude" the moment of suspension does take place as the description of Linda hovering over her bed fully attests ("Yes everything had come alive, down to the minutest, tiniest particle, and she did not feel her bed, she floated, held up in the air")<sup>55</sup> yet the aloe does not come into flower, but it is bound to as the heroine is bound to fall and break.

In "Prelude" Katherine Mansfield explores that liminal zone which she perceives to be both the enchanted realm and the golden cage of women, a zone which acts as a sort of reservoir of the multifarious, the manifold where every action melts before its image, becomes definite, and thus irrevocably effective like the

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<sup>53</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 437

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 437

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28

beheading of the duck in the story. To inhabit the threshold is to inhabit a world where anything and nothing occur simultaneously so that the top of the cream jar that Kezia sees flying through the air falls and breaks and yet does not. In such a world where the barriers between the real and the unreal are so thin as to be almost non-existent, madness that is the subversion of all rational rules is likely to make its appearance, a possibility highlighted by the perception of the vertigo which represents a common and the most frightening feature of Katherine Mansfield's characters. Beyond Mansfield's threshold world beckons the world of the artist for whom anything is possible, as the only rules the artist is subject to are those of his/her creation. Through the characters of Linda, the married man and Raoul Duquette who, like Bertha Young, are all artists *manqué*, Katherine Mansfield reveals something of her own perception of art, of her own fear and desire to be the things she images in order to create them anew, of her way of surrendering her identity to them which is the writer's peculiar way of being utterly possessed by her own art:

When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating on a pond fringed with yellow-blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me...In fact the whole process of becoming the duck (what Lawrence would perhaps call this consummation with the duck or the apple!) is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe, only to think about it. For although that is as far as people can get, it is really only the 'prelude.'<sup>56</sup>

The prelude is for the writer the prelude to that moment of suspension ("I can hardly breathe") when she loses her own identity and acquires that of the things she is

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<sup>56</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume I, 1903-1917, p. 330

creating. Like her characters, the writer is susceptible to the perception of the vertigo insofar as his/her art shows in its unwillingness to conform, in its desire to defy, a life of its own, almost independent from the artist's will, and beckons at the same time to a dimension that is "other," beyond human comprehension. In a letter to John Middleton Murry dated 18 October 1920 Katherine Mansfield writes:

I return de la Mare's letter. I long to hear of your time with him. It's very queer; he haunts me here - not a persistent or substantial ghost but as one who shares our/my joy in the silent world... You know, darling, I have felt very often lately as though the silence had some meaning beyond these signs, these intimations. Isn't it possible that if one yielded there is a whole world into which one is received? It is so near and yet I am conscious that I hold back from giving myself up to it. What is this something mysterious that waits - that beckons?<sup>57</sup>

The link to Walter de la Mare that emerges in the letter is very significant. Mansfield shares with de la Mare the same fascination exerted by the creative power of imagination. It is a dark fascination as it is achieved through the fall of the character into the abyss of self-knowledge. And yet it is exactly that fall that enables writing to leave the prison of the self in order to investigate the non-self which is both the empirical world and that is behind it. To become the object is to the writer to lose her own identity and "spring into the bounding outline of things"<sup>58</sup> as if to let writing write itself without the hand of the writer behind.<sup>59</sup> The innovatory element Mansfield sought to introduce in the medium of prose is thus that freedom which Elizabeth Bowen recognized to be a distinctive characteristic of Mansfield's writing

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<sup>57</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume IV, 1920-1921, p. 75

<sup>58</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume I, 1903-1917, p. 330

<sup>59</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume IV, 1920-1921, p. 86: "...I mean the moment when the act of creation takes place - the mysterious change - when you are no longer writing the book, it is writing, it possesses you..."

which influenced and liberated the art of story telling: “Had (Katherine Mansfield) not written [...] as she did, one form of art might still be in infancy [...] We owe to her the prosperity of the ‘free’ story: she untrammelled it from conventions [...] she was to to alter for good and all our idea of what goes to make a story.”<sup>60</sup> From the child’s drawings in “The Woman At The Store,” “creations of a lunatic with a lunatic’s cleverness”<sup>61</sup> to the almost terror-stricken daydreaming of Linda in “Prelude,” Katherine Mansfield portrays the artist as an edged-off figure thrust to the very brink of sanity, courting madness as the only means of truthful representation; a powerful portrait that we will encounter again in three other New Zealand writers: Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme.

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<sup>60</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth, “A Living Writer”, in *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield*, ed., Jan Pilditch, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 73

<sup>61</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 559

## **CHAPTER II**

**After the fall:**

**Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde and the  
construction of a new subjectivity**

## The prolific self: a theory of the subject as fragmented wholeness in

### Katherine Mansfield and Robin Hyde

Why not invent a new kind of play - as for instance:

Woman thinks:...

He does.

Organ Plays.

She writes.

They say:

She sings:

Night speaks:

They miss

I think it must be something in this line - though I can't now see what.  
Away from facts; free; yet concentrated; prose yet poetry; a novel & a play.

Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf's desire for objectivity, what she defined as the need to "stand further back from life,"<sup>2</sup> which partly accounts for that sense of communality characterizing her work from *Mrs Dalloway* on to *Between the Acts*,<sup>3</sup> is a feature likely to have been borrowed from Katherine Mansfield whose work Virginia Woolf greatly admired,<sup>4</sup> and by which she was undoubtedly influenced.<sup>5</sup> Mansfield's emphasis on communities especially in the form of family groupings is quite evident

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, Olivier, Anne, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, London, Hogarth Press, 1980, Vol. III, p. 128

<sup>2</sup> Woolf, Virginia, *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*, London, Hogarth Press, 1966, Vol. II, p. 147

<sup>3</sup> Beer, Gillian, "The Body of the People", *Women Reading Women's Writing*, Sue Roe, ed., Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1987, pp. 85-114

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, 8 August 1931, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: 1926-31*, Nigel Nicholson, ed., London, Hogarth Press, 1975-80, vol. IV, p. 366; Tomalin, Claire, *Katherine Mansfield. A Secret Life*, London, Penguin Books, pp. 192-205

<sup>5</sup> Smith, Angela, "Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: *Prelude and To the Lighthouse*", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, 1983, pp.105-119

in all her major short stories from “Prelude” to “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party”. Katherine Mansfield’s sense of communality stemmed more than anything else from her perception of the subject as inwardly fragmented. The subject’s sterile monadism is rejected in favour of an alternative conception of the subject based on the multifarious nature of its protean selves, which are themselves subjects put into relationship, interconnected. Constructing the subject is in other words for Mansfield an act of silent disruption, but only apparently, insofar as it gives rise to a threatening yet inevitable proliferation of selves which are put nonetheless into relationship. A reconstruction rather than a deconstruction of the subject<sup>6</sup> is thus fostered. In April 1920 Katherine Mansfield wrote in her *Journal*:

For what with complexes and repressions and reactions and vibrations and reflexions, there are moments when I feel that I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor, who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the wilful guests.<sup>7</sup>

The selves portrayed as guests of a hotel, uncannily similar to the hotel of Joel and Ethan Coen’s film *Barton Fink* (1990), are revealingly defined as wilful in order to underline their finite and independent nature in relation to that of the subject to whom they do not constitute an appendage, though tightly interlinked, but stand apart, as it were as whole fragments. The fragment is simultaneously part of a whole, a “community,” and whole itself: an island of difference. The fragment is both “I” and “We.” In “The Tiredness of Rosabel” (1908), one of Katherine Mansfield’s earliest short stories to be included in later editions, the severance between the real Rosabel and her other “wilful” self, must be continually reinstated

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<sup>6</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Feminine Fictions. Revisiting the postmodern*, London, Routledge, 1989, pp. 1-33

<sup>7</sup> Middleton, John, Murry, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 205

by the authorial voice (“The real Rosabel, the girl crouched on the floor...”) <sup>8</sup> as the imagined self becomes, in the course of the narration, more and more real so as to make it quite difficult for the reader to distinguish between the two, and thus determine the verisimilitude of the narrative discourse. Confusion is engendered in the reader’s mind because Rosabel’s two selves seem to share the same status of real and distinguished characters within the story. The boundary between reality and imagination is therefore irrevocably blurred, creating that ambivalence that is a peculiar feature of Mansfield’s writing.

In Virginia Woolf’s novels, in particular *The Years* and *The Waves*, the writer elaborates Katherine Mansfield’s reconstruction technique of the subject in a very radical poignant way. The accent falls, as Patricia Waugh suggests in *Feminine Fictions*, on “a collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity *in relationship*” as opposed to “an isolated individual ego,” <sup>9</sup> harbinger of patriarchy. The following passage from *The Waves* (1931) by Virginia Woolf is strikingly reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield:

And now I ask, who am I? I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt ‘I am you’. This difference we make so much of, this identity we so fervently cherish was overcome. <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 518

<sup>9</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Feminine Fictions. Revisiting the postmodern*, p. 10

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, Virginia, *The Waves*, eds., James M. Haule and Philip H. Smith, Oxford, The Shakespeare Head Press, 1993, p. 187

The last sentence in particular brings to mind what Mansfield wrote in her *Journal* in April 1920 about the ambivalent nature of the self:

Nevertheless, there are signs that we are intent as never before on trying to puzzle out, to live by, our own particular self. *Der Mensch muss frei sein* - free, disentangled, single. Is it not possible that the rage for confession, autobiography, especially for memories of earliest childhood, is explained by our persistent yet mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent...<sup>11</sup>

Shakespeare's bidding "To thine own self be true" mentioned by Mansfield in the same passage of her *Journal* becomes thus an ideal aspiration lost in a long since deceased past, a self-conceived illusion like a ghost vessel drifting in the deep waters of the manifold: "True to mine self! which self? Which of my many - well really, that's what it looks like coming to - hundreds of selves?"<sup>12</sup>

The suggestive metaphor of the hotel used by Katherine Mansfield to deliver, in quite existential terms, her idea on the nature of the self emphasizes further what has been defined as the subject's fragmented wholeness, its multifaceted essence. Similar to the metaphor of the hotel is, in Mansfield's writing, that of the house. In "Prelude" - to give an example - the writer tells the story of the Burnells' move from a house in town to a house in the countryside. Houses with their bounty of niches, washhouses, backyards and their appendages of verandahs and marquees are the ideal setting for the writer's stories: a territory mapped by the events, the moods and the tensions of their inhabitants, and thus susceptible to sudden changes, apt to reveal darker nuances. Far from Bachelard's reassuring

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<sup>11</sup> Middleton, John, Murry, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 205

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205

portrait of the house, as projection of an interior space,<sup>13</sup> Mansfield's house and its ironic counterpart, the doll's house, act as a unifying principle providing a frame to the proliferation of selves, which characterizes her stories, suggesting both the selves' interconnection and their independence from one another. The doll's house as the ironic counterpart of the house in particular gives away the subject's presumed unity, and underlines at the same time the divided nature of the self portrayed by the writer. Specular image of the real, the doll's house, subverts and exposes the canons of representation, makes life into a game, and men into puppets. When Miss Brill looks at people in the park on a Sunday morning the writer makes her observe:

Other people sat on the benches and green chairs, but they were nearly always the same, Sunday after Sunday, and - Miss Brill had often noticed - there was something funny about nearly all of them. They were old, silent, nearly all old, and from the way they stared they looked as though they'd just come from the dark little rooms or even - even cupboards!<sup>14</sup>

The analogy drawn between dark rooms and cupboards is indicative of the dualism house/doll's house permeating Mansfield's stories. Further in the same short story such a dualism will be reiterated when Miss Brill's room itself will be compared with that of a cupboard: "her room like a cupboard."<sup>15</sup> The same image is present in "A Married Man's Story" at first in the recollection of the married man's "moment of flowering" ("Then the shrivelled case of the bud split and fell, the plant in the cupboard came into flower"<sup>16</sup>), and subsequently, having dropped the comparison

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<sup>13</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space. The Classic Look At How We Experience Intimate Places*, trans. from the French by Maria Jolas, foreword by John R. Stilgoe, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, pp. 3-73

<sup>14</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 332

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 335

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 437

between the room and the cupboard, the writer makes the image of the cupboard alone bear the burden of a wider, more existential signification: "I had been all my life a little out-cast; but until that moment no one had 'accepted' me; I had lain in the cupboard - or the cave forlorn."<sup>17</sup> It is evident here that both rooms and cupboards are described in negative terms, as they both confer a sense of imprisonment, of isolation and of blindness.

The house is thus perceived as a perverse kind of confinement into the conventional, safe, in that defined, mapped space of existence, where the multifarious nature of the self is constrained. This impression is further strengthened by the often implicit reference to the doll's house whose ironic function succeeds in rendering the human existence ridiculous, in rendering the divided/ironic nature of the self and its fragmented wholeness. If Henrik Ibsen allows Nora to leave her doll's house banging the door behind, Mansfield is far more uncompromising with her characters as no existence is granted to them outside it, no freedom is possible if not at the edge of madness or in exile. Unlike the metaphor of the hotel which suggests another metaphor, that of the metropolitan *Wanderer* living in everlasting exile, that of the house seems to synthesise the main characteristics of the bourgeois society of the twentieth century, and epitomize at the same time a certain sense of claustrophobia and unease. That probably accounts, together with the constant pursuance of an improvement in her health, for Katherine Mansfield's rather frantic flight from one house or hotel to the other throughout Europe. In an entry in her *Journal* on 21st June 1918 she writes about hotels:

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 437

I seem to spend half my life arriving at strange hotels. And asking if I may go to bed immediately.

'And would you mind filling my hot water bottle?...

Thank you; that is delicious. No, I shan't require anything more.'

The strange door shuts upon the stranger, and then I slip down in the sheets. Waiting for the shadows to come out of the corners and spin their slow, slow web over the Ugliest Wallpaper of All.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly enough in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* where the two characters, Gerald Crich and Gudrun, were allegedly drawn from Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield, who were friends of the Lawrences, the writer makes his character Gudrun express herself against marriage and shrink at the thought of being "put into a house"<sup>19</sup>. It is interesting to note that in a letter to S.S. Koteliansky D.H. Lawrence expressed his belief that Katherine Mansfield's wanderings were a means to escape from herself and from Murry.<sup>20</sup>

The doll's house as the ironic counterpart of the real, as specular mocking image of the macrocosm, is crucial to understanding Mansfield's strong sense of irony which plays a constitutive role in her writing, and an important, albeit repressed feature of her personality. Leonard Woolf's impression of her seems to confirm that further:

By nature, I think, she was gay, cynical, ribald, witty. When we first knew her, she was extraordinarily amusing. I don't think anyone has ever made me laugh more than she did in those days. She would sit very upright on the edge of a chair or sofa and tell at immense length a kind of saga, of her experiences as an actress or of how Koteliansky howled like a dog in the room at the top of the building in Southampton Road. There was not the shadow of a gleam of a smile on her mask of a face, and the extraordinary

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<sup>18</sup> Middleton, J. Murry, *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 139

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence, D.H., *Women in Love*, London, Penguin Books, 1960, p. 423

<sup>20</sup> Boulton, James T., ed., *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, Vol. III, p. 343: "When you see Katherine, tell her to write to us and send us all the news: we are thinking of her, up in London. - You are quite right about her wanderings - she wants to run away from herself - but also from Murry, which complicates matters...I do wish she could learn to be still, and alone".

funniness of the story was increased by the flashes of her astringent wit. I think that in some abstruse way Murry corrupted and perverted and destroyed Katherine both as a person and as a writer. She was a very serious writer, but her gifts were those of an intense realist, with a superb sense of ironic humour and fundamental cynicism.<sup>21</sup>

Katherine Mansfield knew she was endowed with a strong sense of irony as it appears from her *Journal* where she is commenting on Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*: "I have a huge capacity for seeing 'funny' people, you know, and laughing, and Dickens does fill it at times quite amazingly."<sup>22</sup> In a very interesting essay, "'Bliss,' and Why Ignorance Won't Do: The Use of Criticism and Theory in Current Reading Practices,"<sup>23</sup> Mary Paul reads Mansfield's short story "Bliss" with an eye on the writer's ironic streak, arguing that the short story can be read as a parody of the fashionable ideas about psychoanalysis and gender of the period which Mansfield intended to satirize. Satirical intents are detectable too in the short stories of Mansfield's first collection *In a German Pension* whose publication in 1911 gave her sudden fame.

Katherine Mansfield's peculiar sense of irony expresses itself in her love for the detail of life, "the life of life,"<sup>24</sup> which accounts for Mansfield's capacity for miniaturization, and its very opposite: her capacity for the grotesque. In both cases the focus is on the ironic distance between the subject and the object of his/her gaze,

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<sup>21</sup> Woolf, Leonard, *The Autobiography of Leonard Woolf*, London, Hogarth Press, 1964, vol. III, p. 204

<sup>22</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Vol. II, 1918-1919, p. 46

<sup>23</sup> Paul, Mary, "'Bliss,' and Why Ignorance Won't Do: The Use of Criticism and Theory in Current Reading Practices", *Opening The Book. New Essays on New Zealand Writing*, Williams, Mark and Leggott, Michele, eds., Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1995, pp. 222-227

<sup>24</sup> Middleton, John, Murry, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 81

which contributes to that sense of heights, of shifting distances engendering the vertigo perception which has been discussed at length in the previous chapter.

In the grotesque the detail is expanded until it loses its original shape, until a saturation of space is achieved; it is a detail in excess, whereas in miniaturization the detail preserves its original shape but diminishes in size, the finite big into the infinite small to parody Friedrich Schlegel's romantic concept of irony which contemplates the infinite in the finite. A suitable example of Mansfield's capacity for the grotesque can be found in the description of Mrs Stubbs's photographs in "At the Bay":

Mrs Stubbs sat in an arm-chair, leaning very much to one side. There was a look of mild astonishment on her large face, and well it might be. For though the arm-chair stood on a carpet, to the left of it, miraculously skirting the carpet border, there was a dashing waterfall. On her right stood a Grecian pillar with a giant fern tree on either side of it, and in the background towered a gaunt mountain, pale with snow.<sup>25</sup>

The background detail is here foregrounded until its dimensions efface completely the subject of the photographs: Mrs Stubbs. The comic effect is achieved by ridiculing Mrs Stubbs's vain desire to be immortalized by the camera which is trusted to give a truthful, and in Mrs Stubbs' opinion, undoubtedly flattering representation of herself. Her intention, expressed by Mrs Stubbs later in the story, to have "an enlargemint" of the snap shots fairly increases the comic effect, rendering fully the grotesquerie of her poignant characterization:

'Yes', she said thoughtfully, as she handed the tea, 'but I don't care about the size. I'm having an enlargemint. All very well for Christmas cards, but

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<sup>25</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 238

I never was the one for small photers myself. You get no comfort out of them. To say the truth, I find them dis'heartening.<sup>26</sup>

The "enlargemint" desired by Mrs Stubbs is the point of the grotesque. By outgrowing the original shape, by far exceeding and distorting it, the grotesque imposes its own shapelessness as a canon of representation. Miniaturization on the other hand preserves the original shape of the detail, though not its size, in an effort to stylize rather than deform it. Through stylization, through achieving the shape in essence, the element of the microcosm ascends to the macrocosm, and fuses with it, determining that universal character which constitutes the distinguishing feature of any stylization. By retaining its shape, its small size, the doll's house becomes a representation of a representation and so does the grotesque by outgrowing the original shape of the detail and by eventually distorting it.

In both miniaturization and the grotesque the ironic element is evident, as both need distance to accomplish themselves: the distance existing between the self and the object, the gazer and the gazed at. Irony implies distance which is always a distance from: from the self in relation to the non-self and vice versa. Such a distance engenders division in the form of diversification which is another form of self-knowledge as the subject comes to know itself only by what it is not. Paradoxically enough self-definition can only be achieved through its negation, that is, by defining the non-self. Mansfield's ironic/divided self is similar to Baudelaire's idea of the ironic self as it emerges in Baudelaire's essay "De l'essence du rire" already mentioned in the first chapter, in that both share the similar notion of the fall, "la chute," as the inevitable step toward that self-knowledge pursued by the

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 230

writer and the philosopher, without which no thinking would ever be conceivable. The fall is the pre-condition of human existence and of its representation. By falling man becomes aware of the distance between his/her self and the non-human world, the non-self. Such a distance is to be continually negotiated and reflected upon in order for the self to know itself by asserting the degree of its dividedness. Such a distance gives rise to that sense of the *comique* emphasised by Baudelaire. The comic thing about a man tripping and falling in the street is thus analyzed by the French artist:

Le comique, la puissance du rire est dans le rieur et nullement dans l'object du rire. Ce n'est point l'homme qui tombe qui rit de sa propre chute, à moins qu'il ne soit une philosophe, un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d'assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son *moi*.<sup>27</sup>

The stress is put here on the notion of *dédoublement* evoked - to give an example - in the title of Heather Murray's study of women in Katherine Mansfield's stories, *Double-Lives*.<sup>28</sup> *Dédoublement* is the capacity of self-multiplication which is at the base of any reflective activity without which no irony, what Baudelaire calls *the comique absolu*, would ever be possible as irony is engendered by the relationship between two or more selves:

[...] pour qu'il ait comique, c'est-à-dire émanation, explosion, dégagement de comique, il faut qu'il y ait deux êtres en présence; - que c'est spécialement dans le rieur, dans le spectateur, que gît le comique; - que cependant, relativement à cette loi d'ignorance, il faut faire une exception pour les hommes qui ont fait métier de développer en eux le sentiment du comique et de le tirer d'eux-mêmes pour le divertissement de leurs

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<sup>27</sup> Baudelaire, Charles, "De l'essence du rire", *Oeuvres Complètes de Baudelaire*, Claude Pichois, ed., Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1961, pp. 982

<sup>28</sup> Murray, Heather, *Double - Lives - Women in the stories of Katherine Mansfield*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 1990

semblables, lequel phénomène rentre dans la classe de tous les phénomènes artistiques qui dénotent dans l'être humain l'existence d'une dualité permanente, la puissance d'être à la fois soi et un autre.<sup>29</sup>

Irony implies dualism ("dualité permanente") where the two terms of the relationship must differ from one another so as to create that distance constitutive of all acts of reflection. The element of falling reinstates such a distance and neutralizes it at the same time. When the artistic or philosophical man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at the wrong assumption he was making about himself, at the feeling of superiority he entertained in relation to the world other than himself. Through the fall self-knowledge is achieved insofar as the subject comes to know itself by an increasing differentiation from what it is not.<sup>30</sup> Charles Baudelaire's concept of irony as intellectual awareness on behalf of the artist aimed at embracing two apparently contrasting realities, that of an outwardly united self existing next to that of an inwardly divided self, is relevant to the poetics of both Katherine Mansfield and Robin Hyde as they too tend to portray their characters as caught in the ossimoric game of their fragmented wholeness, characters and yet types/masks, fluid and yet static, fragmented and yet whole.

Irony as *comique absolue*, as acknowledgement of the fall barring for ever the path to innocence and authenticity, is considered by Baudelaire a higher form of comedy than the kind of intersubjective humour common among the French. To Molière he prefers the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, the English pantomime and the tales of T. A. Hoffman. In the pantomime of Harlequin, Colombine, Pierrot, Léandre and in their "gestes extraordinaires" he recognizes the essence of the comic

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<sup>29</sup> Baudelaire, Claude, "De l'essence du rire", *Oeuvres Complètes de Baudelaire*, p. 993

<sup>30</sup> de Man, Paul, *Blindness & Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, pp. 211-213

element, the awareness of the divided/ironic consciousness which haunts the fixity of the mask: “La pantomime est l’épuration de la comédie; c’en est la quintessence; c’est l’élément comique pur, dégagé et concentré.”<sup>31</sup> Describing the English pantomime that Baudelaire saw at the Théâtre des Variétés he further remarks:

Une des choses le plus remarquables comme comique absolu, et pour ainsi dire, comme métaphysique du comique absolu, était certainement le début de cette belle pièce, un prologue plein d’une haute esthétique. Les principaux personnages de la pièce, Pierrot, Cassandre, Harlequin, Colombine...sont à peu près raisonnables et ne diffèrent pas beaucoup des braves gents qui sont dans la salle. Le souffle merveilleux qui va les faire se mouvoir extraordinairement n’a pas encore soufflé sur leurs cervelles...Une fée s’intéresse à Harlequin...elle lui promet sa protection et, pour lui en donner une preuve immédiate, elle promène avec une geste mystérieux et plein d’autorité sa baguette dans les airs. Aussitôt le vertige est entré, le vertige circule dans l’air; on respire dans le ventricule. Qu’est-ce que ce vertige? C’est le comique absolu; il s’est emparé de chaque être. Ils font des gestes extraordinaires, qui démontrent clairement qu’ils se sentent introduits de force dans une existence nouvelle...Et ils s’élancent à travers l’oeuvre fantastique qui, à proprement parler, ne commence que là, c’est-à-dire sur la frontière du merveilleux.<sup>32</sup>

The vertigo of the hyperbole, responsible for the coming apart of the self, throws the personages into a new dimension (“une existence nouvelle”), the fantastic, where everything is possible (“ils font des gestes extraordinaires”) as any attempt at verisimilitude has failed to be relevant. Before having submitted to the irresistible force of the vertigo (“Le souffle merveilleux qui va les faire se mouvoir extraordinairement n’a pas soufflé sur leurs cervelles”) the personages do not differ from the people of the audience, they are still reasonable personages, that is whole, unfragmented, undivided (“sont à peu près raisonnables et ne diffèrent pas beaucoup des braves gents dans la salle”). The passage between the state of reasonable

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<sup>31</sup> Baudelaire, Claude, *Oeuvres complètes de Baudelaire*, p. 990

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 990

personages to that of masks is sudden, and it is highlighted by the introduction of the perception of the vertigo, “le vertige de l’hyperbole”. A similar phenomenon to that described occurs in the Italian *Commedia dell’arte* which Giacomo Oreglia thus defines:

Known as “improvised comedy” (*commedia improvvisa*), “comedy by subject” (*a soggetto*) or “off the cuff” (*a braccia*) from the technique of the comedians who improvised their sallies on the basis of a scenario or *conovaccio* (literally “canvas”), it also became known as the “Comedy of Masks” because most of the characters appeared masked, thus creating fixed types.<sup>33</sup>

It is important to note that both Katherine Mansfield and Robin Hyde share with Baudelaire the same interest in masks in the form of dolls/puppets in Mansfield and types in Hyde, as masks succeed in rendering the ambiguous nature of the self in all its complexity. Types as representation of the ironic/divided self *par excellence* are the key tenets in the fiction of Robin Hyde. To understand the use she makes of types and of the tradition of the *Commedia dell’Arte* is to get acquainted further with that theory of the subject as fragmented wholeness that we have encountered in Katherine Mansfield. Without this fundamental knowledge the understanding of Robin Hyde’s peculiar choices in fiction becomes more and more difficult, if not impossible, giving rise to that critical misrepresentation which still surrounds her work like a malevolent halo. The original connection between the type and the ironic self as described by Baudelaire is an essential link to bear in mind in the analysis of Robin Hyde’s works insofar as the word “type” by itself, as

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<sup>33</sup> Oreglia, Giacomo, *The Commedia dell’Arte*, trans. from Italian by Lovett F. Edwards, introd. by Evert Sprinchorn, London, Methuen, 1968, p. 1

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg remark in *The Nature of Narrative*, can “open the door to some confusion”:

In considering the ways in which narrative artists have attempted to present individual characters to explore their individual lives, we have neglected, thus far, any consideration of the techniques and purposes of so-called type characters. One reason for this apparent neglect is our belief that insofar as a character is a type, he is less a character. Though the word “type” itself opens the door to some confusion, and is often used loosely enough, we understand that in all its significations it refers to something outside the character himself.<sup>34</sup>

The wide-spread “belief that insofar as a character is a type, he is less a character,” oblivious of the ancient origins of types and masks and their subtle relation to characters themselves, is partly responsible for the rejection of Hyde’s characters, insofar as they are deemed not to fulfil the classical canons of narrative, to be incomplete, unrealistic and unfocused, in other words, irrevocably flawed, compromised. Even the most complimentary critic of Robin Hyde, H. Winston Rhodes, who, together with James Bertram,<sup>35</sup> contributed to her rehabilitation within the New Zealand literary tradition, seems to have no doubts about it when he writes: “her books suffer from an unevenness in style and characterization as well as from a looseness in construction.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly E.H. McCormick describes Robin Hyde’s novel *Wednesday’s Children* in *New Zealand Literature: A Survey* as “largely populated by a set of stock characters” and the heroine of *Nor The Years Condemn*, Sister Collins, as “wandering improbably” through the novel.<sup>37</sup> Felicity

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<sup>34</sup> Scholes, Robert & Kellogg, Robert, *The Nature of Narrative*, London, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 204

<sup>35</sup> Bertram, James, “Robin Hyde. A Reassessment”, *The Flight of the Phoenix: Critical Notes on New Zealand Writers*, Victoria University Press, 1985

<sup>36</sup> Rhodes, Winston H., “Robin Hyde, Novelist”, *New Zealand Libraries*, October 1947, p. 180

<sup>37</sup> McCormick, E.H., *New Zealand Literature. A Survey*, London, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 128

Riddy's perspective is similar when she blames the writer for her failure "to distance herself sufficiently from her central characters to be able to focus them clearly."<sup>38</sup>

The possibility that Robin Hyde meant her characters to be different, that she depicted them as she did following an innovatory design of her own, is not taken into consideration, though Hyde makes no bones about it in some of her letters to J.H. Schroder and John A. Lee as well as in two of her novels: *Wednesday's Children* and *Nor The Years Condemn*. In the author's note to *Nor The Years Condemn* Robin Hyde writes:

I have made no attempt to portray living persons, but have showed instead "dreams, and a people of dreams" [...] The book's reality must stand or fall on the sense it conveys to the "boom and bust" period in New Zealand. There I have tried to tell as exactly as possible what happened, and the types of people who were caught up in a mounting wave, sank down into its pit, and are now struggling up again.<sup>39</sup>

In *Nor The Years Condemn*, written between May and September 1937 as a sequel to *Passport To Hell*, the protagonists, Starkie, Sister Collins, Macnamara and The Fruit Lady, share the ambiguous nature of the writer's type/character in that they voice both the aspirations and the contradictions of the "boom and bust" period in New Zealand, and the fragmentation of their individual selves. The description that Macnamara gives of himself to Sister Collins in the novel is indicative of what has been subsequently defined in negative terms by critics as his utopian nature, apt to render him "a vague symbol rather than a complete character."<sup>40</sup> The outspokenness of such a description on behalf of the author should have warned

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<sup>38</sup> Riddy, Felicity, "Robin Hyde and New Zealand" in *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas*, Alastair Niven, ed., Liege, Revue Des Langues Vivantes, 1976, p. 189

<sup>39</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 1995, Author's Note

<sup>40</sup> Rhodes, Winston H., "Robin Hyde, Novelist", *New Zealand Libraries*, p. 179

critics not to look at Robin Hyde's types from a traditional perspective, but to consider them in accordance with the writer's poetics:

"Ambergris isn't used, as people imagine for perfume. It's used to fix perfumes. Once you use it to fix any old scent you like, you've got it for keeps, not for a few glorious hours. It's a stabilizer. There are a good many stabilizers in the world. I, lady, aim to be one of them."

"Stabilize what?"

"The scent of the people...the stench, if you like to call it so. Tears, sweat, blood, silliness, accidental aspiration, the beginnings of honesty, the promises before they become piecrust."<sup>41</sup>

Macnamara embodies that hope for freedom deeply rooted in human beings, a hope which can only flourish out of the historical process. His revolution, as Phillida Bunkle, Linda Hardy and Jacqueline Matthews point out in their commentary<sup>42</sup> to the novel, is tinged with socialist ideas but it is not a revolution of the proletariat as there is no such concept for Hyde, people being perceived in terms of essential human values, and it is a non-violent revolution as violence is firmly believed by the author to perpetrate power struggle and social injustice. The change Macnamara feels he is the harbinger of is the one fostering a sense of communality among people, the one liberating edged-off individuals like Starkie from isolation, as Sister Collins's desire suggestively expresses: "I would like to tear down all the bricks and mortar in the world, all the prisons, hospitals, orphanages and asylums, and give them instead the great meadow."<sup>43</sup> As "fixing agent" Macnamara's task is to keep the spirit of the times alive by keeping awake the consciousness of the

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<sup>41</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 234

<sup>42</sup> Bunkle, Phillida, Hardy, Linda, Matthews, Jacqueline, "Commentary", in *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 288

<sup>43</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 86

people before their dreams and their aspirations get caught in the system of power and repression that Hyde sees dominating human beings.

Macnamara, the idealist, Sister Collins, the pragmatist, and Starkie, the returned soldier, are each separate, fragmented, and part of a whole, part of a community of human beings, who to Robin Hyde conceal “a fertility and a richness untapped.”<sup>44</sup> Hyde’s emphasis on communities derives both from a humanistic perspective contemplating “relationships that gall and goad us for community, which laughs and is free,”<sup>45</sup> as opposed to sterile isolation (“One wouldn’t stand isolated on a little island of safety, cut off from the rest of humanity”),<sup>46</sup> and from the awareness of that proliferation of selves which bars the way to the idea of artistic representation as real, verisimilar and authentic. This fragmentation is there from the start as the first chapter of the novel demonstrates. In this chapter Starkie’s memories merge into Sister Collins’; the setting is simultaneously a hospital in Trentham where Sister Collins works and the war days in Cairo where Starkie is stationed, creating a rich and complex narrative pattern: a pattern of fragmented wholeness which Sister Collins finds hard to decipher. Robin Hyde writes:

Sister Collins slipped outside to be sick. The lights swam. Great letters of fire stamped the darkness, ate into her brain. But when she tried painfully to decipher them, the spelling was always wrong and she cried a little with the worry of it...<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hyde, Robin, *A Home In This World*, with an introduction by Derek Challis, Auckland, Longman Paul, 1984, p. 11

<sup>45</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 1993, p. 200

<sup>46</sup> Hyde, Robin, *A Home In This World*, p. 4

<sup>47</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 16

Her relationship with Starkie is strong and ambivalent. It suggests a silent bond existing between them of which they both seem to be aware. Bede describes it in these terms:

She knew, had always known, why Stark exasperated her. He troubled her. He troubled the depths, making her remember things she wanted to set aside. He was an unsolved problem limping about, and his ghosts were on nodding terms with her ghosts.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly Hyde suggests that a deep affinity exists between Macnamara and Starkie as Starkie's dream of being Macnamara attests:

Just before he was truly asleep, he had a dream, or the edge of a dream. He saw himself crouching in the clay hut at Arrowtown, flipping a penny, while the rats rustled in the walls. A line of smoke turned to flame on the mountains, and Macnamara came down, but his face was changed. Starkie said: "Hey, Macnamara, I'm you and you're Starkie, eh?" and Macnamara replied: "I know it's all right."<sup>49</sup>

Further in the novel Bede will point out to Macnamara how sideways he is like Starkie, strengthening the impression that, though distinct, they belong together, Starkie being Macnamara's *Doppelgänger* and vice versa:

"Bede Collins...What are you thinking about, Bede?"  
 Bede stirred. Her body was cold and tired, but not unhappy. Her fingers, locked together in a steeple, propped up the weight of her chin.  
 "Of a man named Starkie...curiously enough."  
 "Starkie...I know Starkie."  
 "I wonder if it's the same one?"  
 "Oh, yes. It would have to be the same, that's in the story."  
 "Is it a story?"  
 "Yes in a way. All quite true."

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<sup>48</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 13

<sup>49</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 122

Those white lights make me blink. I'll tell you something. Looked at sideways on, you are rather like Starkie."<sup>50</sup>

Bede's metafictional revelation highlights furthermore what has been said so far about the nature of the novel's protagonists. If characters tend to represent living people, and are so portrayed as to be real and verisimilar, types, as representation of the ironic self, do not. They rather voice the impossibility in fiction of telling the absolute truth as every representation is always perceived to be partial. Moreover, types best deliver that sense of fragmentation to which the divided self is subject. In a way one could go as far as to affirm that types represent the hypostatization of the constitutive fragmentation of the self. By revealing that what has been narrated by the novel is a story, Bede, and through her the writer, add to the story a further dimension as if to prevent the narration from being a mere fantasy for the reader to be enticed into, but rather something to engage actively with.

Robin Hyde's awareness of the imaginary nature of the monolithic subjectivity, and its inadequacy to represent the essential self, is resolved in the novel through the collage of fragments, which in chapter sixteen is used to give a thorough report of the Auckland riot of 1935. In this chapter, "Riot Reported," Robin Hyde carries the idea of the fragmented wholeness further, in that the writer subverts the conventions of narrative discourse by introducing disembodied voices, which as in Virginia Woolf's fiction, and in Katherine Mansfield's stories in particular "Prelude," "At the Bay" and "The Garden Party," merge into each other like waves. They construct little by little, fragment by fragment, what could be defined as ironic subjectivity. Such a subjectivity comprises heterogeneous elements

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<sup>50</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 265

in the effort to grow out of the concept of a limited individual ego, what we have learnt to know as the monolithic subjectivity, creating instead a subjectivity *in relationship*.

The chapter begins with the male voices of various speakers at a public meeting discussing politics and it is counterpointed by female voices expressing hardship and suffering in their lives. Those voices are intermingled with voices raving about religion and miracles destined to peter out in a confused mutter which sounds more like a request for help (“I have lost my faith...I have lost my faith”),<sup>51</sup> and with those of two lovers, Millie and Bob, groping in the dark of their relationship, trying desperately to get near each other. Their dialogue is interrupted by the voice of a woman who embodies the properties of fire: destruction and regeneration which constitute the *leit-motif* of the riot. Similar to these voices are the voices reporting the riot. They form all together a collage of voices from which those of Macnamara and Sister Collins eventually emerge. In “Riot Reported” the reader is asked to attempt what Sister Collins tried to do at the beginning of the novel, that is, to decipher the meaning of those fragments, the message of those voices. This attempt inevitably leads to a process of reconstruction of the fragmentation, to a process of reconstruction of the disrupted which coincides with a reconstruction of the subject through its multifarious selves. By linking all the fragments together a message disentangled from power and ideology is delivered, creating a new language for human beings:

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<sup>51</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 220

It's like a kind of dialect laid over the speech to conceal it, a cipher, thought Bede; the funny things we all say off pat, over and over again. And underneath it, what? People aren't half such fools as they look and sound.<sup>52</sup>

As Patrick Sandbrook observes in "Robin Hyde. A Writer At Work" the concept of subjectivity in Robin Hyde is inextricably related to language, which is considered as an ideological construction that contributes actively to the creation of the self. The truth about the self will be determined as a result according to the use made of language, and consequently to the degrees of awareness of the conventional nature of language showed by the writer. Although, as Patrick Sandbrook remarks, Hyde never formulated this theoretically, it is nonetheless evident in her work.<sup>53</sup>

The writer's vision is palpable in a letter to J.H. Schroder where Robin Hyde describes Macnamara's function in the novel: "I suppose you would call Macnamara imaginary, though to me he's extremely real, and a necessary part of the post-war years."<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note that in Robin Hyde the term "imaginary" means exactly the opposite of what it is usually taken to mean. Rather than an opposition between reality and imagination<sup>55</sup> which accounts far too often for an oversimplification of Hyde's work, the different use of the terms real and imaginary, expresses Robin Hyde's rather distinctive consciousness as a modern writer. In a letter to J. H. Schroder after having described her novel, *The Godwits Fly*, as a "sort of portrait of dreamland as seen by a young female with not much talent for living," Hyde further remarks about the novel's main character: "The trouble is a) keep her

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<sup>52</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 180

<sup>53</sup> Sandbrook, Patrick, "Robin Hyde. A Writer At Work", Ph.D Thesis, Massey University, 1985, p. 152-154

<sup>54</sup> Letter to J. H. Schroder, April 25, 1937, 7:93, MS Papers 280, Wtu, as cited in "Robin Hyde. A Writer At Work" by Patrick Sandbrook, p. 316

<sup>55</sup> Rawlinson, Gloria, "Robin Hyde and *The Godwits Fly*", *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, Cherry Hankin, ed., Auckland, Heinemann Educational Books, 1976, p. 44

pinned down to earth and she gets sunken in such bogs of misery b) release her, and she becomes incredible and fantastic. I think I shall do the latter anyhow.”<sup>56</sup> The allure of the fantastic must not be interpreted however as a form of escapism, as the dreamland as well as the dream people which Hyde often mentions to define respectively the genre and the nature of characters in novels such as *Wednesday's Children*, *Nor The Years Condemn* and *The Godwits Fly*, are in terms of fiction more real than the real.

The use of the fantastic in Robin Hyde resembles “le souffle merveilleux” which Baudelaire mentions when describing the protagonists of the English pantomime and their “gestes extraordinaires.” *Wednesday's Children*, written in mid-1935 together with “The Unbelievers,” exemplifies that process of characterization which endows her work with such deep and far-reaching repercussions. The accent falls on types again as the quotation from Rupert Brooke’s poem “Tiare Tahiti,”<sup>57</sup> with which Hyde suggestively chooses to introduce the novel, amply suggests:

“And Types, whose earthly copies were  
The foolish broken things we knew.”

Although passed unobserved this quotation is of crucial importance to a critical reading of the novel in that it exemplifies the writer’s peculiar and until now misunderstood technique of characterization revealing at the same time the hidden and mysterious message of the novel itself. Quoting from Rupert Brooke’s poem,

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<sup>56</sup> Letter to J.H. Schroder, April 26, 1935, 6:80, MS Papers 280,Wtu, as cited in “Robin Hyde. A Writer At Work” by Patrick Sandbrook, p. 138

<sup>57</sup> Brooke, Rupert, *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With A Memoir*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1924, p. 13

the writer makes what the reader retrospectively recognizes to be a statement on the nature of her characters, and more generally on the nature of her fiction, on what she has decided to include in the novel and what she has decided to leave out. The quotation placed as an epigraph to the novel is in other words the writer's final statement on her poetics. Types' earthly copies, defined as foolish and broken, represent, on the one hand, that characterisation that the author has apparently decided to deny to the personages of her novel, the denial of verisimilitude in fiction, and on the other hand they represent that state of fragmentation, of *dédoublément* characterizing the ironic self from which types as such evolve. Types are thus considered as the epitome of the characters' divided nature, and at the same time as their ideal counterpart. They manage in this way to give an appearance of wholeness to the fragmented nature of characters, so as to make it possible for the writer to accomplish the traditional task of a work of fiction: the telling of the tale. In *Wednesday's Children* Robin Hyde plays openly with the traditional canons of narrative, disrupting radically the telling of the tale although apparently suggesting she is doing otherwise. Through the dualism type/character the writer's act of subversion is obliquely foregrounded, fostering that process of reconstruction of the subject which is only apparent as the character is perceived as inevitably fragmented, and thus not representable if not in the ambiguous disguise of its ideal copy: the type.

In *Wednesday's Children* Robin Hyde tells the story of Wednesday Gilfillan, who after winning a large sum of money in a lottery, buys an island in the Hauraki Gulf, and there conceives and raises five children. All of them have different fathers of different nationalities, and Wednesday scandalizes her family in the mainland by announcing each birth in the paper. This is anyway only "the apparent truth" which

proves brittle enough when an Englishman, Mr Bellister, steps into her life and discovers that Wednesday's children as well as her lovers are not real, but belong to her world of dream. The novel ends with Wednesday's disappearance, probably due to drowning. In the last chapter the reader is given an explanation by the author about her proceedings in the form of a letter that Wednesday writes to Mr Bellister before disappearing. Wednesday's letter reveals both the heroine's difficulties in dealing with the ideological structures thrust upon individuals by society, and at the same time the novelist's doubts about verisimilitude in art. Her following words express very powerfully such an ambiguity:

It was Shakespeare who in after years kept saying to me, "To thine own self be true."

And then when it all went so badly - living where I wasn't wanted, and looking such an insignificant plain kitchen pot, and dropping stitches in knitted bedsocks no sane persons would have worn, anyway, I began to wonder, "Which self? Which self? True to which self?" You see, Mr Bellister, most surface selves are such lies.<sup>58</sup>

Strikingly similar to this passage is what Katherine Mansfield wrote in her *Journal* about the mysterious nature of the self:

When autograph albums were the fashion - sumptuous volumes bound in soft leather, and pages so delicately tinted that each tender sentiment had its own sunset sky to faint, to die upon - the popularity of that most sly, ambiguous, difficult piece of advice: 'To thine own self be true' was the despair of collectors. How dull it was, how boring, to have the same thing written six times over! And then, even if it was Shakespeare, that didn't prevent it - oh, *l'âge d'innocence!* - from being dreadfully obvious. Of course, it followed as the night the day that if one was true to oneself... True to oneself? which self? Which of my - well really, that's what it looks like coming to - hundreds of selves?<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 197

<sup>59</sup> Middleton, J. Murry, ed., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 205

“The mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent” to use Katherine Mansfield’s words is the same belief born out of conventions which Wednesday cannot be reconciled with. Her children, Attica, Dorset, Naples, and the baby twins Limerick and Londonderry, as well as her lovers, the Greek bookmaker, Mr Agropoulos, Edward, the Englishman, Beppo Luigi, the Italian organ-grinder, and Michael, the Irishman, who sailed off to Jamaica, represent Wednesday’s other selves: a dream people whom the reader nonetheless is made to believe to be real, albeit rather whimsical, characters. Various hints are dropped throughout the novel to warn the reader not to believe in “surface selves,” and in so doing, manage to resist the escapist enticement offered by “real” fiction, the one abiding blindly by all the existing rules of verisimilitude, all the conventions of narrative art. The ironic intent of the writer is evident. By making the imaginary real, she is putting into question the plausibility of reality as such.

The protean nature of Wednesday is suggested at the very beginning of the novel when Wednesday’s description reveals somehow her ambiguity. She is described both as a wet animal, a vole, and as an angel:

Behind her voleishness, the other and taller presence shone out. It could carry wheat-sheaves and poppies without looking incongruous. It was a sort of domesticated angel, yet not without a sense of humour.<sup>60</sup>

The drunken man whom she encounters out of the building of the newspaper office, *The Comet*, sees her as an angel endowed with the sensuousness of a shepherdess, a sort of Bacchante, whilst the Hindu fruiterer takes her for a ghost: “The fruiterer jabbed excitedly to his confrere. He was saying that the woman outside must surely

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<sup>60</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 16

be a spirit, since she smiled, and white women, as the world knows, do not smile.”<sup>61</sup>

Likewise her children are portrayed from the start in a quite ambivalent way as they seem to spring solely out of one of their mother’s acts of wilfulness:

“I can’t decide,” she thought desperately, “I’ll just have to have another baby, and somehow work it so that he...she...is a compound of perfections, and makes the others look like fools. A pity when five’s such a nice number.”<sup>62</sup>

Each of the children is given a chapter where their peculiar adventures are related: Naples, who is very fond of animals, goes to the circus and ends up in the lion’s cage, signing his life-long pact with the animal world by taming the lion in the cage; Attica, the sculptor, kidnaps a child of the Vienna Singing Boys so as to be able to carve his head; Dorset, the young explorer, joins a “crusader” going to the Holy Land. Naples’ chapter, “Nice Lion,” is somehow emblematic of the feature of the type prevailing in the novel, and reminds us once again of Baudelaire’s description of the English pantomime, and at the same time of the world of masks in the *Commedia dell’Arte*. Describing the masks at the circus, Robin Hyde seems to suggest a relation between them and Beppo, the Elf, his brother, and Naples, a relation which becomes evident by comparing the description she gives of the circus people with that of the personages of the novel:

The clown was Wisdom and Sorrow and Grins in adversity; Pierrot and Pierrette, long since kicked out of decent society, loitered and whistled here, and danced with their own shadows, cast nimbly against the big white moon of the tent.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19

<sup>62</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 19

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 111

Further in the novel the writer will portray rather suggestively Beppo, the Elf, and Naples in this way:

Their dark, hunched shadows were so queer, so queer, all the way back to Wednesday's island [...] shadows silhouetted first on roads washed clean with moonlight, then on the jasper flooring of the sea.<sup>64</sup>

Shadow as man's double self highlights the ironic/divided nature of types that could be considered as the shadow of the character itself. Shadows like types are whole though born out of a division, out of a fragmentation. The truth as Wednesday bitterly remarks is not just one, is multifarious as each truth seems to be able to divide itself ad infinitum: "I was always in bad trouble...with the truth. Not so much knowing *what* it is, as knowing *which* it is. My truths were amoebae, they had second selves, split personalities, double faces."<sup>65</sup> The truth lies in the fragmentation of the self, in its being divided.

By giving a different voice, and a complete, though imaginary existence to each fragment, Robin Hyde succeeds in representing that subjectivity in relationship mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This partly gives an explanation for the title of the novel, which originally was "Wednesday's child", for the emphasis put on the children as they were, as they are indeed, inextricably part of her, capable of defining her identity more than her name alone is able to. Wednesday's children are the heroine's other selves developed as subjects and put into relationship. This subjectivity "other" than the monolithic one epitomized by Mr Bellister, often described as "a granite shaft, a dead grey magical thing, potent with too great a

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116

<sup>65</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 198

power of drawing to itself and striking out at enemies”<sup>66</sup> or as “a sort of tombstone...say a slender shaft in Aberdeen granite,”<sup>67</sup> can only exist in its fragmented wholeness. This fragmentation does not nonetheless constitute a reason for nostalgia or a source of woe, but rather it is perceived as a sign of richness:

“Wednesday’s child is a child of woe”, he [Mr Bellister] continued, with profound pessimism that might have been the aftermath of the brandy. Her face flushed, she snapped at him: “Much you know about Wednesday’s children...”<sup>68</sup>

“Other” than Mr Bellister’s house in England, The Fawns, which shares some of its disquieting characteristics with Mr Rochester’s Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*, “L’Entente Cordiale,” the house on the island, that shelters Wednesday’s children, and their diverse nationalities, is a place in harmony with its inhabitants and with the wild life of the island. It is the ideal house conceived as interior space for human beings to grow in and develop from, it is a space beyond space, a space in becoming:

I know now what I am looking for. It is a home in this world. I don’t mean four walls and a roof on top...I want a natural order and containment, a centre of equipoise, an idea - not a cell from which one can retreat, but a place from which one can advance: a place from which I can stretch giant shadowy hands, and make a road between two obscure villages in China, teach the Arab and the Jew how to live together in Palestine, tide up the shack dwellings and shack destinies of our own thin Maoris in the north...<sup>69</sup>

The house as a home in this world is the ideal space of the subjectivity *in relationship* whose realistic counterpart is the “cupboard” where the characters of

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<sup>66</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 188

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>69</sup> Hyde, Robin, *A Home In This World*, p. 10

some of Katherine Mansfield's stories live their existence trapped, isolated, divided. Yet as in "Prelude," "At the Bay" and "The Garden Party" the house is also the map of that subjectivity *in relationship*, of those voices that within the space of the house merge into each other capturing the melody of the water outside, lapping the bay early in the morning, as if listening to the coming and going of the tides, or the sound of the creek in the paddock. Wednesday disappears in the water, and water that "says things so clearly"<sup>70</sup> is heard in "The poem of the Island" that ends the novel: "And the ebb tide backward slipping. No gold on the waters; only grey, ghostly waters Under my white boat slipping."<sup>71</sup> Its fluidity or its being the mesmerizing voice of silence makes, I think, the water a suitable metaphor for delivering that idea of fragmented wholeness which characterizes the masks of fiction. In the title of Robin Hyde's posthumously published collection of poems, *Houses by the Sea*, the writer comes very near to that ideal place between the earth and the sea, between the house and the beach, which in "At the Bay" we sense to be the open space of the artistic creation.

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>71</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 208

## **CHAPTER III**

**Inside the vertigo / Outside the linear path:**

**Robin Hyde. A voice of dissent**

## Perceiving the narrative vertigo: Robin Hyde's *Wednesday's Children*

The perception of the vertigo, which has been analysed so far in connection with some of Katherine Mansfield's short stories, plays an equally significant role in the fiction of Robin Hyde. That is certainly the case with Robin Hyde's novel, *Wednesday's Children*, where the perception of the vertigo is present both in the writer's peculiar characterization of her personages and in the narrative structure of the novel. By portraying Wednesday, the main character, as an hybrid, something between a "wet animal" and an angel with a touch of the Bacchante to it, or in other words as a fallen angel, a characterization we will come back to in the course of this chapter, Robin Hyde confirms and strenghtens further the idea of the fall entailed in the vertigo perception. In addition to that, by choosing to depict Wednesday as a "flat character" to use E. M. Forster's phraseology,<sup>1</sup> as a type, the writer puts the accent on the divided/ironic nature of the character's self, on that fragmented wholeness which determines, as I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapter, first the perception of the vertigo and subsequently the fall of the heroine.

On a different level, that of the narrative structure of the novel, it is interesting to observe the occurrence of a similar phenomenon. As in "The Wind Blows" by Katherine Mansfield where writing seems to be affected by the blowing of the wind until the spiral-like movement of the wind becomes that of the writing itself, so in *Wednesday's Children* the narration of Wednesday's adventures,

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<sup>1</sup> Forster, E. M., *Aspects of the Novel*, London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1927, p. 93

reaching their climax with Wednesday's disappearance, becomes the pretext for seducing writing in the narrative vertigo of the fantastic. If vertigos, as Michel Foucault suggests in *Madness and Civilisation*, are a form of madness insofar as they represent a movement away from reason as the classical definition of *delirium* as "a word derived from *lira*, a furrow; so that *deliro* actually means to move out of the furrow, away from the proper path of reason,"<sup>2</sup> Robin Hyde's use of the fantastic element in her novel can be interpreted as a movement away from "the proper path of reason", as an act of resistance toward those traditional narrative canons of reality and verisimilitude which divide up genres into high and low. A paragraph significantly entitled "In defense of fantasy: an introductory note to *Wednesday's Children*" is dedicated to the critical response to Robin Hyde's peculiar use of the fantastic element in her novel, in the effort to redeem it from critical misrepresentation.

Instead of regarding the fantastic element as the major flaw of the novel, but starting from the assumption that the use of the fantastic can be interpreted as an act of resistance towards established literary canons, we might as well try to place Robin Hyde's peculiar use of the fantastic within a wider discourse regarding literary genres, drawing an interesting parallel between Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque and Robin Hyde's provocative use of the fantastic in her novel. The link between Bakhtin's carnival and the fantastic lies in the way both employ fantasy in its unbridled form as a provocative and subversive instrument of renovation. Carnival celebrates misrule and anarchy in life as the fantastic celebrates it in literature. Both move away "from the proper path of reason," and become

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, pp. 99-100

oblivious of time, succumbing to that vertigo of “joyful relativity” they themselves engender. Mikhail Bakhtin specifically mentions the “bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic” in relation to the *menippea*, the genre that in the past best delivered that sense of the carnivalistic which Bakhtin deems to have had a great influence on literary forms. This argument will be further developed in this chapter, showing in full detail how the carnivalistic represents an interesting feature of Robin Hyde’s novel. Passages from Bakhtin’s works will find their counterpart in Robin Hyde’s *Wednesday’s Children* with a few digressions of a biographical nature aimed at giving a wider perspective to the comparison in question.

### **In defence of fantasy: an introductory note to *Wednesday’s Children***

I have my own idea about art, and it is this: What most people regard as fantastic and lacking in universality, I hold to be the inmost essence of truth.

Feodor Dostoevsky. Letter to Nikolay Strachov, 26 February 1869<sup>3</sup>

Describing *Wednesday’s Children* Robin Hyde defined it as “a dream novel with no morals.”<sup>4</sup> She wrote it in 1935 just after having finished the draft of “The Unbelievers” which she referred to in one of her letters to J. H. Schroder as the nearest she had come so far to what she wanted to write: “Comedy and fantasy with

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<sup>3</sup> Dostoevsky, Feodor, Letter to Nicolay Strachov, 26 February 1869, in *Novelists on The Novel*, Miriam Allott, ed., London, Routledge, 1959, p. 68

<sup>4</sup> Letter to J.H. Schroder, n.d. (1935), 6:84, MS Papers 280 (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington). Quoted in Patrick Sandbrook’s Ph.D thesis, “Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work”, p. 24

a magic island and communists and psychiatrists and idealised portraits of all my fair and false friends. I wrote it as a relief for pent-up feelings and it did.”<sup>5</sup> Like the characters in *Wednesday's Children* “the Unbelievers are the people who believe not the things supposedly true, but quite other things: and act accordingly.”<sup>6</sup> They live on two imaginary islands in the Pacific ocean, like Wednesday's children who live on an island in the Hauraki Gulf off-shore from the city of Auckland. *Wednesday's Children* was eventually published in 1937, the negotiations for the publication having been particularly long and tiresome as the publishers were “dubious about fantasy”<sup>7</sup> and would have preferred Robin Hyde to write a “realistic” book like her first successful novel *Passport To Hell* published in 1936. The writer's lack of realism is held responsible for the poor reception of her novel. E. H. McCormick defined it as “a fantasy without ballast”<sup>8</sup> and even later sympathetic critics like Shelagh Cox and, to a certain extent, Susan Ash, were puzzled by the fantastic element with which the novel is so peculiarly endowed. Shelagh Cox regards it as “the fatal illusion of self-deception”<sup>9</sup> and Susan Ash remarks that to some readers Wednesday's attitude in the novel could exemplify a “‘childish’ evasion of reality through fantasy.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly Felicity Riddy reduces the fantastic element of the novel to a mere make-believe running the risk of oversimplifying Hyde's work too

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to J. H. Schroder, August 8, 1935, 6:82, MS Papers 280 (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington). Quoted in Patrick Sandbrook's Ph.D thesis, “Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work”, p. 23

<sup>6</sup> Letter to J. H. Schroder, July 19, 1935, 6:81, MS Papers 280, (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington). Quoted in Patrick Sandbrook's Ph.D thesis, “Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work”, pp. 71-72

<sup>7</sup> Letter to J. H. Schroder, April 25, 1937, 7:93, MS Papers 280, (Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington). Quoted in Patrick Sandbrook's Ph.D thesis, “Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work”, p. 316

<sup>8</sup> McCormick, E.H., *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p. 176

<sup>9</sup> Cox, Shelagh, “Creating a Bearable World: Imaginative Transformation of an Alien Society in the Fiction of Robin Hyde and Angela Carter” in *Women's Studies Conference Papers 1982*, Auckland, Women's Studies Association, 1983, p. 14

<sup>10</sup> Ash, Susan, “Critical Afterword” in *Wednesday's Children*, p. 216

much.<sup>11</sup> Frank Birbalsingh on the other hand contributes to reinstate the Manichean division between fantasy and reality, pointing at the fantastic element of the novel as at its likely flaw:

Although some episodes are clearly drawn, it is difficult to tell which episodes are actual and which are imagined by the heroine. Eventually, when Wednesday dies, it appears that all the children are imaginary, in which case most of the action can be regarded as depicting her fantasies.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973) Tzvetan Todorov presents a critical study of fantasy which questions, through a systematic analysis of texts, the subordination of fantasy to reality.<sup>13</sup> As Rosemary Jackson remarks, such a classification has prevented critics for too long from approaching the fantastic as a literary form endowed with its own poetics: "Critics have traditionally defined fantasy in terms of its relation to the 'real,' and in literary terms this meant that the fantastic tended to be understood through its relation to realism."<sup>14</sup> What Rosemary Jackson implies, is that although by definition the fantastic cannot be conceived without its realistic counterpart, critics have often considered the fantastic for this reason deficient in comparison with the real. Its ambiguity is on the contrary a sign of richness and of dialogic potential: "The fantastic exists as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel's closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to

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<sup>11</sup> Riddy, Felicity, "Robin Hyde and New Zealand" in *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas*, p. 186: "It turns out in the end that both the children and their fathers are all make-believe, a plain and lonely woman's wish-fulfilment dream; but she drowns herself rather than forsake them for the real lover who finally presents himself."

<sup>12</sup> Birbalsingh, Frank, "Robin Hyde", *Landfall* no.124, 1977, p. 364

<sup>13</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. from the French by Richard Howard, Cleveland/London, The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen, 1981, p. 26

its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly Eric S. Rabkin observes in *The Fantastic in Literature* that “one of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that perspectives enforced by the grand rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted.”<sup>16</sup> These mimetic rules, in which Auerbach’s idea of the novel is deeply rooted, constitute however the necessary substratum for the fantastic to be enacted. Rabkin further remarks:

The fantastic is a quality of astonishment that we feel when the ground rules of a narrative world are suddenly made to turn about 180°. We recognize the reversal in the reactions of characters, the statements of narrators, and the implications of structure, all playing on and against our whole experience as people and readers. The fantastic is a potent tool in the hands of an author who wishes to satirize man’s world or clarify the inner workings of man’s soul. In more or less degree, a whole range of narratives uses the fantastic. And at the far end of this range, we find Fantasy, the genre whose centre and concern, whose primary enterprise, is to present and consider the fantastic is marked by Fantasy, and offers a fantastic world.<sup>17</sup>

Chris Price in her essay “The Childish Empire and the Empire of Children: Colonial and Alternative Dominions in Robin Hyde’s *Check to Your King* and *Wednesday’s Children*”<sup>18</sup> puts the emphasis on the different use of the word “childish” in Robin Hyde’s two novels in relation to the world of fantasy. “Childish” as a derogatory term characterizes the ethics of the empire builders in *Check To Your King*, and more generally the male dominated world of colonial New Zealand, a world skeptical of dreams and utopias, whereas the same term in its

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25

<sup>16</sup> Rabkin, Eric, S., *The Fantastic in Literature*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 8

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>18</sup> Price, Chris, “The Childish Empire and the Empire of Children: Colonial and Alternative Dominions in Robin Hyde’s *Check to Your King* and *Wednesday’s Children*”, *Opening The Book. New Essays on New Zealand Writing*, pp. 49-67

positive connotation is deemed to characterize the private world of women and children alongside indigenous people, and account for their capacity for fantasy. In this case the term “childish” stands for a childlike quality of innocence which is perceived to be of inestimable value by the writer, as opposed, in its clear-sightedness, to the patriarchal blind eye of reality.<sup>19</sup> Yet even Chris Price seems not to be immune to the persistent bias attached to the use of fantasy in fiction. Her assumption that the use of fantasy in Robin Hyde is solely subordinated to a considered strategy of the writer aimed at partly neutralizing the novel’s subversiveness in order to make it acceptable does not take into consideration the writer’s profound interest in the fantastic<sup>20</sup> nor its specific role within the writer’s poetics.

Price ascribes the use of fantasy to the writer’s fear of provoking and outraging the society she set out to satirize as Jean Devanny did when she wrote *The Butcher Shop* in 1926, a novel which, ten years earlier, caused a great stir and was banned both in New Zealand and Australia as a result of its subversiveness. She further suggests that Robin Hyde probably “absorbed the lesson of the *Butcher Shop*, and deliberately set out to avoid the same fate for her own work.”<sup>21</sup> Such a thesis proves to be inconsistent just by casting a glance at Robin Hyde’s private and public life, fraught with unpopular choices and idiosyncratic views which alienated

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<sup>19</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 104

<sup>20</sup> Sandbrook, Patrick, “Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work”, pp. 73-4

<sup>21</sup> Price, Chris, “The Childish Empire and the Empire of Children: Colonial and Alternative Dominions in Robin Hyde’s *Check to Your King* and *Wednesday’s Children*”, *Opening The Book. New Essays on New Zealand Writing*, p. 64

her from her environment. She was known to have the nature of a crusader, and had wit and daring in abundance.<sup>22</sup>

Choosing to write fantasy novels instead of the realistic ones demanded of her by her publishers is probably the most convincing proof of her dedication and commitment. In an article on New Zealand women of letters, which appeared in *The Working Woman* of April 1936, she writes of Jean Devanny with a detachment granted by the lapse of time separating the two women writers, which further suggests the unlikelihood of Chris Price's thesis: "So far as I can recollect, a woman, Mrs Jean Devanny, is the only author to have earned the distinction of having her book banned. *The Butcher Shop*, written with great, if undisciplined power, is a work of crude ore."<sup>23</sup> When Chris Price affirms that "setting the work as a fantasy and using the tone of children's stories were methods of making Hyde's criticism of society seem less stridently political and less threatening,"<sup>24</sup> she is not only misreading the use of the fantastic in the writer's work, which is a common enough mistake among Robin Hyde's critics, but she is also misrepresenting the writer's political concerns and social commitment evident in her journalism<sup>25</sup> as well as in her fiction. She described herself to J.H. Schroder as "more than a little pro-Bolshie,"<sup>26</sup> denouncing in her articles the injustices brought about by the Depression in terms of unemployment, hitting women in particular, lack of free speech and the loss of human values.

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<sup>22</sup> Boddy, Gillian & Matthews, Jacqueline, eds., "The Life of Robin Hyde" in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1991, p. 70

<sup>23</sup> Hyde, Robin, "The New Zealand Woman in Letters", *The Working Woman*, April 1936 in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 192

<sup>24</sup> Price, Chris, "The Childish Empire and the Empire of Children: Colonial and Alternative Dominions in Robin Hyde's *Check to Your King* and *Wednesday's Children*", *Opening The Book. New Essays on New Zealand Writing*, p. 63

<sup>25</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Journalese*, Auckland, The National Printing Company, 1934

In *Wednesday's Children* Robin Hyde tackles political issues such as the role of the League of Nations, the war in Abyssinia, colonialism, women's position within society, combining these elements with a specific use of the fantastic. The issues raised by the novel are diverse and problematical, but it is worthwhile pondering on their significance in order to comprehend better their far-reaching implications. By defining *Wednesday's Children* as "a dream novel with no morals" Robin Hyde did not intend to reduce her novel to a fine piece of escapism. On the contrary, the writer seems to achieve in *Wednesday's Children* through the use of fantasy what Virginia Woolf in "Modern Fiction" describes as that uttermost freedom which allows the writer to write what he chooses and not what he must, that shaking free from narrative conventions, which represents the strongest temptation of a writer, his "spasm of rebellion":

The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Letter to J. H. Schroder, 2 May 1932, cited in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 40

<sup>27</sup> Woolf, Virginia, "Modern Fiction", in *The Common Reader* (first series), London, The Hogarth Press, 1962, pp. 188-89

## **Rocking and dreaming in the white boat of folly: the Carnivalistic in *Wednesday's Children***

The invisible thread which connects the mesmerizing image of the white boat in "The Poem for the Island" inserted at the end of *Wednesday's Children* to the literary tradition of folly, exemplified in the far more threatening image of Brandt's *Narrenschiff*, is just one of the silver threads woven into the rich tapestry of Robin Hyde's novel. And yet it is a significant one insofar as it suggests a journey back through narrative genres to the roots of fiction marked by the writer's courageous attempt to shape amidst the voices of the past her own voice. In this sense the novel could be considered innovative as it reveals an extremely developed textual self-awareness which, adopting Linda Hutcheon's ironic allegorical reading of the Narcissus myth, could be described as the narcissistic quality of fiction about fiction.<sup>28</sup> The ironic intent present from the start in the form of types preferred to more traditional characters, which is highlighted by the choice of Rupert Brooke's verses placed as an epigraph to the novel, is carried further, giving rise to a hilarious masquerade of genres, from satire to the picaresque, in a tragicomic effort of self-creation as art accepts no longer the traditional values of the past and becomes, in Joseph Frank's words, the only source of a new realm of "the sacred" in the effort "to undertake the unprecedented task of creating by itself the cultural, religious or metaphysical content from which art had always hitherto drawn its aims and inspiration."<sup>29</sup> The author makes explicit references in the form of light parody to

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<sup>28</sup> Hutcheon, Linda, *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox*, New York and London, Methuen, 1980

<sup>29</sup> Frank, Joseph, *The Widening Gyre*, New Jersey, New Brunswick, 1963, p. 175

the works of Swift,<sup>30</sup> Cervantes<sup>31</sup> and Sterne,<sup>32</sup> placing her novel in the tradition of serio-comical genres successfully investigated by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin distinguishes between serio-comical genres such as Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire which he defines as dialogic, and serious genres such as the epic, the tragedy, the history, and classical rhetoric defined as monological, in that, they imply an integrated and stable universe of discourse.<sup>33</sup> The main characteristic of the serio-comical genres is perceived to be their bond with *carnivalistic folklore*:

They are all - to a greater or lesser degree - saturated with a specific carnival sense of the world, and several of them are direct literary variants of oral carnival-folklore genres. The carnival sense of the world, permeating these genres from top to bottom, determines their basic features and places image and word in them in a special relationship to reality. In all genres of the serio-comical, to be sure, there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism.<sup>34</sup>

The term "carnival" has for Mikhail Bakhtin a quite far-reaching inclusive meaning riddled with implications and ancient echoes. Its use tends to be very broad<sup>35</sup> insofar as the carnivalistic is considered to be a "flexible form of artistic vision." The literary genre in which it is deemed to find its fullest expression is the Menippean satire which Bakhtin simply calls the *menippea* whose influence on the

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<sup>30</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 13

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 199

<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Caryl Emerson, ed., Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 106-7

<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 107

<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 218

history of the development of European novelistic prose is reckoned to be immense.<sup>36</sup> Descendents of this literary genre are the works of Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, Dickens, and Dostoevsky. The menippea as a traditional form of fantastic art is related to the carnivalistic in its celebration of misrule and social disorder foregrounded by carnival as ritualised festive event during which folly and transgression are given a right to be. An interesting link can be found between the characteristics of the carnivalistic proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and various aspects of Robin Hyde's novel *Wednesday's Children*. The writer's use of the fantastic in particular is similar to that present in the menippea. Fantasy in carnivalistic art as well as in Hyde's novel is perceived as an act of resistance to norm and tradition. The vertigo of the carnival which knows no temporal dimension, no rules, no direction, which knows nothing but its falling, is the same vertigo perceptible in the narrative structure of *Wednesday's Children* where fantasy in its unbridled form blurs the boundaries between genres, mocks the rigid divisions separating them, distorts and corrupts according to the true spirit of carnival. Although Peter Stallybrass and Allon White observe in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* that Bakhtin's utopian theory of carnival has often been misinterpreted and too easily appropriated, and that carnival has lost its social force, it can be nonetheless argued with them that women's relationship to transgression maintains its politically progressive nature: "Only a challenge to the hierarchy of *sites* of discourse, which usually comes from groups and classes 'situated' by the dominant in low or marginal positions, carries the promise of politically transformative power."<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>36</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 119

<sup>37</sup> Stallybrass, Peter and White, Allon, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, London, Methuen, 1986, p. 201

“Upsetting the public: carnival, hysteria and women’s texts” Claire Wills starts from Peter Stallybrass’s and Allon White’s assumption and develops it further in order to “draw an analogy between Bakhtinian carnival, hysteria and women’s texts in terms of their capacity to disrupt and remake official public norms.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly Paulina Palmer in her essay “From ‘Coded Mannequin’ to Bird Woman: Angela Carter’s Magic Flight” uses the Russian critic’s theory of the carnivalistic to read *Nights at the Circus* by Angela Carter.<sup>39</sup> The example of Angela Carter, used here only to highlight the possibility of a profitable reading of women’s texts with Bakhtin, is not however completely out of place in relation to Robin Hyde. Angela Carter and Robin Hyde share the same interest in folk-tales and myths and make use of the carnivalistic and its transgressive power in a similar way. It is interesting to note that Shelagh Cox compares these two writers, pointing out the peculiar use of their subversive imagination, aimed at creating a world where women can fit in and find their own place.<sup>40</sup> In a letter to the New Zealand poet Eileen Duggan dated 12 April 1935, the year in which *Wednesday’s Children* was written, Robin Hyde wrote about the importance of myths and folk-tales and the need to rewrite them, to actualize them, which is exactly what forty years later Angela Carter did in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979):

What Feuchtwanger calls “those fables which hold more truth than reality” [...] bring back to us an echo and a colour of ages and places forgotten [...] I have the greatest respect for the old folk-tales, both in verse and in prose, not the pretty ones but the kind whose savour is like the smell of newly

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<sup>38</sup> Wills, Claire, “Upsetting the public: carnival, hysteria and women’s texts”, *Bakhtin and cultural theory*, Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, eds., Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 130

<sup>39</sup> Palmer, Paulina, “From ‘Coded Mannequin’ to Bird Woman: Angela Carter’s Magic Flight”, *Women Reading Women’s Writing*, Sue Roe, ed., Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1987, pp. 197-201

<sup>40</sup> Cox, Shelagh, “Creating A Bearable World: Imaginative Transformation of An Alien Society in the Fiction of Robin Hyde and Angela Carter”, *Women’s Studies Conference Papers 1982*, pp. 11-18

chopped wood in a forest clearing. I see no reason why new personalities of fairytale shouldn't be created, and why old ones, dried and withered in forgotten pages, shouldn't be interpreted so that they have one foot in the fable kingdom and one in the human city.<sup>41</sup>

Mikhail Bakhtin is interested in folklore too. He puts the accent in his works on the influence of folklore in the development of literary genres. His analysis concerns in particular carnivalistic folklore which is deemed to constitute the basis for serio-comical genres. In *Wednesday's Children* the influence of the menippea is palpable as the novel seems to share with this genre many a characteristic; the most important one being "its bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic,"<sup>42</sup> together with an "extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention."<sup>43</sup> In the chapter entitled "Nice Lion" - to give an example - the lion's thoughts about his master and tamer, The Mighty Ponderoso, can be certainly considered to belong to the fantastic. In hearing the lion's reflections upon his master, the reader is as astonished as Alice in Wonderland to discover that flowers do speak after all.<sup>44</sup> Animals speak in *Wednesday's Children* and comment on human beings, often mockingly. The voice at the circus that, bawling through the megaphone, announces the coming on stage of "Ponderoso the Mighty. Ponderoso the Great, alone with his raging, savage lions"<sup>45</sup> finds its comical counterpart in the lion's opinion of his master: "the fellow is a wart. What business had he to leave the door of my cage unlocked to-night?"

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<sup>41</sup> Letter to Eileen Duggan, 12 April 1935, quoted in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, pp. 115-6

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 114

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 114

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, Carroll, *Through The Looking Glass* in *The Annotated Alice*, Martin Gardner, ed., New York, Clarkson N. Potter, 1960, p. 200: "'Oh Tiger-lily!' said Alice, addressing herself to one that was waving gratefully about in the wind, 'I wish you could talk!' 'We can talk,' said the Tiger-lily, 'when there's anybody worth talking to.' Alice was so astonished that she couldn't speak for a minute: it quite seemed to take her breath away."

<sup>45</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 111

Aha, aha, does he fancy I know not when he has been at the bottle again? If I chose to take advantage of his idleness and uxory...”<sup>46</sup> Similarly a pony commenting on the romantic fantasies of two young people, Pamela and Tommy/Derwant, in a stable-loft, suggests a satirical bent about human passions inherent to the perspective of the animals:

“I nearly lost you, Tommy,” sobbed Pamela, “I nearly did lose you. My lovely Tommy.”

“Don’t mind,” said Tommy, “if horses go extinct on us like unicorns, we’ll move on and on to places where there’s still a stable-loft. We’ll live to find the Isle of Horses.”

“Scad,” said the pony, to the nearest lilac-coloured dove. “Oh, Love,” moaned the dove. “Don’t you go Bronte on me,” ordered the pony, stamping with vexation. The dove, much annoyed, flew out into the sunshine, and circled thrice over the stables, giving its favourite impersonation of the Holy Ghost.<sup>47</sup>

The fantastic element is not however an end in itself. It must be justified according to Bakhtin by the search for a philosophical idea, by the pursuit of the truth where the goal is not intended to be the possession of the truth, but the journey that leads to it. In regard to this Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

We emphasize that the fantastic here serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it. To this end the heroes of Menippean satire ascend into heaven, descend into the nether world, wander through unknown and fantastic lands, are placed in extraordinary life situations.<sup>48</sup>

In the novel the theme of the journey is developed on different levels. Whenever Wednesday and her children leave their island and go to the mainland, a journey takes place, and incredible adventures occur. There is Dorset’s fantastic journey to

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 206

the Holy Land in the company of Mr Abednego, Attica's journey to the mainland where she kidnaps a child of the Vienna Singing Boys in order to be able to carve his head, Naples' journey and his circus experience, and Wednesday's several journeys to the mainland. Her last journey in the company of Mr Bellister has all the characteristics of a journey to the nether world:

‘Charon, Charon,’ whispered Wednesday, as the oars sheathed in the black plumage of the water, ‘where is the obolus for my eyelids?’ As she leaned forward, the moon placed two cold little silver pennies on her closed eyes, and Mr Bellister was startled by her deathly look.<sup>49</sup>

The fantastic element exemplified in Wednesday's children's incredible adventures is combined as it occurs in the menippea with slum naturalism. Robin Hyde describes in *Wednesday's Children* the people of Auckland slums:

The afternoons were the battle-ground of homelier folk, bent, grimy faced old darkies who bought sacks for ha-penny, returned soldiers shy of an arm or leg, or cheese-faced as the result of some gas attack, selling wilted bunches of mint or violets. Insurance agents never called but bailiffs often did, and sometimes you would see a house oddly disembowelled, its tawdry possessions heaped up on the pavement, while a woman with unkempt hair sniffed miserably, and her husband, sticking a blackened pipe in one corner of his mouth, tried to look jaunty and don't-care-a-damnish [...] Sometimes a woman screamed in childbirth, sometimes a drunken man thrashed his wife because he could not see why she failed to remain young and beautiful; why desire should mean children; why his children were both nothing and everything to him, a wanton extravagance, a set of mean little critics who swallowed his substance and would deprive him of his very beer.<sup>50</sup>

Another characteristic of the menippea which features in Robin Hyde's novel is “a representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man-

<sup>48</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 114

<sup>49</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 190

<sup>50</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, pp. 87-88

insanity of all sorts, split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams, passions bordering on madness.”<sup>51</sup> This is exemplified in Wednesday’s ambiguous identity, in the multifaceted nature of her being: lover and mother on her island, tea-cups reader, fortune-teller, known as Madame Mystera, on the mainland, a vole and an angel, and by the end of the novel a character who rejects her subject status or, in other words, her “I” status, but opens up to the various possibilities of her becoming, to the community of her other selves: “I look more like a pot, a brown pot. Just there to contain things, a receptacle for simmering personalities.”<sup>52</sup> Later in the novel Wednesday explains: “My truths were amoebae, they had second selves, split personalities, double faces.”<sup>53</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin writes about this kind of representation: “Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed in him, he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself.”<sup>54</sup>

Daydreaming and dreams do not only characterize the (de)construction of the subject, but characterize the form of the novel as well, and constitute the final message sent by the author to the reader in “The Poem for the Island” in which the narrating voice disrupts the illusion of the narration by creating a new one where the dream is the rocking lullaby of a white boat anchored in the distant seas of the imagination:

That was so slight a theme

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<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 116

<sup>52</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 84

<sup>53</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 198

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 116-7

Windbells no more,  
 Foam-bells, bells of the paraha, lipping  
 An island shore,  
 Still as a dream within a dream,  
 And the ebb tide backward slipping.  
 No gold on the waters; only grey, ghostly waters  
 Under my white boat slipping.  
 [...]  
 And I in a white boat rocking,  
 Rocking and dreaming, in an island space.<sup>55</sup>

The white boat, which makes the narrative journey possible, represents the novel itself. Its whiteness similarly hints at the white pages of the book as the trace left upon them suggests the black sinuous body of the writing, witnessing, to pursue the metaphor further, that moment of the boat's passage which is the moment of artistic creation. The image of the boat/novel foregrounded by Robin Hyde in *Wednesday's Children* can be found in Katherine Mansfield. In a letter dated 25 March 1915 to John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield writes about the novel she was trying to write:

I have finished a huge chunk, but I shall have to copy it on tissue paper for you. I expect you will think I am dotty when you read it, but, tell me what you think, won't you? It's queer stuff. It's the spring makes me write like this. Yesterday I had a fair wallow in it, and then I shut up shop and went for a long walk along the Quai - very far. It was dusk when I started, but dark when I got home. The lights went out as I walked, and the boats danced by. Leaning over the bridge I suddenly discovered that one of those boats was exactly what I want my novel to be. Not big, almost 'grotesque' in shape - I mean perhaps *heavy* - with people rather dark and seen strangely as they move in the sharp light and shadow; and I want bright shivering lights in it, and the sound of water.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 208

<sup>56</sup> O'Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume I, 1903-1917, pp. 167-68

The image of the boat/novel is of crucial importance to the theme of the journey which is a recurrent theme in the novel. As we have pointed out earlier in this chapter, the theme of the journey stems from the use of the fantastic in the novel. Fantasy deemed as a deviation from reason becomes another form of folly, and the boat of folly as the means that enables the narration to take place is the boat evoked by Robin Hyde at the conclusion of her novel. Robin Hyde's image of the "white boat" is reminiscent of the medieval boat of folly, Brandt's *Narrenshiff*, where madness as in Erasmus' *Praise of folly* is in Bakhtin's words a "parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official truth."<sup>57</sup>

In *Wednesday's Children* madness puts on the mask of the carnivalistic and runs unbridled. Madness like dreams represents not only an alteration of the mind and the mind's natural reaction to a state of prolonged repression, but also the capacity for divination exemplified in the mythic figures of Tiresias and Cassandra. They give an up-side-down picture of the world which often contains an element of utopia. As in the menippea, dreams incorporate elements of social utopia present in *Wednesday's Children* in the form of commensalism, the striving for a community of free human beings sharing "relationships, which gall us and goad us, for community, which laughs and is free."<sup>58</sup> Wednesday's island and her house, L'Entente Cordiale, whose name is in this respect very suggestive, can be considered both the geographical and ideal *locus* of the utopian element of the novel which is exemplified in Wednesday's words:

And the things that aren't right only exist for a moment, but the things that could be and ought to be right exist for eternity. And if a thing exists in

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<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 39

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 200

eternity, but hasn't quite got down to existing here, every now and again, something flashes, like the light-shutter in your camera, and anyone who happens to be standing by at the moment can see it perfectly clear, without its veils. That's how most of the good books and good poems succeed in getting written. Somebody is there at the proper time and just catches them.<sup>59</sup>

Wednesday's community of "islanders" might not be real, but ought to be real as it belongs to the things that are not, but ought to be. They represent that kernel of inspiration, that essence of the writer's vision that both Robin Hyde and Katherine Mansfield identify with the transient nature of glimpses. The island is the place where edged-off people, "bona fide refugees"<sup>60</sup> like Wednesday herself go to: "I let myself be edged off the earth - by shyness, by clumsiness, by mooning in corners."<sup>61</sup> As she explains to Mr Bellister: "People never do come here, unless things outside refuse to fit in a bearable sequence."<sup>62</sup> It is significant that the island gives shelter to people of different nationalities who speak different dialects: there is Maritana, the Maori woman; Constantine Agrapoulous, the Greek; Edward, the Englishman; Beppo, the Italian with his African monkey; Michael, the Irishman; the Elf from America; Mr Abednego, a stranger in search of the Holy Land; and just by accident the Austrian Father Schoom in charge of the Vienna Singing Boys. The names given to Wednesday's children, Attica, Dorset, Naples, Limerick and Londonderry furthermore convey a universal meaning to the image of the island. Its inhabitants, who form an harmonious though undoubtedly colourful picture, represent a micro-universe at peace with its constitutive heterogeneous elements. Central to the understanding of the utopian element in the novel is the importance of this ideal,

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107

<sup>60</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 188

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 192

though often comical, micro-universe, and its real counterpart which is in the novel the League of Nations.

The novel's concern with the current ideological issues represents another important point of convergence with the *menippea*. References to the historical events coeval to the author emerge constantly throughout the novel. They comprise the role of the League of Nations and the Abyssinian war. Wednesday's child, Dorset, puzzling over the events of his day, reveals the writer's satirical intent in depicting the blind and obtuse patriotism, which giving rise to warmongering pride, prevents countries from living together in peace:

He was terribly concerned over the League of Nations, and the only one who, after the first fine careless rapture of damning the Italians for the bombing of Adowa, really gave a bootlace for Abyssinia. Everything the newspapers said, good or bad, concerning England's part in the world, Dorset read, marked, learned and inwardly failed to digest. He could never understand whether he belonged to a nation of thieves and swashbucklers (as one side declared) or to a nation of Saint Georges in golden armour, possessing bank balances and the greater part of the globe purely by a series of fortuitous accidents.<sup>63</sup>

The writer's satire of the war is evident in the discussion about Mussolini and the war in Abyssinia which, shifting to an apparently remote issue, ends up being a discussion about the Holy Sepulchre:

'What's a Holy Sepulchre?'

'That's where Our Lord was buried.'

'But He got up again, didn't He?'

'Course He did. He got up and walked about and then descended into Heaven. You ought to know, Attica.'

'Well, didn't He ever go back to the Holy Sepulchre?'

'No, not ever. He went to Heaven.'

'Then why do they want it so much, if it's just empty?', asked Attica with biting clearness.

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<sup>63</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 105

'Because our Lord was there a little while, and made it holy. Awful holy.'  
 'Well, I'd be afraid to have it in my back-yard,' announced Attica, 'it'd give me the creeps. I'd always be going there and looking over the edge to make sure He wasn't really there all the time. I'd be getting up in the middle of the night because I'd think He was dead after all. Why don't they fight the Saracen for the Holy Cradle instead?'<sup>64</sup>

On a more biographical ground it is important to highlight the role played by Robin Hyde's interest in the cause of peace for the great impact that undoubtedly this had on her life. In 1935, writing to Eileen Duggan, Robin Hyde remarked to her that the cause of peace was the only thing besides love that had any importance: "It touches the three things about which I can be in earnest - health, peace, enlightenment [...] If such a trinity of ideals can be the core of a writer's work, they are what I want for mine."<sup>65</sup> Three years later she experienced the atrocities of the war during her journey through China at the time of the Sino-Japanese conflict. She was the first woman journalist to travel to the front where she witnessed acts of savage cruelty and violence, which she documented in her articles from the front, together with the patient resistance of Chinese people amid suffering and despair. *Dragon Rampant*, a book on her war experiences in China, was written for Chinese people in "an effort towards understanding,"<sup>66</sup> revealing "the agony of the drops which show human faces for a single moment before they go over the waterfall."<sup>67</sup> The voice of the poet can be heard throughout the book alongside that of the far more detached and focused journalist denouncing the atrocities of the war and the

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100

<sup>65</sup> To Eileen Duggan, 12 April 1935, quoted in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 140

<sup>66</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Dragon Rampant*, London, Hurst & Blackett, 1939, Introduction, p. 13

<sup>67</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Dragon Rampant*, Introduction, p. 12

complicity of Western democracies whose “idealism flows in one direction, its munitions and oil supplies in another.”<sup>68</sup>

The swiftness with which Robin Hyde could pass from poetry to prose and journalism undoubtedly accounts for her protean nature, but also for her idea of the writer as socially and politically engaged, and his/her art whose main quality is perceived to be its inclusiveness. The accent is put here on art’s inclusiveness or, in other words, on its inter-textuality, its ability to comprise different discourses, different genres and languages. In *Wednesday’s Children* Robin Hyde makes overt references to the works of Swift, Sterne, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Rainer Maria Rilke and others, often inserting verses or whole poems, which are employed with a certain degree of parody, but which nonetheless contribute to create a mixture of poetry and prose. According to Bakhtin this hybridity is a peculiar characteristic of the menippea:

Characteristic for the menippea is a wide use of inserted genres: novellas, letters, oratorical speeches, symposia, and so on; also characteristic is a mixing of prose and poetic speech. The inserted genres are presented at various distances from the ultimate authorial position, that is, with varying degrees of parodying and objectification. Verse portions are almost always given with a certain degree of parodying.<sup>69</sup>

Robin Hyde’s peculiar use of parody explains the reason why she included a mesmerizing poem such as “The poem for the Island” at the end of the novel alongside comical poems such as the poem about fish written by Wednesday in honour of Agrapoulus’ fish-and-chip shop. This can be considered an example of how the writer succeeds through irony in linking together tragedy with comedy, the

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>69</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 118

high with the low in literature. Similarly in “The Poem about Edward” a parodical intent can be detected. The ideal image of England which the poem evokes is contradicted by the comical counterpart to this image provided throughout the novel by the writer’s satire of the cult of Englishness in New Zealand, the land where Mr Bellister observes: “everyone perpetually intones, ‘We are more English than the English.’”<sup>70</sup> Describing Albert Park in Auckland at the beginning of the novel the writer remarks:

At first glance this retreat looks a fair imitation of an English park. Then you notice that many of its trees are queer old stumbling customers, half defiant, half apologetic, wholly indigenous. Brass-mounted cannon, mounted below one of the more pregnant-looking statues of Queen Victoria, try to sneer at the seagulls and sparrows whose droppings insult their antiquity [...] A grimy little statue of a girl in a woollen singlet, bearing beneath one arm a dead but uncooked halibut, also looks somewhat different from the class of marble person one encounters in English reserves.<sup>71</sup>

In this sense one might say that Robin Hyde’s parody of colonialism is a parody of a parody insofar as Homi Bhabha’s idea of mimicry is employed by the writer in an ironical way. That “difference that is almost the same, but not quite”<sup>72</sup> directs itself towards the colonizers as they become subject to a colonization from above with England as the horizon of their minds and aspirations. That difference that represents a breach of faith toward “Home” must be overcome by a fanatical cult of Englishness, and a complete effacement of the element of otherness, be it present in the wilderness of the landscape or in the striving for a national identity independent

<sup>70</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 119

<sup>71</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 14

<sup>72</sup> Bhabha, Homi, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” in *Modern Literary Theory. A Reader*, eds., Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh, London, Edward Arnold, 1992, p. 235

of the motherland. Robin Hyde's parody directs itself toward that cult of Englishness that is already regarded as a parody of colonialism where the colonizers colonize themselves for fear that that difference, mainly geographical, which separates them from those at Home, might become more and more difficult to overcome.

The use of parody in *Robin Hyde* is peculiar as it is employed on two different levels, that is, on the level internal to the narration in the form of irony, highlighting the distance between the author and the narrative discourse, and on the level external to the narration in the form of a further objectification which concerns not directly the narration, but its form: the genre. In the chapter "Crusaders" the writer applies irony to the fantastic element characterizing the protagonists' journey to the Holy Land, and to the characters' quest of the Holy Sepulchre, satirizing at the same time a certain Western attitude of expansion and possession in the name of great ideals prone to conceal more down-to-earth schemes. Mr Abednego, whose biblical name<sup>73</sup> suggests an heroism he is completely devoid of, not surprisingly turns out to be a swindler. On the other hand irony is applied externally to the form of the narration in an attempt to satirize the genre of chivalric romance of adventure by turning the chevalier/crusader into the figure of a Sancho Panza-like swindler. Similarly the author, though making use of the fantastic element in *Wednesday's Children*, parodies it at the same time by revealing in "The Cottage with Candles" all the tricks employed by Madame Mystra, tea-cups reader and fortune-teller, to

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<sup>73</sup> Achtemeier, Paul J., ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985: "The new name given to Azariah, one of Daniel's three companions (Dan: 1:7) who were appointed over the province of Babylon (2:40) and subsequently thrown into the fiery furnace."

conjure the supernatural in the presence of her clients eager to listen to a word of hope, and thus delude themselves:

Clients liked the readings, as they were called, to be done in almost complete darkness, a tiny charcoal brazier gleaming like a red eye, blinds pulled down, shadows pressing and whispering. They had the idea that spirits materialise more easily in darkness; and besides, sitting thus, dazed with the fumes of the charcoal, they saw through half-shut, tired eyes, remarkable colours, shining speedwell blues, great rippling patches of gold. Vaguely they were convinced that there was something supernatural in this. Wednesday found that the more she darkened her abode and blocked up its air-channels, the higher soared her reputation.<sup>74</sup>

This represents the oldest use of parody, defined as “a composition in prose or verse in which characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous,”<sup>75</sup> which has contributed to the development of the novel. The stress is put on the capacity of parody for imitation, that is to absorb and to make one’s own by distorting the original. Through the use of parody canonized genres are in this way destabilized, giving way to an hybridization which contributes towards regenerating the novel from within:

Parodic stylizations of canonized genres and styles occupy an essential place in the novel. In the era of the novel’s creative ascendancy - and even more so in the periods of preparation preceding this era - literature was flooded with parodies and travesties of all the high genres (parodies precisely of genres, and not of individual authors or schools) - parodies that are the precursors, “companions” to the novel, in their own way studies for it.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 85

<sup>75</sup> See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Vol. XI, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989: Christopher Stone, *Parody*, The Art and Craft of Letters Series, London, Martin Secker, 1914-1916

<sup>76</sup> Holquist, Michael, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. by Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 6

Robin Hyde was aware of the inadequacy of the mimetic canon in representing the entire prose tradition, and of the arbitrariness of the rigid boundaries set up to define literary genres, a concept emphasised by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* where the Canadian critic explains how genres and myths have been created as major organizational patterns to order experience.<sup>77</sup> Similarly in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* Linda Hutcheon emphasizes the role of parody as a disruptive force aimed at giving new impetus to the literary tradition:

Parody develops out of the realization of the literary inadequacies of a certain convention. Not merely an unmasking of a non-functioning system, it is also a necessary and creative process by which new forms appear to revitalize the tradition and open up new possibilities to the artist. Parodic art both is a deviation from the norm and includes the norm within itself as background material. Forms and conventions become energizing and freedom-inducing in the light of parody.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, stylistic hybridization is followed by linguistic hybridization through what Bakhtin describes as “intra-language heteroglossia,”<sup>79</sup> present in *Wednesday’s Children* in the form of different “dialects” which results from a comical fusion of English with Maori, Italian and German. The disruption of stylistic unity through the parody of literary genres infects linguistic unity and the myth of a monolithic language capable of giving a comprehensive and exhaustive representation of the world. The proliferation of dialects, which parodies the official language, confirms further the non-existence of a single reality, a single perspective, putting the accent instead on the co-existence of multiple points of vantage, and

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<sup>77</sup> Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957

<sup>78</sup> Hutcheon, Linda, *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox*, p. 50

<sup>79</sup> Holquist, Michael, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, p.68

consequently on the possibility of a multi-voiced literary discourse. The carnival sense of “joyful relativity” is thus staged in the novel; the vertigo is perceived, the fall has taken place, revealing how only in the grotesquerie of the hybrid the secret integrity of truth might speak from time to time a word of wisdom.

### **A fallen angel: Wednesday or the story of a Picara**

If Mr Bellister breaks the halo of mysteriousness surrounding Wednesday’s name by quoting a well-known English nursery-rhyme,<sup>80</sup> its presence in the title of the novel maintains nonetheless its semiotic energy unaltered insofar as it is endowed with that peculiar haunting quality of the riddle which asks to be solved, although the impossibility, or rather, the high degree of difficulty, of such an achievement makes up for its very nature. In the light of this impossibility we might investigate certain hints dropped by the writer on account of her heroine’s name by looking closely at Wednesday’s character in relation to the major themes present in the novel. Wednesday Gilfillan is first mentioned at the beginning of the narration when she is briefly described as “a small woman in a fur coat”<sup>81</sup> entering the advertising department of a newspaper office in Auckland. Her description is resumed later in the novel when she is compared to some kind of brown animal identified by her son, Naples, with a vole:

[...]she did look like some kind of friendly wet animal, and not only because of her coat. Her eyes, deep set and brown, sometimes looked small as hazel-nuts. On the other hand, she had a trick of letting the two black

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<sup>80</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 55

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13

flowers in their centres suddenly open out, wide and lustrous. She had a little brown face, running to smile and wrinkle, with delicate plucked brows which tried to get together and commune at the top of her nose. Wrinkles lay softly under her skin, from which you might deduce that she was every day of thirty-seven. Her fawn-coloured kid gloves were damp, and when she peeled them off you could imagine her hands busy shelling acorns or removing the blood-red peel of some tropical fruit. They were little, deft, wrinkled, with pointed fingers thin as claws.<sup>82</sup>

This does not, however, prevent the drunken man she encounters out of the newspaper office from seeing her as an angel, a fallen angel, with a touch of the Bacchante to it: “With wonderful clearness he saw the great rosy and crystal wings unfold behind her head. He saw the lissome slightness of Wednesday’s body, and how it could dance like a mad shepherdess [...] He saw Wednesday girt about with symbols, corn-sheaves, stout doves and olive branches.”<sup>83</sup> The title of the first chapter “Wednesday enters for the Doubles” thus refers both to her twins, Limerick and Londonderry, whose birth she goes to the newspaper office to announce, and to Wednesday’s double nature, something between a brown animal and a lascivious angel, reminiscent of Fevvers, Angela Carter’s heroine in *Nights At The Circus*. Although at this early point the writer has already dropped some hints at the unlikely nature of Wednesday’s children, and many more will be dropped throughout the novel, it is only in the last chapter, significantly entitled “The Burning of Bridges”, that the reader discovers he/she has inhabited Wednesday’s vivid imagination, has explored the mind of a thirty-seven year-old plain woman, who imagines for herself a life at odds with the repressive codes of behaviour that rule society. She has five children outside marriage and plenty of lovers of different nationalities which

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<sup>82</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 15

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16

accounts for her half-brother's definition of her as a kind of "international thingumabob."<sup>84</sup> She lives on her own on an island and occasionally goes to the mainland where she becomes Madame Mystera, a fortune-teller and tea-cups reader. Her family reaction to her is one of abhorrence and condemnation, except for the old and eccentric Uncle Elihu who, together with Wednesday, voices the author's idea of the new woman which seeps through the novel:

Once he had recovered from the shock of Mr Agrapoulus, [Wednesday's first lover] he had somehow managed to see a point in Wednesday's proceedings. He had looked back, with wise and faded eyes, upon features of social existence which had always depressed him...limitations and one-sidedness in matrimonial arrangements, the fetish of illegitimacy, the dual standard of morality, the cheerful acceptance of prostitution and its near-respectable little sisters. It was all very well for his contemporaries to talk of Woman as a delicate flower, fit only for protection. Elihu knew his cloakrooms, a generation before and a generation after most people, and he knew that a normal thing, woman is neither protected inside marriage nor beyond it.<sup>85</sup>

Marriage is considered by Robin Hyde as "sex parasitism" for women, tricking them into economic dependence on men at the expense of their sexual freedom. When Hyde affirms that "Woman is a backward nation" she realizes that the main causes of that are her conditions rather than her lack of quality or intelligence:

Woman is a backward nation - or species, or gender, whichever you please, for reasons mainly economic and sentimental. I don't care how many brilliant exceptions you may point to, how many women have succeeded "in spite of everything": while the conditions of one sort of individual, and the limitations she is asked, or forced to accept, are less than the best this individual is capable of taking and using if given the chance, into the

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<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>85</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 164

backward class she goes, and stops until by pluck, luck or good management she can wriggle out.<sup>86</sup>

In *Wednesday's Children* the writer grants her heroine economic independence in the form of a winning lottery ticket, sexual freedom, and a vivid imagination, probably in response to one of her queries sparked off by the reading of Rosamund Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*: "I wonder why women writers allow their heroines so many fewer rewards [...] than men. Perhaps it's because women are more disillusioned about their own prospects."<sup>87</sup> Making her heroine to the malicious eyes of her family and to those of the world in general a "harlot," Hyde polemically places her value beyond her virginity, endowing her in so doing with a touch of *The Sadean Woman*.<sup>88</sup> The accent falls here on the theme of integrity which is of crucial importance to the novel. Integrity is what Wednesday most lacks, and what Mr Bellister on the contrary possesses in excess. From the time she decides she cannot abide by Shakespeare's bidding, "To thine own self be true," simply because she does not know to which of her many selves she should be true to, Wednesday's silent fall begins, and with it the complete disruption of her identity, the complete atomization of her character. Integrity is the word used by Brenda, Wednesday's sister-in-law, when describing Mr Bellister: "Integrity, the only thing worth fighting for, the hard stuff of a man not to be eaten by mice or locusts either."<sup>89</sup> Similarly Wednesday describes him as self-possessed:

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<sup>86</sup> Hyde, Robin, "Woman Today", *Tomorrow*, 14 April 1937, in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 196

<sup>87</sup> To J.H.E. Schroder, 13 April 1928, in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 27

<sup>88</sup> Carter, Angela, *The Sadean Woman. An Exercise In Cultural History*, London, Virago Press, 1979

<sup>89</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 23

“Self-possession,” she added, “I think that is the word. Isn’t it a strange word, Hugo, when one considers it? Infinitely better than the French “sang-froid.” The ownership of one’s self. Never giving one’s self away, in love, in shame, in quarrels, in defeat. I don’t mean that you are ungenerous. In fact, that sort of self-possession is a little like the miracle of the loaves and fishes. You can feed the multitudes and remain intact.”<sup>90</sup>

Mr Bellister, who is suggestively associated with Aberdeen granite, is Wednesday’s counterpart. He is the man of reason, sound, whole, and furthermore skeptical of Wednesday’s world of magic and imagination: “He had no objection to magic, but neither had he any intention of allowing this island, the dark water-channel, to master with the haunting timbre of its speech the things of reason that he intended to say.”<sup>91</sup> Wednesday on the other hand is “a simmering receptacle of personalities,” protean, and passionate, though to her relatives she is just a woman who has lost her honour and respectability. And yet one could reply with Falstaff in Henry IV, a play which Robin Hyde makes reference to in the novel,<sup>92</sup> and which in my opinion she had in mind when writing *Wednesday’s Children*:

What is honour? a word. What is in that word honour? what is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? he that died a-Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. ‘tis insensible then? yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I’ll have none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon - and so ends my catechism.<sup>93</sup>

Falstaff like Wednesday is an outlaw as he rejects the codes of behaviour of his own age; he, like her, speaks the language of the fool riddled with wise folly. If honour

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<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, p. 190

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>93</sup> Shakespeare, William, *The First Part of the History of Henry IV*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1946, 5. I. II 2, 133-140, p. 88

belongs to a man died a-Wednesday, then Hyde's heroine is probably his ghost, and the Hindu fruiter, who, in the novel, mistakes her for one proves not to be wrong after all.<sup>94</sup> As Mr Bellister fails to realize, Wednesday does not belong to the world of the living, (““Oh, Mr Bellister, people aren't merely flesh and bones, faces that grow old, indifferent, so terribly soon.””<sup>95</sup>) or not in the sense that Mr Bellister does. According to Bakhtin, the clown, the fool, and to a certain extent the rogue, on whom Wednesday's character is modelled, are “not of this world,” a feature which allows them to see through the ways of the world, and not commune with them.<sup>96</sup> Wednesday's disappearance in the novel must not be interpreted, as it has been, as suicide, but rather as the evanescent passage of a shadow. She is the joyful spirit of the multifarious, changing shape or mask at her whim.

To Wednesday as to Falstaff honour is “a mere scutcheon” devoid of meaning, as integrity is just another word for isolation. Falstaff, as prototype of the picaresque hero, who has to cope with a dehumanizing society, hints at Wednesday's similar nature. As Richard Bjornson points out in *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction*, “in its broadest sense, the picaresque myth functions as one possible paradigm for the individual's unavoidable encounter with external reality and the act of cognition which precedes and shapes his attempts to cope with a dehumanizing society.”<sup>97</sup> Similarly Alexander Blackburn emphasises the note of humanism present in picaresque myth:

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<sup>94</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 19

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 199

<sup>96</sup> Holquist, Michael ed., *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, p. 159

<sup>97</sup> Bjornson, Richard, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977, p. 11

Picaresque myth may be an ultimate kind of humanism whereby we are led to a tower or abyss from which to contemplate and accept life as it is with all its folly. Essentially a con artist, potentially a poetmaker of new social identities and new cultures, the picaro presents a masquerade of episodic adventures that are inevitably “to be continued” as long as experience remains open [...]<sup>98</sup>

The absence of conventional morals in Robin Hyde’s novel underlined by the writer herself in her definition of *Wednesday’s Children* as “a dream novel with no morals” leads to the assumption that the novel belongs somehow to the picaresque. In *Fabulation and Metafiction* Robert Scholes affirms that “the moral fable is kin to the larger satire; the amoral fable to the picaresque tale, which can grow very long indeed.”<sup>99</sup> If this is true for Robin Hyde’s novel, it must be said that the picaresque element is present in *Wednesday’s Children* in the form of parody. In the episode of Madame Mystera’s arrest by the police, who appear at her place in civilian clothes to have their fortunes told, Hyde gives a parody of that element of delinquency which features in the picaresque novel. Dragged to court Madame Mystera reflects on the innocent, almost comical nature of her crime:

Wednesday thought: “My first crime...really, it’s almost disappointing. One expects something big to come of a crime. All those policemen, and lawyers in wigs, and the poor old gentleman with his gavel. Reporters are like mosquitoes, they breed freely on the pestilential swamp of, now just what the devil do I mean? Curiosity? Vulgarly? Triviality? No, it’s a blend of all three, with some unknown ingredient thrown in. The trouble is, there is a wrong conception as to the nature of Sin. That’s what throws everything out of joint, and makes the instruments of society seem so blundering and base.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Blackburn, Alexander, *The Myth of the Picaro*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina, 1979, p. 202

<sup>99</sup> Scholes, Robert, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1979, p. 142

<sup>100</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 133

It is “that wrong conception as to the nature of Sin” that gives shape to Wednesday’s characterization, which makes her a hybrid, something between an animal and an angel, a picara and a saint, a comical figure and a tragic one. And yet through the masks of her many selves embodied in the figures of her children, in the outline of her island, something emerges as “there is a face at the back of all the changing faces” which Eliza in the First Version of *The Godwits Fly* perceives to be “the soul of man,”<sup>101</sup> or in Hyde’s definition “the constant face behind the mutabilities.” In the fall of the heroine the ever-changing masquerade of forms and genres of the novel unravels under the sign of that “joyful relativity” which liberates the imagination until the alchemy of the artistic creation is achieved, until the blank page perceives the vertigo of the writing, and the dream becomes real.

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<sup>101</sup> Sandbrook, Patrick, “Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work”, pp. 74-75

## **CHAPTER IV**

**Janet Frame and Keri Hulme:**

**from tower to “Tower”**

**Tower / spiral / shell: the history of a metamorphosis**

## Through the Mirror: the head of Medusa of Janet Frame's characters

I venture to make this prophecy. The best New Zealand literary work written within the next fifty years, will bear the stamp of oddity. That is because, whether you like it or not, New Zealand is an extremely odd place, and the tenement of moody native spirits. But they are rich. Look out for them when they get going.<sup>1</sup>

The threatening proliferation of selves, which characterizes Katherine Mansfield's stories and Robin Hyde's novels, finds its fullest expression in Janet Frame's fiction. In an early story, "Jan Godfrey," which appeared in Janet Frame's first published book, *The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951), Katherine Mansfield's *dédoublement* and Robin Hyde's multiplication technique achieve their climax under the signature of the manifold which constitutes one of the main significant features of Janet Frame's writing. In the short story the manifold is represented by the narrator's desperate effort to escape from the clutch of his identity and assume the identities of others insofar as identities are considered to be interchangeable masks: "We cling to our names because we think they emphasise our separateness and completeness and importance, but deep down we know that we are neither separate nor complete nor very important, nor are we terribly happy."<sup>2</sup> The illusion of the individual's monolithic subjectivity at the base of the historical and progress-

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<sup>1</sup> Hyde, Robin, quoted in Gloria Rawlinson, "The Cloud of Witness IV. Robin Hyde", *The Wooden Horse*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1950

<sup>2</sup> Frame, Janet, "Jan Godfrey", *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, London, Bloomsbury Classics, 1991, p. 122

oriented perception of the world represents the writer's point of dissent. The stern law of bipolarity ordering the world into discriminating categories, which comprise, to give an example, binary oppositions such as rational/irrational, sane/insane, male/female, white/black, is subverted by the notion of the manifold as reservoir of the imagination, and by a systematic critique of language. What is so poignantly criticized and questioned is the plausibility of a society, the product of Western thought, based on the dichotomous opposition rational/irrational which sparks off a process of discriminant mental sieving aimed at pushing aside all that does not fit in, dooming those, left out of such a binary system of thought, to self-segregation, and to a life-long exile "at the outskirts of communication."<sup>3</sup> The "other" is then nothing else but the arbitrary creation of a society which excludes instead of including, and furthermore the by-product of a language which translates faithfully the reality it is yoked under. In the poem with which the narration of Janet Frame's novel, *Intensive Care*, begins, these elements are thus foregrounded:

In the dream in the dream  
 the child played a poem  
 protected by mild adjectives  
 gentle verbs and the two  
 pronouns teaching the  
 division of earth and sky  
 night and day  
 object and show; and the separating  
 personal eye.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, New York, George Braziller, 1962, pp. 143-144: "I am confused here on the outskirts of communication. I have set out on my exploration - I, Thora Pattern, Zoe Bryce, Toby Withers, Pat Keenan, and all the other people I have met or known - even the child at the piano, the lodger upstairs, his friend the other woman lodger..."

<sup>4</sup> Frame, Janet, *Intensive Care*, Auckland, Century Hutchinson, 1987, p. 9

The “mild adjectives” and “gentle verbs” which characterize the language of the poem account for the treacherous nature of language, apparently giving shelter and relief, whilst teaching estrangement and separateness (“teaching the division between earth and sky, night and day, object and show”), and putting at the same time the subject’s vision under the yoke of his/her exclusive subjectivity (“the separating personal eye”). Reality is thus constructed on a set of oppositional dichotomies which leaves no space for the wide range of possibilities, the various nuances of experience, life is endowed with. What cannot be included in the binary system of rationalism is either banned, ostracized or denied representation. In *Daughter Buffalo*, one of the main characters, Turnlung, remembers his confusion as a child over the word “dual” which to him sounded equally like “duel” and “jewel.”<sup>5</sup> Dual implies both the notion of duel, the fighting for supremacy of two different meanings, and that of a hidden richness disclosed by the term “jewel,” which does not rely on opposition, but on the contrary can be found in the multifaceted surface of the jewel as an object, refracting light from multiple angles.

Janet Frame’s criticism of rationalism aims at disrupting the artificial boundary between the official and the unofficial, the canonized and the uncanonized, the overt and the hidden, the allowed and the forbidden. In this context the language of madness, which the writer exposes in her fiction, in particular in *Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water*, serves to reveal the dark, occulted face of Western society which often uses repression in order to impose its order. Madness becomes, as in Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation*, a form of resistance, a form of protest against official reason. In “Women beyond culture” Lorna Smith on

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<sup>5</sup> Frame, Janet, *Daughter Buffalo*, Auckland, Vintage, 1994, pp. 91-98

the one hand emphasises the importance of madness as a form of resistance to the dominant culture, and on the other hand considers its formulation arbitrary and functional to the needs of a social system which creates madness in order to maintain and reinforce its grip on power: "In order that a particular system is maintained, confirmed and justified, a peculiar definition of madness is reinforced. The social and linguistic nature of madness is pre-determined. Madness must be seen as a deviation from the norm in order that the norm retain its power and authority."<sup>6</sup> Madness is, in Janet Frame's suggestive words, "Open Day in the factory of the mind."<sup>7</sup> The voice of madness as a form of protest must be stifled, and the element of otherness which belongs to it must be cured, that is, incarcerated, subdued, erased. Otherness in all its forms is perceived to be a threat to the *status quo*, and thus it is isolated and put under lock and key:

And so we have grouped the deaf, dumb, blind, crippled, mentally ill, in one mass in order "to deal with" them, for we must "deal with" these vast surfaces of strangeness which demand all our lives a protective varnish of sympathy. Protective for us; against them and ourselves. It is easy to ward off their demands for patient understanding by obliterating them with a mass dull coat of generality.<sup>8</sup>

Janet Frame's characters belong to this silent mass of people who for reasons of sex, race and religion, or simply because they are not able to fit in, have never had their right to speak and have lived in total isolation and despair, locked up in psychiatric hospitals, pushed out of sight and forgotten, as they represent the dark aspect of an

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, Lorna, "Women beyond culture. Cornflower reflection: beyond the circle of our vision", in *Introduction to Contemporary Cultural Studies*, David Punter, ed., London, Longman, 1986, p. 333

<sup>7</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, London, The Women's Press, 1982, p. 160

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 14-15

otherwise perfectly functioning society whose optimism cannot bear to be contradicted.

Similarly Robin Hyde, quoting the South African poet Roy Campbell, reveals her sympathy for the deprived and the derelict: "I sing the people: shall the muse deny. The weak, the blind, the humble and the lame."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere in a letter to John A. Lee she writes: "I'm continually in touch with the mentally disrailed, including myself..."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in *Wednesday's Children* the people coming to Wednesday's island are described as a crowd of edged-off characters: "People who seemed to come out of the wind, with urgent mouths and tired eyes and the dust on their shoon. There must be so many like them, saying in little houses all over the world, "I can't get out, I can't get out" like Sterne's starling. Perhaps the lost halves of their truth were what came to me."<sup>11</sup> In "The New Zealand Woman in Letters," an article which appeared in *The Working Woman*, Robin Hyde significantly underlines Katherine Mansfield's concern for people and for the contrasting social conditions present within society:

People complain that Katherine Mansfield has been over-publicised by her husband, Middleton Murry. But a long time after Mr Murry's assiduous huntings in the scrap-basket are all over and done with, Katherine Mansfield's gems of stories will shine out clear, hard and vital. When the fashionable have done with her, she will reach down to the people: Katherine Mansfield's harassed, tortured Miss Brill, the school mistress of "The Singing Lesson", Katherine Mansfield's marvellous contrasting social conditions, and drawing together of sympathies, in "The Garden Party", Katherine Mansfield's poor children with their eyes shining as the little lamp in "The Doll's House" lights up, Katherine Mansfield's patient old grandmother grieving over the solemn little sick boy whose lungs are

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<sup>9</sup> Hyde, Robin, "The Modern Trend", *The Press*, 31 October 1936, quoted in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 101

<sup>10</sup> Hyde, Robin, Letter to John A. Lee, 7 August 1936, John A. Lee Collection, Auckland Public Library, quoted in Patrick Sandbrook's Ph.D thesis: "Robin Hyde: A Writer At Work", p. 20

<sup>11</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 199

choked with flour from a baker's shop - those surely are the truths for New Zealand to treasure always. It was the daughter of the rich who had for the poor that deep and compelling sympathy which made her work a picture of the structure of society.<sup>12</sup>

Reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield's microcosm, ironically epitomized in the doll's house, are the words of Robin Hyde in *Wednesday's Children*: "We are little people and sit in little houses, with little pots of cultivated land looking back at us."<sup>13</sup> Like "Sterne's starling" Katherine Mansfield's characters seem to cry from their cupboards and doll's houses: "I can't get out, I can't get out." The same cry for help features as a recurrent element in Janet Frame's characters, both those physically incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals, and those apparently living "normal" lives. What they want to get out of is the straitjacket of their self which pins them down to the life of puppets, yet in order to fit in the monolithic shape of their united self they must deny and suppress those frightening reflections which seem to contradict the uniqueness and separateness of their undivided self:

People dread silence because it is transparent; like clear water, which reveals every obstacle - the used, the dead, the drowned, silence reveals the cast-off words and thoughts dropped in to obscure its clear stream. And when people stare too close to silence they sometimes face their own reflections, their magnified shadows in the depths, and that frightens them.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that Janet Frame depicts this process of accommodation to one's undivided self as a physical act of self-mutilation. Vera Glace seems to suggest that in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* when she explains how one finds out

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<sup>12</sup> Hyde, Robin, "The New Zealand Woman in Letters", *The Working Woman*, April 1936, in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 191

<sup>13</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 65

<sup>14</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 87

from the very birth that the shape of the air does not fit in the shape of one's body, so that one is forced literally to cut off parts of oneself in order to make it fit in. This is the first physically painful sign of non-coincidence forcing the subject to modify him/herself in order to accommodate to the demands of the world. It is indicative that it is not the shape of the air to be adjusted to the subject's requirements as it would be otherwise natural to think:

When people moved about me I found that they left their shape in the air, as if they had been wearing the air as clothing which stayed molded even after they struggled out of it, for make no mistake, one struggles out of air because always it fits too tightly, ever since the first tight squeeze of it zipped into the lungs at the first breath, pinching at the tongue and the throat and setting up the cry which some take as a sign of admission into life but which is really only a protest that from the first moment of living the air does not fit, it has just not been made to measure, and all future breaths will cause pinching and pain, and how many times until death and nakedness will one be forced to cut off parts of oneself, to whittle at, mutilate the whole in order to accommodate the intransigent shape of air?<sup>15</sup>

Similarly at the beginning of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* the writer associates the image of the double, discernible in Vera Glace's recollection of her imaginary friend, Poppy, with the image of cut flowers, associating the image of the double, which painfully exposes the divided nature of the self, with that of cut flowers brutally bruised and singed in order to prevent them from withering too soon. Those pills, which people take to alleviate pain, crumbled in the water of cut flowers in order to make them last, become thus symbolic of the painfully ravaged state of the self itself:

And whenever Poppy and I met, we talked and talked, because we were friends. But if by chance in our walking (we always walked in step), we got

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17

out of step or we separated with Poppy going one side of the lamppost and I, Vera, going the other, the curse of silence was put upon us.

"We have got the pip," Poppy would tell me. "I have got the pip with you and you have got the pip with me."

And we shut our mouths tight, and all day for years we did not speak, only stared at each other, judging, judging, and I could see my crimes like clear glittering pictures in Poppy's eyes.

Cut flowers last longer, I am told, if they are bruised or singed or if you crumble in the water one or those pills which people swallow to deaden a continual feeling of pain.<sup>16</sup>

In *Scented Gardens for the Blind* Janet Frame tackles the issue of the subject's identity, proposing a reconstruction rather than a deconstruction of the subject. The various selves of the subject are in other words put in relationship so as to form a sort of fragmented wholeness where the fragment is at the same time part of the whole and whole itself. Such a subjectivity in relationship which lies at the heart of the character of Wednesday in Robin Hyde's *Wednesday's Children* is similarly present in Janet Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. The novel deals with three characters, a woman, a mute child and a man whose features confuse and combine in a constant game of mirrorings, introspections and self-projections, giving birth to what can be defined as an anomalous trinity. This effect of overlapping created by the writer is defined by Jeanne Delbaere in these terms: "It is as though the central image had not been adjusted to an exact focus so that we have three versions of it partly superimposed upon one another."<sup>17</sup> The three characters seem to embody those contrasting voices of the mind which radically deny the existence of a mono-subjectivity, to which Janet Frame opposes an inclusive and fluid type of subjectivity capable of describing a far more complete and rich reality.

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<sup>16</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, pp. 9-10

<sup>17</sup> Delbaere, Jeanne, "Beyond the Word: *Scented Gardens for the Blind*", in *The Ring of Fire. Essays on Janet Frame*, Jeanne Delbaere, ed., Aarhus, Den., Dangaroo Press, 1992, p. 97

Those characters are the fragments of the protagonist's fluid self, Vera Glace, whose journey of exploration will eventually give them access to that unknown region where the first seeds of a new language lie.

In *Scented Gardens for the Blind* Janet Frame leads the reader into the world of otherness through the character of Vera Glace, whom the reader gets to know together with her daughter, Erlene, and her husband, Edward, thanks to the chain of monologues the narration mainly consists of. Vera's tragedy is at the beginning that of a mother who lives a difficult relationship with her daughter, a mute child, and at the same time that of a wife abandoned by her husband, who, absorbed by his genealogical studies, has been living far away from home for eleven years. The numerous clues dropped by the writer throughout the novel, which hint at something terrible behind that complex reality, remain unheeded until it is the writer herself at the end of the novel who reveals the truth, or better a truth about it as represented by Vera Glace, a sixty-year-old librarian without family or relatives who has spent thirty years of her life in a psychiatric hospital in New Zealand where she still lives refusing to speak. It is with astonishment that the reader discovers that he/she has lived in the mind of an internee of a psychiatric hospital, and that Erlene and Edward were only whims of her imagination. The sudden explosion of the atom bomb on the other side of the globe destroying Great Britain will restore Vera Glace's power of speech, witnessing the birth of a new language which is not the accomplice of a society creating otherness in order to marginalize it, but a language of freedom going at the same time backwards and forwards, looking back at the past and ahead to the future simultaneously, aiming at a research, which ends up and starts anew at the origins: such is the language of "ancient stone and ice," the language of the "swamp" to which Virginia Woolf too reverts in her last novel.

As the characters in *Wednesday's Children* the characters in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* turn out to be the figments of the writer's imagination. Vera, Erlene, and Edward are comparable to Wednesday's children insofar as they are dream people who have been denied "their rightful blissful state of dissolution":

It seemed as if the three had one night been given free passage in the world, emerging in the path of a dream from the mind of someone asleep, and preparing to fly on and on, as dreams do until they slowly dwindle to snowflake-size and nothing, when a strange guardian of the night had pounced upon them, seized them, forced them to account for their identity, in a way which dreams have no means of doing; they had been threatened, imprisoned as human beings, and denied their rightful blissful fate of dissolution...<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to observe that both Robin Hyde and Janet Frame play with the notion of identity and subjectivity. That notion of subjectivity in relationship, which allows the two writers to represent the many selves of the subject as apparently distinct characters, as whole tasseras of a complex mosaic, gives rise to that fragmented wholeness where the focus shifts continually from "I" to "We" and vice versa, only to reveal the gap beyond the various masks of identity, the arbitrariness of such identity constructions in the first place, and the unnecessary emphasis put on them. Uniqueness and separateness in relation to identity are deemed to be maintained in order to bridle the otherwise untamable power of the imagination, and limit at the same time that protean quality of the subject which makes him/her difficult for society to control and to manipulate.

What is also worth noticing is that both writers focus their attention on the figure of a woman, single, childless, and rejected, and both are concerned with the

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<sup>18</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 228

traditional concept of the nuclear family permeating patriarchal society. Wednesday describes herself as “an insignificant plain kitchen pot”<sup>19</sup> and adds: “I was an unwanted woman for twelve years - all the way between my seventeenth birthday and my twenty-eighth one. That was reality. I should think a woman of the streets could dramatise things, or get drunk and forget about them. But with a woman such as I was, the facts were there and couldn’t be bilked.”<sup>20</sup> About Vera Glace one could guess the same sort of isolation. The matter-of-fact description given of her by Dr Clapper to the newly appointed psychiatrist is in its concision very suggestive:

We have little idea of what goes on in the head of that one, over there, and I repeat that all I can tell you is her name - Vera Glace, and that she has no family, she has never been married, she has been without speech for thirty years [...] She was a librarian I think, this Vera Glace, living in one of the small South Island towns, never venturing beyond her hometown, living, I suppose, a harmless sort of life; and then suddenly, at the age of thirty, she was struck dumb. No treatment that we have been able to give her has been successful. She has no family left. Curious, the turn of events.<sup>21</sup>

If all that Dr Clapper can tell about Vera Glace is her name, we might agree with Janet Frame, whose ironic smile hides slyly in the novel behind such pragmatic statements, that he is inadvertently providing all the information one could possibly need. The name Vera derives from either the Russian “viera” which means “faith” or from the Latin “verus” which means “truth.” Glace on the other hand comes from the French “glace,” and it can mean both ice and glass whilst the French word “glacé” suggests something frozen, glazed or iced.<sup>22</sup> The name Vera Glace thus

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<sup>19</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 197

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189

<sup>21</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 247

<sup>22</sup> Mercer, Gina, *Janet Frame. Subversive Fictions*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 1994, pp. 76-77

contains the notion of a frozen truth or faith. Her truth consists of her multiple/triple nature, of her being fragmented and yet whole. Her fragments, embodied in the figures of Erlene and Edward, make up for her identity. Truth, the writer seems to imply, lies in the manifold not in the monad. As Susan Schwartz observes in "Dancing in the Asylum: The Uncanny Truth of the Madwoman in Janet Frame's Autobiographical Fiction":

For Frame, the fragmentation of the subject made so painfully visible in the institutionalized madwoman signifies the truth of the divided subject. The madwoman is representative of the ontological fragmentation that the sane, in misrecognizing themselves as whole, refuse to see.<sup>23</sup>

In *Faces in the Water* Janet Frame similarly identifies the image of ice with the idea of frozen possibilities. Ice is created through the solidification of a fluid element, water, which from the Greek philosopher Thales onwards has come to symbolize the natural process of the being's becoming. Janet Frame's metafictional reflection seems to embrace this notion, showing the impossibility of representing the being in its becoming, in its changing masks, if not in its hypostatization, in its fragmented wholeness. In a society dominated by violence, isolation and death, truth can only be perceived in the form of human despair which as Munch's *Cry* echoes soundlessly through eternity as if suspended in time, frozen, trapped under the ice with its grimace of pain and anguish still vivid and vibrating. As with the name of Wednesday in *Wednesday's Children*, that of Vera Glace suggests a certain lack of integrity highlighted by the fragmented nature of the protagonist. In Janet Frame's

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<sup>23</sup> Schwartz, Susan, "Dancing in the Asylum: The Uncanny Truth of the Madwoman in Janet Frame's Autobiographical Fiction", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, Volume 27, Number 4, October 1996, p. 117

work as in that of Katherine Mansfield and of Robin Hyde, the notion of the fall is tightly connected with a sense of loss of integrity epitomized in that fragmented wholeness which characterizes the nature of their characters' subjectivity.

### **The notion of the fall in Janet Frame's fiction**

In *The Edge of the Alphabet*, through the image of the stoned swan falling to the earth, the writer conveys the idea of that loss of integrity which permeates the nature of her characters:

Outside, the stoned swans with blood pouring from them staining their feathers, beat at the windowpane to get in [...] the blood trickled down outside the windowpane and the hooded evil eyes of the swans pressed against the glass.

"Help," they cried.

But they were suspicious and sad and hungry, and after a while their beating stopped, and they fell to the earth [...]<sup>24</sup>

Pat, one of the characters in *The Edge of the Alphabet*, identifies the swans because of their whiteness with purity, yet the narrator's voice contradicts him, highlighting their evil nature and that of the colour white: "swans a denial of night brandished in snow-filled wings that gripped the white flowing evil, made substance of it, evil looking in the mirror."<sup>25</sup> White, the narrator's voice states at the end of the novel, is an evil colour as it makes visible what should remain concealed: the desperate effort to achieve any sort of communication, to bridge the distance which separates human beings as attempted by "the action painter throwing his white garbage to get a

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<sup>24</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, pp. 253-254

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247

meaning,”<sup>26</sup> or by the writer tackling the white space “that is host to words black words and the hooks and the infinities of musical notation and the beetle-diarrhea of newsprint and the entreaties in letters that are never answered. Letters for help.”<sup>27</sup>

White is in other words the colour of an impossibility, an incapacity for integrity and wholeness the artist in particular is aware of, as there is not one absolute truth, nor one undivided self to be represented, but fragments and “faces in the water.” Janet Frame’s characters are endowed with the multifarious faces of the faceless. Their stare is that of Medusa which can only be endured if reflected through a mirror. The untenable quality of the truth is similarly emphasised by Robin Hyde in *Wednesday’s Children*: “‘How I wish,’ wrote Wednesday, ‘that I might have known Pontius Pilate. That man understood. When he wrote, *What is Truth*, he wasn’t flippant, as people think, but asking the most serious, difficult question in the world, the riddle that makes the Sphinx smile in its superior way.’”<sup>28</sup> In a poem suggestively entitled “Pilate”<sup>29</sup> Robin Hyde faces the same problematic about truth which lies at the heart of *Wednesday’s Children*. The image of shattering, of things breaking into pieces present in the novel, is indicative of the fragmented nature of truth:

“To the dream within the dream,” said Mr Bellister, and gave the pohutukawa tree the shock of its life by hurtling the glass against its trunk. Thick as the glass was, the wood defeated it. Between the piercing splinters ran a trickle of wine, red as the tree’s own December crown of flowers. Wednesday, after a moment’s hesitation, drained her claret to the dregs,

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 281

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 282

<sup>28</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday’s Children*, p. 198

<sup>29</sup> Hyde, Robin, “Pilate”, *Selected Poems*, pp. 10-11

raised her hand, and then listened to the sharp crystalline smack of the broken glass.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly in Hyde's poem "Young Knowledge" the poet identifies knowledge with a permanent state of fragmentation:

Knowledge is all that grasps and breaks and strives,  
The flat tide flowing red between the mangroves,  
The little evil roots that suck in mud  
The broken faces; all the broken faces  
That put together makes the mask of knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

The "peering eye of reality" which is defined as a "glass eye" similar to that of a lighthouse deprives human beings of their wholeness, breaks them to pieces, makes their fall inevitable, as inevitable as the fall of the migratory birds breaking against the glaring windows of the lighthouse:

This time of the year, the migratory birds, shining cuckoo, godwit, golden plover, came back to New Zealand from the North. Sometimes the poor brave sillies flew straight into the Polyphemus-glare of the lighthouse windows. A thud of soft breasts, a crackle of tiny hollow bones, and down they plumped, journey's end a quieter thing for them than the urgent racial memories had whispered. If that had happened to Beppo and the Elf - if there hadn't been the island for them to fly to - one could easily imagine the thud that so small a migrant as Beppo would have made, breaking against the great blind eye of Reality.<sup>32</sup>

In Janet Frame one can find the same sense of fall, of breaking into pieces, of fragments turned into splinters, shards, epitomized in the dropping of the atom bomb in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* as well as in the breakthrough of the stone in *A State of Siege* which coincides with the protagonist's mysterious death:

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<sup>30</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 131

<sup>31</sup> Hyde, Robin, "Young Knowledge", *Selected Poems*, p. 36

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104

As Manfred stared at the window there was a crash, a splintering of glass flying in all directions, onto the spare bed, onto the floor, onto the shelf by the bed, in Manfred's hair, at her feet. She stood, terrified. The wind, waiting at the window, leapt through the ragged gap, flapping wildly at the curtains; and, in a moment, the storm had entered the room, the wind was whistling through the house, all the curtains were dancing wildly. The house grew cold. When Manfred shivered, it was much with the cold as with the shock of what had happened. The black space where the glass had been showed that daylight was still far away. A sense of collapse seemed to overcome the house, as if its walls were made of paper.<sup>33</sup>

Stone and ice represent in the writer's vision that wholeness denied to human beings which haunts their perception of identity. In stone and ice the living essence is left unaltered by time and death as unquenchable trace: "how smooth stones are, how accomplished in their being, how unhurried in their movement; stones in their lives are slow travellers with no history."<sup>34</sup> And yet they are able to preserve and distill, bridging the distance between past and future: "still they could, if they wanted to, tell tall tales of moss, desperation in burning, murder; as plate and slate of marvel, as stone, they can be overturned where centuries and men are served, swallowed, written and learned; and skimmed on the dark water, stone may be the shadow of a cathedral."<sup>35</sup> The emphasis put on the self-possessed nature of stone renders the fragmented nature of human beings even more disruptive towards them and the space they inhabit:

I was surrounded by shadows and presences. At first I used to put out my hands to prevent the attack. Then I would clutch an article of furniture, trying by force to keep it in its place, yet knowing that after I had withdrawn my hand the same terrible flowing and surrounding would

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<sup>33</sup> Frame, Janet, *A State of Siege*, New York, George Braziller, 1966, pp. 243-244

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241

continue. How I wished that the map of my room were in numbered segments which would stay pinned and numbered.<sup>36</sup>

The failing of the subject as monad mines the notions of time and space as diachronically ordered segments, and reveals them as pre-conceived constructions of meaning. The "I" as undivided unit of meaning does not make sense any more, nor does his/her web of interrelationships. The writer's criticism does not leave untouched either the sanctuary of patriarchy: the nuclear family:

What is the use of chanting the jingle, Husband, wife, child, Edward, Vera, Erlene, of putting ourselves in the togetherness pose of the advertisements, arm-in-arm before the radio or washing machine, with polishings of love on our faces, and exclamations, confidences, bursting like frozen green peas from our furlined pod heads? It is nothing like that. All that remains of our lives is the ceaseless useless effort to find the instrument which will saw through the bars, the mile-wide walls; or to tunnel under and emerge, gasping for air, smeared like beasts with our own dung, and then only to be turned away as strangers from ourselves and from others.<sup>37</sup>

On the same sense of aloofness and lack of communication is based Robin Hyde's picture of family life in *The Godwits Fly*. Her description of Eliza's parents, Augusta and John Hannay, echoes that sense of isolation and estrangement that we find among the couples of Katherine Mansfield's stories:

Two people, solitaires, dreamers, winning out of their first environment, find a dog-chain twisting their ankles together. Still they fight for their escape; one lonely, shy, suffering under a sense of social injustice, for escape into the steaming companionship, the labouring but powerful flanks of mankind: the other fights for what blood and tradition have taught her, fields of bluebells...courage, craftsmanship, the order which for her has existed only in a dream [...] They are young when it begins; their words, like their veins, are hot and full of passion. They share a double bed, and

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<sup>36</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 17

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 151

have children. One day an ageing man looks round, and finds himself wrestling with an ageing woman, her face seamed with tears.<sup>38</sup>

Isolation and aloofness confirm further the idea of the fall of the individual in Janet Frame's fiction. Her characters seem to have been all precipitated into an abyss from which they try to tell their story, from which they try to make their voice heard. The recurrent image of the crevice, the fracture, the wound, which has been often interpreted in terms of gynopoetics,<sup>39</sup> seems to me to hint retrospectively at the experience of the fall. Similarly all the threats to human existence fall in Janet Frame's fiction from the sky to strike the earth dumb with wonder: the hawks "with burning glass eyes who spent all day sitting on the top of the mountain choosing their victims and preparing for the night, when they swooped and struck,"<sup>40</sup> the atom bomb dropped on Great Britain in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, the rain of words striking people dead in *The Carpathians*.

The dizzy perception of the fall is tightly connected with the loss of centrality of the subject, with the subject's loss of identity. This can be gathered, for example, by hearkening to Vera Glace's voice in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. Her fear that the sun might fall from the sky because she is not gazing at it<sup>41</sup> testifies ironically to the unease of man at finding out that he/she is not the centre of the universe, not even a very relevant particle of it. Elsewhere in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* the image of the fall is suggested by the story of the keeper of the

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<sup>38</sup> Hyde, Robin, *The Godwits Fly*, Gloria Rawlinson, ed., Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1970, p. 47

<sup>39</sup> Mercer, Gina, *Janet Frame. Subversive Fictions*, pp. 1-7; pp. 29-39

<sup>40</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 99

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 17-18

lighthouse going mad from having spent too much time in the company of light, cut off from the rest of the world:

[...] one day I saw a small boat struggling against the waves, being steered from the lighthouse, and as it came nearer I saw that one of the three men in it was waving his arms and screaming while the others tried to cope with him. It was the lighthouse keeper marooned for too long with Light. He had gone mad. The wind was filled with sand, stinging and hot, and the seabirds wheeled and cried. The lonely posturing figure was set down on the beach. He trod the sand as if he believed it might have been water. He tried to reenter the water, to run and plunge in. Then, surrendering because he was being held so tightly by his companions, he stopped the wild moving of his limbs and instead he let out a high-pitched scream, like a seabird. He had changed to a seabird.<sup>42</sup>

The lighthouse in its aloofness becomes thus the symbol of the human condition of isolation and despair, and, as with Katherine Mansfield's pear tree in "Bliss" and with the tower in *Vertigo*, its vertical presence makes the fall of the character only more inevitable. Imprisoned because mad he is taken from one tower, that of the lighthouse, to the metaphorical tower of isolation embodied by the mental asylum. The fall, Janet Frame seems to suggest, is not only inevitable, but also never-ending, it goes on and on. Deprived of any notion of either time or space the fall is blind, it knows nothing but its falling: "Do you know that they take people from tower to tower, up and down up and down the spiral stair?"<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, pp. 46-47

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47

## Unwinding the spiral: metamorphosis of the "Tower" in *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme

Looming up in the distance, "strange," "gaunt," and "embattled," the tower of Kerewin Holmes in *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme is a vertical structure endowed with a spiral staircase. Kerewin built it for herself in a remote South Island coastal community, driven by the joy of having a place on her own in which to dedicate herself to her art. Conceived as the woman's "glimmering retreat" it becomes a prison, an ivory tower where Kerewin, painter, builder, connoisseur is held captive by her own art:

It was the hermitage, her glimmering retreat. No people invited, for what could they know of the secrets that crept and chilled and chuckled in the marrow of her bones? No need of people, because she was self-fulfilling, delighted with the pre-eminence of her art, and the future of her knowing hands.

But the pinnacle became an abyss, and the driving joy ended. At last there was a prison.<sup>44</sup>

As in Janet Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, the tower becomes a symbol of isolation and estrangement, in that it forces the subject into the fetters of a sterile single-perspectivism. Foreshadowed by the tower is the Leibnizian monad, the isolated individual ego, unable to interconnect, whose counterpart is the anomalous trinity represented by Kerewin, Simon and Joe, the main characters of the novel. They constitute what the writer has defined in an interview<sup>45</sup> as the basic threesome unit of *The Bone People*. To a concept of the subject as single, undivided

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<sup>44</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, London, Picador, 1986, p. 7

<sup>45</sup> Smith, Shona, "Constructing the Author. An Interview with Keri Hulme", *Untold 2*, 1984-1986, p. 32

self Keri Hulme prefers that of a subjectivity in relationship where the multiple selves of the subject combine and interconnect *ad infinitum*. They create that same fragmented wholeness which characterizes the notion of the subject in the fiction of Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde and Janet Frame. Fragments yet whole, Keri Hulme's characters are inextricably bound insofar as they are complementary and interdependent, or, in Simon's words, "they only make sense together,"<sup>46</sup> and they are at the same time distinct and definite, endowed with their own peculiar characteristics and idiosyncrasies. Various hints at their ambiguous nature are dropped throughout the novel.

The fragmented wholeness of the characters is already evident in the prologue where the reader catches three glimpses of the central characters in the form of three cameos. Each cameo is focused on one character, and renders in its brevity the character's fragmented nature, and in its finitude his/her peculiar individuality and wholeness. The three cameos are both in terms of form and content tightly interlinked, in that they describe the same scene from different points of view. The focus shifts from Simon to Joe, and eventually to Kerewin, almost imperceptibly, as in the three cameos the same words are reiterated over and over again only to be slightly varied in order to convey the eccentricity and separatedness of each character. This sense of tautological inter-relatedness, which distinguishes the prologue, is also determined by the peculiar use of language, as Anna Smith remarks in her essay on *The Bone People*:

Linked into a circling, repetitive structure by the use of incantatory language and iterative phrases, the prologue creates a powerful sense of ritual. Like a primitive chant or magic spell, the brief text calls the story to

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<sup>46</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 395

life and expresses faith in the engendering power of language whose sounds and formal placement enact a powerful textual message: that suffering individuals can be lovingly swallowed up and reconciled in the embrace of a community.<sup>47</sup>

In the three cameos the characters are depicted whilst walking down the street, feeling at peace with themselves and with the people they meet on their way, until they are one with them.<sup>48</sup> The image of linking hands and of an ever-expanding community featuring in such a description, strengthens the idea of togetherness that pervades the protagonists' characterization in the novel. It is the voice of the author that, in the prologue, points to the subversive quality of the characters' togetherness, which is harbinger of radical change:

They were nothing more than people, by themselves. Even paired, any pairing, they would have been nothing more than people by themselves. But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great. Together, all together they are the instruments of change.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of characterization their togetherness is rendered through an uncanny game of mirrorings and projections: Kerewin - to give an example - is Simon's exact opposite. She is dark-haired and heavily built; he is blond and skinny. She is associated with the moon; he is associated with the sun. She abhors physical contact; he is very fond of touching. He is dumb; she is a word-spinner, fluent and articulate. Their features merge, yet their outlines remain distinct, as the three faces

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<sup>47</sup> Smith, Anna, "Keri Hulme & 'Love's Wounded Beings'", *Opening The Book. Essays on New Zealand Writing*, Mark Williams and Michele Leggott, eds, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1995, p. 144

<sup>48</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 3

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4

of the tricephalos, representing herself, Joe and Simon,<sup>50</sup> remain, in Kerewin's sculpture, separate, though part of the same thing. Images of inter-relatedness abound in the novel, creating a sort of undertow effect that confers on the narration its symbolic aura. According to Shona Smith interconnections within the novel are buttressed by "the pervasive images of circles and spirals"<sup>51</sup> as unifying symbols, yet the symbolic substratum of the novel rests, in my opinion, mainly on language. When Kerewin compares herself and Joe to "wounded stones, losers in the tidal wars, soon to become sand except for the urchin's intervening hand"<sup>52</sup> she is using the metaphoric language of cosmic correspondences that combines the scattered and the unrelated together in order to project them into a wider cosmic pattern. Further in the narration Kerewin suggests that the link between man and child might be her: "He's the bright sun in the eastern sky, and he's the moon's bridegroom at night, and me, I'm the link and life between them."<sup>53</sup> The language used is tinged with cosmic accents in that it hints at a pattern where microcosm and macrocosm live symbiotically. Kerewin, Simon and Joe belong to such a pattern in that they provide in their distinctiveness, in their fragmentedness, the link that binds them together, and makes them belong. Nobody is the link, neither Kerewin nor Simon, but their togetherness, so that to make "the net whole,"<sup>54</sup> to say it with Kerewin, is to achieve

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 314: "Day by day, the three faces grow. The blunt blind features become definite, refined, awake. Back of head to back of head to back of head: a tricephalos. It's easy to model her own face, and is finished first. Joe is there each day: she can pick the detail she requires and grow the clay face next morning to match it. But remembering the child's face pains her."

<sup>51</sup> Smith, Shona, "Keri Hulme: Breaking Ground", *Untold 2*, 1984-1986, p. 44

<sup>52</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 252

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 424

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 436

unity through multiplicity: "And then it was three again, the trinity regained in a microcosmic way."<sup>55</sup>

The starting point of the novel is nevertheless the monad which is symbolized by the tower. This is suggested by the identification of the tower with Kerewin's imprisoned self. The anthropomorphization of the tower, which emerges from its description, emphasizes further Kerewin's identification with it: "A concrete skeleton, wooden ribs and girdle, skin of stone, grey and slateblue and heavy honey-coloured."<sup>56</sup> Kerewin is similarly compared with stone, and is referred to in the novel as the "stony lady"<sup>57</sup> or simply "the stony."<sup>58</sup> Like her tower, Kerewin is isolated and "embattled" as the author points out: "She's a very rigid enclosed person even up to the kind of clothes she wears. They are a kind of walking armour."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, she perceives herself as "a rock in the desert,"<sup>60</sup> confirming once more that sense of utter isolation delivered by the tower: "it stood, gaunt and strange and embattled, built on an almost island in the shallows of an inlet, tall in Taiaroa."<sup>61</sup> Kerewin is also perceived by Joe as lonely and almost inhuman like her tower: "And then sometimes, she seems inhuman...like this Tower is inhuman."<sup>62</sup> Joe, on the other hand, is ironically described by Kerewin as "a man in love with a stone."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 436

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 243: "I'm Kerewin the stony and I never cry."

<sup>59</sup> Smith, Shona, "Constructing the Author. An Interview with Keri Hulme", p. 28

<sup>60</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 289

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 252

The anthropomorphization of the tower/prison is pushed as far as Kerewin's inner domain so that the wall of the tower, high, hard and impenetrable, becomes the self's inner boundary, its final prison: "I am encompassed by a wall, high and hard and stone, with only my brainy nails to tear it down. And I cannot do it."<sup>64</sup> The tower as embodiment of the monad becomes thus obsolete and sterile, rendering the fall of the heroine the more inevitable.

The uncanny nature of the tower expresses itself in the ambivalence of its structure which defies the surrounding void by growing high, and seems to be constantly on the verge of succumbing into it again as if drawn downward, inground, by an entropic desire of perfect symmetry. This duplicity is rendered in the novel by the axis tower-hole as it appears from the start:

She had debated, in the frivolity of the beginning, whether to build a hole or a tower; a hole, because she was fond of hobbits, or a tower - well a tower for many reasons, but chiefly because she liked spiral stairways.<sup>65</sup>

Kerewin, herself, is both builder and digger, where to build and to dig suggest an action directed respectively upward and downward, outward and inward, but also an action turned at the same time toward the future and the past. In *The Bone People* to dig implies an act of rediscovery of traditional Maori values that need to be reframed into the present in order for them to be effective in the future. In Kerewin's digging dream, the act of digging refers both to a desire for self-knowledge directed inwardly, in contrast with the outward-oriented knowledge represented by the tower, and on a different level, that of myth, it refers back to the mission bestowed on

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7

Kerewin in connection with her Maori origins. That is also suggested by the opening of the three sections of the prologue, which recalls the Maori creation myth as well as the Genesis insofar as it begins with the same words: "In the beginning, it was darkness[...]"<sup>66</sup> The supernatural, almost ritual, meaning attached to the act of digging as well as to that of falling, which represent in the novel two modalities of self-knowledge, is highlighted in Kerewin's revealing dreams by the presence of light:

The dreams were trying to tell me something but I couldn't understand them. I still don't. In the last one, the breathing stopped and the marae suddenly lightened like something lifted the covering rock off, and a great voice not human, cried, 'Keria! Keria!' Bloody strange way to end a dream, eh? She laughed. 'I woke my brother up yelling, 'Dig what?' and he thought I was nuts.'<sup>67</sup>

The marae in Kerewin's digging dream is lightened all of a sudden, and the tower in another of her dreams is struck by lightning: "The sky split and thunderbolts rained down, and she started falling, wailing in final despair from the lightning struck tower."<sup>68</sup> By falling the subject gets rid of the traps set up by his/her ego, removes him/herself from the tower in order to undertake that journey of rescue of one's heritage, which in *The Bone People* finds its expression in Kerewin's digging experience. To dig becomes thus synonymous with to rediscover. What Kerewin is called to rediscover or to bring to light again are those Maori values of communality which are symbolized by the spiral-shaped marae, the courtyard of the meeting house.

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 5-7

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 254

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 267

The hole Kerewin enters in her dreams conceals a marae, a sacred site, symbol of Maori values at the core of Aotearoa/New Zealand<sup>69</sup> that she is called to dig up and re-build. The hole as well as the tower from which she dreams of falling<sup>70</sup> reveal the same hunger for self-knowledge where to know is to be aware of the sprawling infinity where you would have expected set boundaries, of the multifaceted essence of the subject, and its unfathomable nature. The fall of the subject represents thus an attempt to gauge the sprawling infinity that opens up under his/her feet by losing the notion of the self as unique point of focus. Self-knowledge implies the knowledge of the non-self, thus to descend into the hole or to fall from the tower become metaphors of a loss of identity on behalf of the subject, which finds its ultimate expression in death. The hole in the ground that Simon digs, curious of its content, in the second section of the novel, hints at the experience of death that the three central characters embark on in the course of the narration:

There is a hole there, two feet in diameter. He can see in for nearly a yard, then it tunnels away in curve and the shadows become too dark to see anything. He'd like to wriggle partly in, stretch his arms out, explore, but there might be something quiet, with teeth, waiting further up...He digs for most of the afternoon before he gets to the end of the hole. There is a round hollow, not large. It is lined with soft hair, and on that, huddled together, are two mummified baby rabbits. He looks at them for a long time, not touching them. Sweat dribbles into his eyes, stinging them, but he stands quite still and looks.<sup>71</sup>

Yet it is significant that Simon's discovery of death is matched with a dream of rebirth. If there is a movement in the novel directed downward, and suggested by the

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<sup>69</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 254: "Sometimes I saw a hole in the ground. Sometimes I entered it, and in the heart of the island there was a marae."

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 267

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 202-203

symbols of tower and hole, there is also a counter-movement, symbolized by the spiral, bringing the down up, transforming the loss of identity envisaged by the experience of the fall into a vision of a new self-identity, turning death into life again as in Simon's dream:

You're kneeling back by that hole. It's hot in the sunshine. You feel like crying, but you know something better, and you want them alive. So you start feeding them music, underbreath singing, and little by little the withered leathery ears fill out: flick flick, a tentative twitch and shake. The dead dried fur begins to lift and shift and shine. Those sunken holes of eyes and nostrils pinken slowly, like a blush stealing over, the eyes to moisten, darken, the nostrils to quiver, and they open their eyes on you and they glow.<sup>72</sup>

The axis tower/hole engenders a vertiginous movement that removes the centre by shifting it further down until the perception of the vertigo leads to the desire-stricken fear of the abyss,<sup>73</sup> that is, the fear of an ultimate groundlessness in things. The image of Simon fumbling in search of the bottom of the hole, and his fear of a hidden beast waiting at the end of it, voice the fear of the bottomless, of the ultimate void, which is represented by the abyss. In *The Bone People* as in *Vertigo* the haunting image of the tower serves to emphasize the experience of the fall until a complete disclosure of the abyss is achieved: "But the pinnacle became an abyss, and the driving joy ended."<sup>74</sup> The absence of ground, of foundation, and falling away suggested by the opening up of the abyss in the earth (the German word for abyss, *Abgrund*, is in this respect much more suggestive than the English) puts the

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<sup>72</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 203

<sup>73</sup> On the notion of the fear/desire to throw oneself into the abyss as expression of existential freedom see Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1946, p. 55; and Jean-Paul Sartre, "Anguish" *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre*, ed. Robert Cumming, New York, Random House, 1965, pp. 115-123.

<sup>74</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 7

accent on the illusory notion of the centre as absolute point of convergence. The abyss is, in Gary Shapiro's words, "what is there where we would have expected the centre."<sup>75</sup> The systematic removal of the centre and the ensuing loss of direction and proportion give rise to the experience of the abyss. The abyss becomes thus the hyperbolic expression of the loss of centrality, the loss of identity, which determines the fall as experienced by the subject.

In *The Bone People* the heroine falls because she is dethroned from her position of supremacy as unique focus of the narration: the centre is shifted and subjected to continuous permutations. It is in the dialectical relationship between centre and periphery, self and non-self, subject and object that the notion of the fall inherent in the writer's characterization and in the narrative structure of the novel must be viewed. If Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde and Janet Frame draw in their fiction upon the notion of the fall, Keri Hulme thematizes it. The overt symbology of the novel focusing on the image of the tower and its specular image, the hole, give evidence for it, and so does the cyclic structure of the narrative. A clear example of the intense symbolization present in the novel is provided by Kerewin's falling dream where the author explicitly suggests an analogy between Kerewin's tower and the Tower of Babel.<sup>76</sup> In *The Bone People* the notion of the fall and the vertigo perception related to it through the vertical structure of the tower are not only hinted or left in the background, but become the pivot of the narration. Likewise the abyss is acknowledged and woven into the narrative pattern of the novel through the symbol of the spiral. The writer unmaskes the abyss by throwing

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<sup>75</sup> Shapiro, Gary, *Earthwards. Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995, p. 91

<sup>76</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 267: "A falling dream, and the Tower of Babel? Astral travel, and the house of God? She didn't, then, think at all of her Tower."

her characters headlong into it so that the fall becomes the beginning of a journey into the uncharted.

The tower makes its first appearance in the prologue to the novel entitled "The End At The Beginning" where the cyclic structure of the novel is laid bare. *The Bone People* is divided up into four sections of three chapters each, anticipated by a prologue and concluded by an epilogue. The prologue begins with three fragments, each of them dedicated to three unnamed characters who are Simon, Joe and Kerewin as they appear at the end of the novel after their journey of inner exploration. By making ending and beginning interchangeable the writer comes closer to the ancient Maori symbol of death and rebirth which is the double spiral. As Peter Simpson noted in a review of *The Bone People* in the *Australian Book Review* for August 1984, "the spiral form is central to the novel's meaning and design; it is in effect the code of the work, informing every aspect from innumerable local details to the overall picture."<sup>77</sup> The spiral principle permeates the structure of the tower (also incorporating a spiral staircase), and is furthermore part of the narrative structure of the novel. Explicit reference to the spiral principle and its Maori origins is made throughout the novel as the following passage attests:

On the floor at her feet was an engraved double-spiral, one of the kind that wound your eyes round and round into the centre where surprise you found the beginning of another spiral that led your eyes out again to the nothingness of the outside. Or the somethingness: she had never quite made her mind up as to what a nothingness was. Whatever way you defined it, it seemed to be something [...] It was reckoned that the old people found inspiration for the double spirals they carved so skilfully in

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<sup>77</sup> Simpson, Peter, "In my spiral fashion", *Australian Book Review*, August, 1984, pp. 7-8

uncurling fernfronds. Perhaps. But it was an old symbol of rebirth, and the outward-inward nature of things.<sup>78</sup>

The double spiral which permutes centre and periphery, bringing the inside outside, the centre to the periphery and vice versa, hints in an uncanny way at the abyss, that “nothingness of the outside” whose “somethingness” still puzzles and fascinates Kerewin. Puzzlement mixed with fascination is Kerewin’s reaction to Simon’s “spiralling construction of marramgrass and shells and driftchips and seaweed”<sup>79</sup> built by the child on the beach, which makes something like music, entwining the breath of the earth with that of man:

He [Simon] lay down on the sand with his ear by it, and she went to him, puzzled. Simon got up quickly. Listen too, he said, touching his ear and pointing to her. So she did, and heard nothing. Listened very intently, and was suddenly aware that the pulse of her blood and the surge of the surf and the thin rustle of wind round the beaches were combining to make something like music.<sup>80</sup>

To fall into the abyss becomes in the novel another mode of knowledge where knowledge is a form of non-knowledge. The abyss, itself, represents the entry into the void which is not considered as absent space, as nothingness, but journey toward the centre. If “the abyss is there where we expect the centre,”<sup>81</sup> one can define the fall into the abyss as an act of knowledge in *via negativa*, as a willingness to pursue the centre where the centre is denied, or to pursue it as a non-centre. The progressive dissipation of the centre of the self into the non-self gives rise to a

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<sup>78</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 44

<sup>79</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 102

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102

<sup>81</sup> Shapiro, Gary, *Earthwards. Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*, p. 91

threatening proliferation of selves, to a proliferation of “multiplicities” which, according to Chris Prentice, replace in *The Bone People* the dichotomy self/other.<sup>82</sup>

The music heard by Simon and Kerewin on the beach weaving the surge of the surf, the sound of human blood and the rustle of the wind together, needs as a condition for being that someone is listening,<sup>83</sup> a point of reference, acting as a filter, as a catalyst between microcosm and macrocosm. The spiral functions similarly in that it represents a link between finite and infinite dimension: “The spiral is at once passive testimony to experience of cosmic process and pattern [...] and a catalyst of such experience.”<sup>84</sup> Through the dialectical relationship between centre and periphery, self and non-self, the inward-outward movement of the spiral is re-created within the novel. The spiral can move inward and outward, from microcosm to macrocosm or the reverse, giving full expression to a sense of the cosmic as spiralling off infinity at the base of the real: “The spiral is at once a decoy luring us from the plane of immediate experience and pointing us toward the really real, and a demonstration of the spontaneous appearance and direct pressure of cosmic process and pattern on the plane of immediate experience.”<sup>85</sup>

In its double movement, simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal, the spiral denies the centre by creating a “scale of centres,”<sup>86</sup> thus turning the spiral’s projecting infinity into its ever-receding boundary, what Robert Smithson defined as

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<sup>82</sup> Prentice, Chris, “Re-Writing their Stories, Renaming Themselves: Post-Colonialism and Feminism in the Fictions of Keri Hulme and Audrey Thomas”, *Span* 23, 1986, pp. 68-80.

<sup>83</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 102: “She adds, ‘They only make music when someone is listening’”

<sup>84</sup> Kuspit, Donald B., “The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson’s Drunken Boat”, *Arts Magazine* 56, n. 2 (October 1981), p. 82

<sup>85</sup> Kuspit, Donald B., “The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson’s Drunken Boat”, p. 82

<sup>86</sup> Holt, Nancy, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 114

the spiral's "open limit."<sup>87</sup> The spiral succeeds in making the infinite accessible by provoking through the vertigo perception a physical sensation which converts the infinite into the finite. The uncontrollable vertigo the spiral triggers off by constantly removing the centre contributes to a systematization of the fall, which enables the subject to perceive the surrounding infinity not as alien space, but as a concentrically and excentrically explorable dimension. These two moments in the process of knowledge are represented in *The Bone People* by the falling and digging experience, and are epitomized in the symbols of tower and hole. By falling the subject loses his/her identity only to acquire through the act of digging, which is a conscious act of exploration, a new-self-identity. As Kerewin affirms, "To unearth anything, we begin by digging."<sup>88</sup>

The intensification of physical sensation through the vertigo perception contributes towards physicalizing the sensation of the infinite. Similarly in *The Bone People* the perception of the vertigo is so intensified through the experience of the fall as to deliver the uncanniness of the cosmic, and make it tangible. The vertigo perception is engendered in the novel by the experience of the fall, which is at first only hinted at through the symbol of the tower, and is subsequently fully developed as the increased symbolization related to it (the double spiral, the knocked-down tower, the hole) attests.

A particular emphasis on the notion of the fall is given in the fourth section of the novel entitled "Feldapart Sinews, Broken Bones" where the fall occurs for the three central characters. Their experience of the fall takes the form of an

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 168

<sup>88</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 37

encounter with death. Kerewin's experience of death, her descent to the netherworld, occurs in connection with a loss of identity on her part which takes the form of a fall. This is evident in the chapter of the fourth section dedicated to Kerewin, and suggestively entitled "The Woman At The Wellspring of Death," where Kerewin dying alone in her bach is visited by "a small dark person" "of indeterminate age," "of indeterminate sex," "of indeterminate race,"<sup>89</sup> enveloped in mystery, who brings her back to life again. In connection with this supernatural apparition Kerewin is said to fall. The experience of the fall is rendered incisive by the conciseness and simplicity of the statement, "And fell,"<sup>90</sup> referred to Kerewin. No explanation of the fall is given, but the presence of the supernatural, so that the fall is endowed with a thorough symbolical significance. The fall gives access to the experience of death as experience of the non-self on behalf of the de-centred subject. By falling Kerewin breaks through the bars of her confining self, only to acquire a new self-identity where the specific and the finite is transcended into the infinite and the universal. Donald Kuspit defines such a process as being peculiarly characteristic of the spiral:

The spiral is emblematic of both immersion in the primordial process and emergence from it - of Dionysian loss of particular identity in the infinite and Apollonian achievement of a vision of new self-identity, destined to become universal and exemplary.<sup>91</sup>

By falling Kerewin loses her particular identity, which proved to be too limiting and sterile, and experiences a "feeling of burgeoning" in her life comparable to the

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<sup>89</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 424

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 424

<sup>91</sup> Kuspit, Donald B., "The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson's Drunken Boat", *Arts Magazine* 56, n.2 (October 1981), p. 82

“Apollonian achievement of a vision of new self-identity” as mentioned by Donald Kuspit:

I'm working hard, I'm painting easily, fluently, profoundly. I smile often. I have direction in my life again, four directions - make that five - no six. I'm weaving webs, and building dreams and every so often this wonder seizes me unawares. Which is a far distance on from the moribund bag of bones of a month ago.<sup>92</sup>

Kerewin's new self-identity is nevertheless fully achieved only when she starts re-building the old Maori hall in Moerangi, yet such an achievement cannot occur without the contribution of Joe and Simon. Like Kerewin they have to fall and lose their particular identity in order to attain to a new self-identity, resulting from the union of their single experiences. The fall of Kerewin, Simon and Joe is treated singularly in the fourth section of the novel. The emphasis is on the notion of the fall which is considered both as individual and as universal experience emblematic of the relationship between man and nature. The fall becomes thus a means to assess the infinite within the finite, the supernatural within the natural. Similarly Joe's encounter with the supernatural in the form of the kaumatua, the keeper of the mauri spirit or life principle, brought on one of the great canoes, is characterized by a fall:

He was on the edge of a bluff: below him, a scoured stone beach, with driftwood in tangled piles along the tideline. It was thirty shadowed feet to the bottom [...]He spreads his arms to the lowering sky and runs over the edge. For a moment he seems to hang there, space below his feet, and then he plummets with sickening speed.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 431

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 335 and 341

Joe's fall marks the beginning of the character's journey of exploration under the guidance of the kaumatua, who saves him from death and initiates him at the same time into the mysteries of Maoriland, recounting details of the past of Aotearoa, "the shining land," and of the Maori Fall: "We ceased to nurture the land. We fought among ourselves. We were overcome by the white people in their hordes. We were broken and diminished."<sup>94</sup> Accepting the kaumatua's inheritance and mission, that is, to keep watch on the mauri, the life principle, Joe re-discovers his Maori identity. Hints at the experience of the fall abound in this chapter of the fourth section dedicated to Joe. When Joe and the kaumatua are approaching the place where they believe one of the great canoes lies buried, the kaumatua nearly falls. The old man's lack of balance can be explained by oncoming death, yet the emphasis put on it suggests another reading. It is the closeness to the sacred site that seems to engender a kind of vertiginous sensation responsible for the fall: "The kaumatua shuffles, bonefingered hand grasping Joe's forearm. He moves blindly; his feet catch on sticks and stumble on stones."<sup>95</sup> The sacred site, itself, is described in such a way as to suggest a kind of dizziness:

The beaten earth track forks. Joe helps him [the kaumatua] down the left-hand path. They come to rocks, worn and broken, but still towering above them. An ancient gorge where the river ran aeons ago, and carved this place for part of its bed. A silent place: ochre and slategrey stones. No birds. No insects. The only plants are weeds, stringy and grey and subdued.<sup>96</sup>

The gorge as well as the towering rocks are vertically constructed though they develop in opposite directions, respectively downward and upward. They succeed in

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 364

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 365

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 365

rendering the hollow barrenness of the sacred site, conferring on the place, in a rather oblique way, a sense of vertigo, furthermore confirmed by the bottomless cave Joe and the kaumatua come across in their quest for the great canoe: "A weathered stratum of rock makes an overhang. It is almost a cave, but it hasn't a floor. A great natural well, like a sinkhole, a cenote, has been formed in the rock."<sup>97</sup> Joe's floorless cave resembles Simon's rabbit hole. Their attitude toward it is similar. Driven by curiosity Simon would like to "stretch his arms out" in order to explore the hole, but holds back for fear of a wild animal lurking at the bottom of it. Similarly Joe puts his hand out in the water of the well, only to retract it as quickly as possible as if it had been bitten by a wild animal:

He puts his hand in the water cautiously, meaning to see whether the water is coloured or contains stoneflour, and snatches it out again before his fingers go in past the knuckles. Jesus Holy!  
It's like ten thousand tiny bubbles bursting on his skin, a mild electric current, an aliveness.<sup>98</sup>

It is not however a wild animal that bites Joe's hand, but a flux of energy that goes through it as quick and unexpected as a bite. The two episodes remain strikingly similar as they both confer the same sense of the abyss as unfathomable and uncanny. The hole reveals the fear of the abyss, of the ultimate void to which the subject's identity inevitably succumbs. Yet the hole in Joe's experience as well as in Simon's represents alongside the fear of the abyss, the inward-directed quest for a new self-identity.

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 367

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, p. 367

Simon's experience of the fall is in this respect not dissimilar to Joe's or Kerewin's. His fall into a world of darkness as a consequence of Joe's savage thrashing comes very close to the experience of death. The fall takes place at a moment of crisis. The breaking point is reached in the novel when Joe beats Simon almost to death, causing him severe head injuries. After the tragic event the three characters drift apart as Simon is taken to hospital, Joe is sent to jail, and Kerewin, critically ill, leaves her tower. Violence leads to the climax of the novel, though it is important to note that violence in *The Bone People* is not an aim in itself, but means of healing. On the gratuitous nature of violence in the novel C. K. Stead puts his condemning finger,<sup>99</sup> ignoring though that the vortex of violence Simon, Kerewin and Joe fall into, does not put an end to their endeavours. On the contrary it represents an initiation to the characters' journey of inner exploration.

Far from endorsing violence the novel challenges it in that it seeks an explanation for its thriving in the fabric of New Zealand society. In Ann Maxwell's analysis of the novel violence breeds out of a state of increasing isolation, fragmentation and alienation experienced by the individual in a Western-oriented society: "These culminate in the violences born of impotence and silencing; the care and creativity nourished by natural forms of filiation and communal modes of

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<sup>99</sup> Stead, C.K., "Bookered", *Answering to the Language. Essays on Modern Writers*, Auckland Auckland University Press, 1989, p. 183: "But I have to admit that when I stand back from the novel and reflect on it, there is in addition to the sense of its power, which I have acknowledged, and which is probably the most important thing to be said about it, a bitter after-taste, something black and negative deeply ingrained in its imaginative fabric, which no amount of revision or editing could have eliminated, and which, for this reader at least, qualifies the feeling that the publication is an occasion for celebration. I'm not sure whether I should even attempt to explain to myself what it is that constitutes that negative element, or whether it should simply be mentioned and left for other readers to confirm or deny. But I suspect it has its location in the central subject matter, and that is something it shares (to give another point of reference) with Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*, a work which also presents extreme violence against a child, yet demands sympathy and understanding for the man who commits it. In principle such charity is admirable. In fact, the line between charity and imaginative complicity is very fine indeed."

production which are directed outward on the world, are replaced by an impulse to destruction turned inward on the private corpus of self and family.”<sup>100</sup>

Joe’s physical violence is the tangible proof of an impulse to self-destruction which is equally part of Kerewin and Simon. The violence that plunges Simon into a world of semi-consciousness is a form of misplaced energy born out of a condition of despair and isolation that both Kerewin, trapped in her tower, and Joe, a marginalized Maori, share. When Kerewin overhears Joe, as yet unknown to her, talking in a pub, she reflects on his aggressive linguistic attitude, revealing him as a Maori dominated, crushed, and impoverished by the Pakeha society he lives in:

Why this speech filled with bitterness and contempt? You hate English, man? I can understand that but why not do your conversing in Maori and spare us this contamination? No swear words in that tongue...there he goes again. Ah hell, the fucking word has its place, but all the time?<sup>101</sup>

Yet violence in the novel is not only Joe’s prerogative. Keri Hulme describes Kerewin as a “carefully controlled person” who has “a great capacity for violence.”<sup>102</sup> Kerewin’s “me killer-instinct”<sup>103</sup> is a form of violence which is directed as much as outwards as inwards, turning into a form of self-destruction. Violence as self-destruction and punishment is exercised by Simon too. In the fishing episode Simon deliberately wounds himself for no apparent reason.<sup>104</sup> On

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<sup>100</sup> Maxwell, Ann, “Reading *The Bone People*: Toward a Literary Post-Colonial Nationalist Discourse”, *Antic* 3, 1987, p. 26

<sup>101</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 12

<sup>102</sup> Smith, Shona, “Constructing the Author: An Interview with Keri Hulme”, p. 29

<sup>103</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 190: “She is screaming with delight inside herself, trembling with dark joy. Fight. Fight. Fight. O me killer instinct, riding high on my shoulders, wide with teeth and smiling.”

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 214-217

the other hand Kerewin's violence to Simon, though not of a physical nature, hurts just the same, as she tells Joe: "the intent is sin as much as the action."<sup>105</sup>

In *The Bone People* violence leads to the occurrence of the fall as the three central characters are hastened toward the brink of the abyss, and are doomed to fall. Like Kerewin and Joe, Simon achieves his new self-identity through the experience of the fall. Simon's fall is emblematic as it marks the achievement of that self-identity resulting from the union of the three characters' selves, which Simon recognizes to be his/their only possible way to exist: "But we have to be together. If we are not, we are nothing."<sup>106</sup> Simon falls twice: once as a result of Joe's attack on him, and twice at Kerewin's deserted tower. Having fled the institution he was sent to after his hospital days, Simon goes back to the tower in the hope of finding Joe and Kerewin there. The disillusion at finding the place deserted is great: "Where? Where? Where have they gone? turning blindly away from the door and staggering as he goes, anywhere, nowhere, I don't care where, where have they gone?"<sup>107</sup> The fall is imminent as Simon's staggering, his turning blind and his total loss of direction seem to suggest. Significantly it is under the shadow of the half-fallen down tower (Kerewin knocked it down before leaving), that Simon stumbles and eventually falls:

The black burn scar reels past, black grass? no longer thinking just seeing, then his heel catches against something and he goes down backwards into the middle of the ashes and cinders and small charred pieces of wood.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, p. 327

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p. 395

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p. 410

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 410

Simon's final fall like Kerewin's and Joe's brings healing insofar as by falling he recovers his wholeness. Lying on the ground he finds "the thing," which is Kerewin's sculpture, the tricephalos, representing him, Kerewin and Joe as a triple unity:

Gone beyond thinking, drawn forward by his hands, he kneels in front of the thing. There are shadows and voices coming towards him, from all sides over the lawn. It is Kerewin, it is Joe, turning round the third face, aiee it is me, and even though he is moaning aloud, somewhere in the cloudy anguish a thready voice says, Together, all together, a message left for you, and he clasps it to his chest as hard as he can, and will never let it go.<sup>109</sup>

It is significant that the achievement of a new self-identity on behalf of the three characters, which occurs, as we have seen, in such disparate ways, coincides with the partial knocking down of Kerewin's tower. By knocking down her tower Kerewin turns away from a concept of life and art, restricted to her own ego, conceived as a single and self-sufficient unit, and turns toward an idea of commensalism, harmonizing the subject with his/her multifarious selves, and on another plane, the natural with the supernatural, the finite with the infinite. The tower, symbol of the modernist artist's elitism and freedom, fails to be the kernel of artistic renaissance (the artistic renaissance it was originally meant to celebrate), and becomes a fatal trap as Kerewin's creativity dries up. The author, however, indulges in a detailed description of the tower:

a star-gazing platform on top; a quiet library, book-lined, with a ring of swords on the nether wall; a bedroom, mediaeval style with massive roof-beams and a plain hewn bed...a living room with a huge fireplace, and rows of spicejars on one wall, and underneath, on the ground level, an entrance

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 410

hall hung with tapestries, and the beginnings of the spiral stairway, handrails dolphin-headed, saluting the air.

There'd be a cellar, naturally, well stocked with wines, home-brewed and imported vintage; lined with Chinese ginger jars, and wooden boxes of dates. Barrels round the walls, and shadowed chests in corners.<sup>110</sup>

Such lavish details suggest, on the one hand, the important role that the tower plays in the novel, but on the other seem to imply an ironic intent on behalf of the author. The author's ironic intent is aimed at emphasizing a symbolism already obvious, that of the ivory tower as refuge of the narcissistic artist, and at rendering at the same time the demolition of the tower only the more inevitable. The tower succeeds in reflecting the modernist view of the artist as isolated and detached from reality, absorbed in his/her narcissistic world, until such an image becomes distorted, and the elitist idea of modernism is mocked. The failure to recognize Hulme's ironic streak in dealing with Kerewin as artist *manqué* is for Graham Huggan a common feature of much criticism on *The Bone People* which in Huggan's words "is weakened by a failure to understand the ironic treatment of High Modernism in the novel as an implied continuation of the tradition of European cultural supremacy."<sup>111</sup> From this critical perspective C. K. Stead's remarks on the obvious symbolism of Kerewin's tower lose significance as he attributes such obviousness to a flaw in the novel which is described as "alarmingly naive,"<sup>112</sup> rather than attributing it to the author's wilful attempt to ironize on Modernism:

Kerewin is the isolated artist who has run out of inspiration. She lives, literally, in a tower of her own making, which (again quite literally) has to

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<sup>110</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 7

<sup>111</sup> Huggan, Graham, "Opting out of the (Critical) Common Market: Creolization and the Post-Colonial Text", *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing*, eds., Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, Sydney, Dangaroo Press, 1989, p. 32

<sup>112</sup> Stead, C.K., "Bookered", *Answering to the Language. Essays on Modern Writers*, p. 182

be broken down before she can paint again. The obviousness of the symbolism doesn't detract from the authenticity of the portrait. Kerewin, one feels, is bold enough and innocent to live by her symbols, as Yeats did when he bought a tower from Ireland's Congested Roads Board for £35 and restored it so he could write of himself 'pacing upon the battlements'.<sup>113</sup>

It is of primary importance to realize that Kerewin's artistic attitude is not necessarily shared by Keri Hulme and that the two must be distinguished, despite the many similarities.<sup>114</sup> The risk is to inflate the autobiographical element latent in the novel, and to undervalue at the same time the role played by the notion of the fall both in relation to the tower and to the characters. The fall is responsible for that process of metamorphosis involving the slow disruption of the tower, which is in turn emblematic of the inner disruption experienced by the central characters. The focus on the alterations taking place inside the tower would be otherwise inexplicable nor would the lengthy descriptions recording such changes to be justifiable: "It [the tower] is stripped entirely bare now, except for the forlorn shelves round the walls. The books are packed in cases, and stowed in the cellar. The swords are greased thickly and laid away on a cellar shelf. The chest of jade and the drawers of shells are locked and sealed into three tin trunks."<sup>115</sup>

On the process of metamorphosis harmonizing disruption with growth rests the whole idea of commensalism which seeks to establish social inter-relation between contrasting aspects of the same reality. Commensalism is thus developed to create a dialectical relationship between the single and the unrelated and the general

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>114</sup> McLeod, Aorewa, "Private Lives and Public Fictions", *Public & Private Worlds: Women in Contemporary New Zealand*, ed., Shelagh Cox, Wellington, Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson, 1989, pp. 67-81

<sup>115</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 313

pattern they belong to, which must be viewed as another version of the dialectical relationship between centre and periphery. Kerewin's idea of commensalism is based on interconnections and on a sense of mutual belonging, of inter-relatedness. Its centre is still the tower dismantled of its pompous paraphernalia, a "suitable shell" more than a "gaunt," "strange" and "embattled" vertical building:

But if I exist this coming Christ Mass, rejoin me at the Tower eh? O the groaning table of cheer...speaking of tables, does commensalism appeal to you as an upright vertebrate? Common quarters wherein we circulate like corpuscles in one blood stream, joining (I won't say like clots) for food and drink and discussion and whatever else we feel like...a way to keep unjoy at bay, like those last few weeks before they haled your corpus away. With no obligation on your part, I could provide a suitable shell.<sup>116</sup>

The turning point in the metamorphosis of the tower coincides with the novel's violent climax. Kerewin starts knocking down her tower after Simon has gone to hospital. She demolishes it with Joe's help, having no definite plan in her mind, just cherishing the sheer pleasure of demolition:

They [Kerewin and Joe] spend the afternoons breaking down the upper circles; the neat stone blocks dislodged one by one to hurtle down into the dandelion-studded lawn[...]They have become expert wreckers. It had been hard at first, blistered hands and stretched aching muscles. But you grew accustomed to the heavy swing of the sledge hammer, built it into a rhythm. You grew wise to the ways of stone and nailed wood, and learned to turn their solidity against them. Lever with a crowbar, tap in a wedge here, a judicious smack with the hammer, and down falls more of the Tower.<sup>117</sup>

The breaking down of the tower on behalf of the subject highlights the passage from a form of sterile monadism to an inclusive form of subjectivity in

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p. 383

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p. 316

relationship, fostering diversity and multiperspectivism. The tower as embodiment of a rigidly encoded nucleus, centre-centred, falls down, and evolves into an open structure, susceptible of change, where the centre as unique point of convergence is replaced by multiple points of reference which are put in relationship: “a shell-shape, a regular spiral of rooms expanding around the decapitated Tower...privacy, apartness, but all connected and all part of a whole.”<sup>118</sup> It is interesting to note that what Kerewin spares destruction are the bits of the old building that are deemed to be reframable in this new context, tracing, in so doing, a line of continuity with the past:

She saved very little of the upper levels: the great sister curve from the library, and the sea-shaded windows from the bedroom, and the golden niche where the boy had stood centuries ago: the plumbing and the solar waterheaters; the handrail of the stairway, taking particular care of dolphin heads with their benign engraven smiles. All the rest of the wood and the furnishings she sent splintering and crashing downwards in a frenzy of destruction.<sup>119</sup>

On deciding what to destroy and what to preserve of the tower, Kerewin makes a choice for the future. As her journey of inner exploration reveals to her, the past, both personal and national, can be a valuable starting point for acquiring a new consciousness, and fostering radical change. To begin with the end becomes thus equivalent with building the future on the past in a constant process of growth and change. Such a process does not develop vertically but circularly. That is the reason why the tower is only partially destroyed, and that is why only those parts of the old building that can be remodelled and refigured are kept. The “great sister curve from

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<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, p. 434

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, p. 316

the library” that Kerewin decides to preserve is an element of the old order that can be refigured in the new, insofar as its curving shape subverts vertical direction, and the notion of a single centre.

Similarly old myths are revised in the novel and replaced with new versions, resulting from the union of heterogeneous elements belonging to Christian, Maori and oriental mythologies. Keri Hulme, in her role of myth-maker, succeeds in harmonizing apparently contrasting elements, so that the rosary with no crucifix that Simon gives Kerewin as a gift is not incompatible with other religious symbols employed in the novel like the phoenix or the spiral. When Kerewin, in praying with the rosary, invokes Mary and turns her into a Maori sister, she is creating something new, bringing Catholicism and Maoritanga together: “The beads slide by her fingers. It’s along time since I prayed this way, she thinks[...]Say hello to the most gracious lady of them all, sister to tuakana sister, blessed among women, Hello Mary.”<sup>120</sup>

The combination of Christian and Maori elements, which takes place constantly in the novel, is anyway not only indicative of the historical process of assimilation, begun with the arrival of missionaries in New Zealand in the nineteenth century, but also above all of a subversive intent on behalf of the author: the rediscovery of Maori values is achieved in the novel through a process of revision, of “creolization,”<sup>121</sup> which subverts colonial discourse by undermining the hegemony of Pakeha society and values. The concept of creolization, which is borrowed from Edward Kamau Brathwaite, is significantly described by Huggan as “an interculturative process within which a series of intermediary postures are struck

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<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141

<sup>121</sup> Huggan, G., “Opting out of the (Critical) Common Market: Creolization and the Post-Colonial Text”, *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing*.

up that elude or actively work against the binary structures (white/black, master/slave) which inform colonial discourse.”<sup>122</sup> Inter-action between Pakeha and Maori culture contributes, on the other hand, to a process of metamorphosis, which emerges in the novel from the use of Maori alongside English. As “the combination of the two languages decenters the text”<sup>123</sup> so does the diverse cultural background that the two languages imply. Decentred in the novel is the colonial discourse, which is dismantled, like Kerewin’s tower, of its redundant layers and paraphernalia, and finally transformed into an interculturative process capable of fostering radical change, and of offering valuable alternatives. Keri Hulme’s idea of bi-culturalism<sup>124</sup> in New Zealand strives to conjugate two different realities, attempting a synthesis between the strictly individualistic dimension of Pakeha tradition and the strictly communal dimension of Maori tradition, in the effort to achieve a form of commensalism capable of comprehending both.<sup>125</sup> Simon During detects a discrepancy between the author’s attempt to establish a postcolonial identity on the basis of a union between Maori and Pakeha, and her use of postmodernist narrative techniques in the novel.<sup>126</sup> During’s idea of “a ‘pure’ Maori precolonial convention” is poignantly criticized by Margery Fee, who perceives Keri

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid*, p. 31

<sup>123</sup> Hamelin, Christine, “‘Fitted to his own web of music’: Art as renaming in *The Bone People*”, *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, no.10, 1993, p. 110

<sup>124</sup> Hulme, Keri, “Mauri: an introduction to bi-cultural poetry in New Zealand”, *Only connect: literary perspectives East and West*, eds., Guy Amirthanayagam and S.C. Harrex, Adelaide & Honolulu, Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English and East-West Center, 1981, pp. 290-310

<sup>125</sup> Smith, Shona, “Constructing the Author. An Interview with Keri Hulme”, p. 27: “One of the things that is causing a kind of havoc among those people who are trying to determine a future path for Maoridom is the fact that people are now taught to be individuals and to see themselves as apart, one way and another, from the community. Whereas, certainly in the old days and certainly among a lot of people still around, you cannot see yourself as apart from the rest of your whanau, your hapu. You cannot. You just do not make sense. Which is why[...]people like Pat Grace and Witi Ihimaera tend to work from a ‘we’ perspective. It is thoroughly Maori and thoroughly proper but to me it seems that can no longer work - if you could bring back the 1790s probably it’d be quite good.”

<sup>126</sup> During, Simon, “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism”, *Landfall* 34, 1985, pp. 373-74

Hulme “as a postcolonial writer who uses postmodernist techniques only to help her undermine the powerful discursive formations she is of necessity writing within.”<sup>127</sup>

The necessity to construct a national identity on the basis of a bi-culturalism, which is deeply rooted in the fabric of New Zealand society, as “Maori have been living within the Pakeha discursive formation for generations”<sup>128</sup> represents, in my opinion, the turning point of the argument. The metamorphosis of the tower into the spiral-shaped shell seems thus to be engendered by the tension present in the novel between the Pakeha “I” dimension and the Maori “we” dimension which Keri Hulme resolves in the idea of commensalism dominating the novel.

The structure that the tower evolves into, is thus circular and opening up to infinity spiralwise, in that it consists of rooms that expand around the tower. Its shell-shape is emblematic of the notion of subjectivity in relationship that it gives expression to, which combines apartness with togetherness, fragmentedness with wholeness, but also emblematic of the spiral’s movement, both centrifugal and centripetal, which connects microcosm with macrocosm. The shell in its spiral-like shape is both link to and trace of the cosmic, as the following words uttered by Kerewin at the conclusion of the novel reveal:

Sunflowers and sea-shells and logarithmic spirals (said Kerewin);  
 sweep of galaxies and the singing curve of the universe (said Kerewin);  
 the oscillating wave thrumming in the nothingness of every atom’s heart  
 (said Kerewin);  
 did you think I could build a square house?

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<sup>127</sup> Fee, Margery, “Why C.K. Stead Didn’t Like Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People*: Who Can Write as Other?”, *Australian & New Zealand Studies in Canada*, 1, 1989, p. 22

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22

So the round shell house holds them all in its spiralling embrace.<sup>129</sup>

The round shell house together with the old Maori hall in Moerangi and its marae replace the vertical axis tower-hole. The spiral unwinds, spreading around the ruins of the tower until its vertical structure is modified, altered, and regenerated in the form of a shell. Yet in order to let the spiral unwind, the tower must be necessarily decapitated. By beheading the tower the centre as unique point of convergence is successfully removed. Decentred and decapitated the tower spreads horizontally, turning the obsolete exclusiveness of the monad into the multi-voiced inclusiveness of the subjectivity in relationship, which informs in the novel the triple-forged nature of the central characters.

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<sup>129</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 424

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Keri Hulme, Blaise Pascal and the symbolism of the spiral**

### ***The Bone People's* cosmogony and the "Pascalian spiral"**

The notion of the fall in *The Bone People* hinges on the apparently odd combination of the natural with the supernatural, the finite with the infinite. In "Keri Hulme and Negative Capability" Mark Williams defines the relation between the natural and the supernatural in the novel as "confusing and lacking in clear demarcating signposts,"<sup>1</sup> adding furthermore that the supernatural element in *The Bone People* is not "consistently treated as fictive."<sup>2</sup> Depicted realistically, the Maori tradition of the supernatural present in the novel imposes itself on the reader without asking for permission nor claiming credibility, and refusing the metaphysical props often granted by symbols. Keri Hulme's intention is clear: she casts no spell, she is no charmer. Far from the histrionic gesture of the clairvoyant poet, who evokes the hidden and the mysterious by hints only, Keri Hulme, in dealing with the supernatural, makes everything plain, as if to prove to the reader that there is no literary trick beyond the journey of initiation the three central characters embark on.

The characters' journey of initiation represents a reality by itself, which transcends its own limits in a constant tension toward the beyond. The tension built up by the writer is resolved through the experience of the fall which coincides with the occurrence of the supernatural. After the fall anything can happen, as Alice's unending fall into the rabbit-hole in *Alice in Wonderland* demonstrates. Alice's

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Mark, "Keri Hulme and Negative Capability", *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1990, p. 87

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87

adventures are, nevertheless, not less real or less realistically described than they would have been, had not she fallen into the rabbit-hole. The narrative mode remains the same, unaltered, although a change from one plane of reality to another has taken place. Likewise, in *The Bone People* the narration unravels by itself, unhindered insofar as the natural and the supernatural are perceived to be part of a whole that cannot be divided. No line is drawn, no boundary is set, yet the rite of passage from the natural to the supernatural is marked by the experience of the fall, which highlights the passage from one dimension to the other. The author is in control, but she decides not to intrude. A suitable example of the treatment of the supernatural in the novel is given in the chapter of the fourth section entitled "The Woman At The Wellspring Of Death" where Kerewin, dying alone in her bach, is visited by a person of indeterminate nature. At first the person in question is just an offstage voice intruding upon Kerewin's thoughts until the heroine approaches that moment of recognition, prelude to the fall, when her dimmed vision becomes lucid all of a sudden, and the bodiless voice intruding upon her thoughts becomes a palpable presence with its definite form and features:

Of a sudden, crystal distilled clarity. A small dark person, all etched sharp.  
 She [Kerewin] blinks and it splinters.  
 'I can't see you any mind more' She murmurs it sleepily.  
 'You will.'  
 'I have just discovered,' says Kerewin. And fell.<sup>3</sup>

It is the occurrence of the fall which enables the transition from the natural to the supernatural to take place. That is at least the sense conferred by that "You will" pronounced by Kerewin's visitor as a promise of clarity and integrity of vision. The

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<sup>3</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 424

notion of the fall draws in this way a line of continuity between the natural and the supernatural, granting to the supernatural its right to be alongside the natural without the writer having to disclose or explain anything. After the fall has taken place the description of Kerewin's mysterious companion becomes as a consequence even more realistic as the following passage attests:

All fall down. But gone on up. A funny feeling. Light as a balloon, light as a cloud. She raises herself easily on an elbow, floating upright, and looks toward the fireplace, and there poking through the ashes, is a thin wiry person of indeterminate age.  
Of indeterminate sex. Of indeterminate race.  
Browned and lined, and swathed in layers of old blanket weathered and sundyed. Silver hair. Silver eyebrows. A massive burnscar for half a face, with mouth and eyebrows wreaked and twisted by pink keloid tissue.<sup>4</sup>

What the writer strives to foreground through her use of realism in the novel, which is applied indiscriminately to the natural and to the supernatural, is the experience of the characters' journey of inner exploration: "*The Bone People* is explicitly patterned by the quest motif; Kerewin works as a female hero who undertakes an archetypal quest journey which culminates with the return to society."<sup>5</sup> The theme of the journey as journey of initiation into the mysteries of self and nature, similarly present in the fiction of Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde and Janet Frame, is introduced by the writer from the start, as Kerewin's song in the first chapter of the novel seems to give evidence:

This ship that sets its sails forever  
rigid on my coin

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 424

<sup>5</sup> Ash, Susan, "Narrating a female subjectivity in the works of Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme.", Thesis, Ph.D., University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, 1990, p. 257

is named Endeavour.  
 She buys a drink to bar the dreams  
 of the long nights lying.  
 The world is never what it seems  
 and the sun is dying...<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the ironic innuendo at the country's colonial past (the ship Kerewin sings about is called Endeavour) Kerewin's song reveals, especially in the last verses, a few elements of the journey of initiation. The emphasis is put on the fallacy of all appearances ("The world is never what it seems"), and an implicit warning is given against the assumption which claims all the real as necessarily true. The dying of the sun seems to hint, on the other hand, at the urgency of the journey of initiation which the character must undertake in order to achieve a better understanding of her origins and her place in the universe without which she is doomed to despair: "She buys a drink to bar the dreams of the long nights lying." The dying of the sun can be also interpreted as a gradual loss of the centre, of an absolute point of reference, which characterizes the journey of exploration undertaken by the subject as a journey away from and back towards the centre, in the attempt to achieve a new self-identity based on multiple points of reference rather than on a single, self-sustaining unit.

Mark Williams objects to the author's choice of depicting both the natural and the supernatural realistically as if Keri Hulme broke, in so doing, a literary convention she was not meant to break:

In Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the realistic details encourage us to believe in the unbelievable for the space of the narrative. But we are not meant to grant the reality of phantoms and spirit ships except as symbols of some abstract metaphysical scheme. In *The Bone People* the

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<sup>6</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 11

supernatural is not consistently treated as fictive. The world of Maori spiritual presences, of gods and visits by the ghosts of ancient Maori people, into which Joe stumbles in Chapter 10 is depicted as real - not 'real' in the sense that the pub scenes and squalid domestic scenes are, but not merely fanciful either.<sup>7</sup>

The refusal to treat the natural and the supernatural as separate and distinct is indicative of the writer's willingness to cover with her novel as much ground as possible, and of the ontological ambition of her project. It is not just man's world the writer is interested in, but above all his/her relationship with the entire cosmos. The finite is perceived to be just a peripheral yet essential part of an infinite universe characterized by an intricate maze of correspondences, linking different worlds together. The finite and the infinite, the natural and the supernatural coexist and melt into each other continually. It is the co-existence and simultaneity of apparently opposed realities that fascinate the writer, and make her want to investigate them further. Natural and supernatural are part of a microcosmic continuum, which finds its counterpart in the sprawling infinity of the cosmos. There is a fluidity between microcosm and macrocosm in the novel, seldom achieved in fiction, which enables the writer to move swiftly from one dimension to the other without incurring major narrative pitfalls. The accent is put on that sense of infinity, permeating both microcosm and macrocosm, which determines the subject's decentralization and fall.

The uncanny infinity of the cosmos reverberates through Keri Hulme's collection of short stories, *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*, whose power of fascination is engendered by the writer's perception of the universe as unfathomable and

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, Mark, "Keri Hulme and Negative Capability", *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, p. 87

mysterious. Natural and supernatural as distinct categories are thus sacrificed on the altar of a disquieting conception of wholeness, which permeate, according to the writer, the entire cosmos. If the boundary between natural and supernatural is liable to instability, anything can happen, even evil. In his review of *Te Kaihau/The Windeater* Tim Armstrong highlights the writer's ability to convey the evil characterizing the representation of the uncanny inherent in nature, affirming that there are "few other writers of undoubted power whose work is so full of deformity, both in subject matter and in style."<sup>8</sup> In Keri Hulme's short story "Planetesimal", the uncanny infinity of the cosmos is symbolized by the blackness of the perfect oval cut as a tattoo into the arm of a girl whom the narrator meets at a party.<sup>9</sup> Hers is not a normal tattoo though, but something more ominous and terrible. The tattoo is a hole in the girl's arm, "the cancellation of her flesh," which opens up into the abyss of the cosmos. The girl's tattoo turns out to be the threshold of another world into which the girl eventually falls. Interconnected worlds play an important role in another short story by Keri Hulme, "One Whale, Singing," where the heroine too falls, in that liberating moment when she gets in touch with the whale she has established a form of mental communication with during the cruise, which collides with her boat.<sup>10</sup> The presence of the whale fosters a displacement of the androcentric discourse dominating the short story through the character of the woman's husband, who is a scientist. In Keri Hulme's short stories the leitmotiv is represented by the decentralization of the subject achieved through the displacement of the centre as absolute point of convergence, which is replaced by the creation of multiple points

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<sup>8</sup> Armstrong, Tim, "Sea People, Land People", *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 March, 1987, p. 245

<sup>9</sup> Hulme, Keri, "Planetesimal", *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1986, pp. 73-76

<sup>10</sup> Hulme, Keri, "One Whale, Singing", *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*, pp. 61-71

of reference, resulting from the continuous permutation between centre and periphery. In “Planetesimal” the subject of the narration, represented by the girl at the party, who perceives herself as the centre of her world and who is perceived by the reader as the centre of the narration, discovers through the singular nature of her tattoo the pointlessness of a centre as absolute point of reference in a cosmos that spirals off to infinity in all directions. Similarly human knowledge acting as the centre of the natural is replaced by the periphery of such knowledge which is represented by the supernatural. In “A Tally of the Souls of Sheep”<sup>11</sup> that permutation between centre and periphery is formally exemplified in the relation within the short story between textual body and marginal notes where the marginal notes unsurprisingly contain all the indications concerning the supernatural in the form of “phantom voices” featuring in the text.

The supernatural occurs in the concluding section of *The Bone People*. It is an event neither isolated nor unexpected; on the contrary, it has been carefully prepared by the previous three sections containing those undeniably “real” scenes (“the pub scenes” and the “squalid domestic scenes”) mentioned by Mark Williams, and prelude to the fall, which belong to the naturalistic. Critical of the treatment of the supernatural in the novel, Mark Williams, on the other hand, does not exempt himself from demonizing the natural element, which is deemed to be too powerful not to be evil:

Yet what is most troubling about the novel is not explicable in terms either of its commitment to Sufism, mandalas or magical oncology. Nor can it be explained in terms of the peculiarities of Hulme’s psychological makeup.

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<sup>11</sup> Hulme, Keri, “A Tally of the Souls of Sheep”, *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*, pp. 43-60

The source of that power is to be found in a vision of the human capacity for evil that is almost Manichaeian in its intensity and scope.<sup>12</sup>

“Horribly naturalistic”<sup>13</sup> details like those emerging from the description of Simon’s beatings are deemed to weigh down the novel and are held responsible at the same time for the novel’s disturbing power. Such a demonization is backed up by C. K. Stead, who detects “something black and negative” that he cannot explain away, which is “deeply ingrained in [the novel’s] imaginative fabric.”<sup>14</sup> Mark Williams’ and C. K. Stead’s demonization of the natural element in *The Bone People* does honour, however, to Keri Hulme’s capacity as a writer to convey the uncanny inherent in nature. Far from being idyllic, the representation of nature in *The Bone People* is often disquieting: the landscape seems to be haunted by man’s despair; at times the land becomes ghostly and the distant cry of birds is a bitter reminder of man’s misery:

The wind has dropped  
 It is growing very dark.  
 The shag line has gone back to Maukiekie, bird after bird beating  
 forward in the wavering skein.  
 The waves suck at the rocks and leave them reluctantly. We  
 will come back ssssoooo...they hiss from the dark.  
 Maukiekie lies there in the evening,  
 that rock of an island,  
 not much more than an acre and bare  
 except for a mean scrub of bushes and brown guano-eaten grass,  
 where the shag colony spreads its wings in the sunlight  
 and haggles over footspace at night;  
 Maukiekie at nightfall,  
 all black rock crusted with salt and birdlime  
 and sleeping life, and  
 nearest to land

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, Mark, “Keri Hulme and Negative Capability”, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, p. 107

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 90

<sup>14</sup> Stead, C. K., “Bookered”, *Answering to the Language. Essays on Modern Writers*, p. 183

the stone hawk, blind sentinel  
watching the cliffs.<sup>15</sup>

Kerewin's description of Maukiekie is exemplary of the indebtedness of the natural to the supernatural in the novel. Despite the seemingly naturalistic description, the island of Maukiekie appears in its desolation to be haunted by the supernatural. The island is described at nightfall when the shadow of darkness stretches over it, blotting out its daylight memories. The double reality of the island, which changes its features with the approach of darkness, seems thus to hint at the overlapping of natural and supernatural where the supernatural is identified with the realm of night and darkness. The "stone hawk" as "blind sentinel watching the cliffs" seems to add with its totemic presence a gothic touch to the description of the island, strengthening the relation between the natural and the supernatural. In order to achieve a better comprehension of the supernatural one must therefore turn to the natural element. A first glance cast at it reveals a tight link with the subject. Kerewin's identification with land and sea, which takes the form of an invocation, seems at least to suggest that: "O land, you're too deep in my heart and mind. O sea, you're the blood of me."<sup>16</sup> It is through nature that the subject acquires a knowledge of his/herself. By relating the place that he/she occupies in the universe to the surrounding space, the subject defines his/her identity. As Blaise Pascal points out in his *Pensées* the question to be asked by the subject is not who, but where he/she is:

En voyant l'aveuglement et la misère de l'homme, en regardant l'univers  
muet, et l'homme sans lumière, abandonné à lui-même, et comme égaré

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<sup>15</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 166

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 166

dans ce recoin de l'univers, sans savoir qui l'y a mis, ce qu'il y est venu faire, ce qu'il deviendra en mourant, incapable de toute connaissance, j'entre en effroi comme un homme qu'on aurait porté endormi dans une île déserte et effroyable, et qui s'éveillerait sans connaître où il est, et sans moyen d'en sortir.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of direction that Pascal's subject experiences when he/she wakes up in a desert island without knowing why is at the base of the "angoisse pascalienne,"<sup>18</sup> which is not, as Georges Poulet points out, a form of religious anguish, but rather a form of bewilderment in front of the immensity of the universe: "Car il s'agit ici moins d'une angoisse proprement religieuse, que d'un *égarement* au sens précis du terme, c'est-à-dire l'angoisse de l'être qui se voit perdu, impuissant à se donner des points de repère, sans prise sur aucune autre étendue que le cercle étroit de son île ou de son cachot."<sup>19</sup> The "angoisse pascalienne" can be only overcome by acquiring a universal knowledge capable of determining the place of the subject in the universe:

Seule une connaissance, une présence universelle peut suffire à nos besoins et à nos exigences. Pour connaître où je suis, nos besoins il me faut partir de l'endroit où je suis, m'étendre indéfiniment par la pensée dans les espaces, afin qu'ayant possédé ces espaces, je puisse enfin, revenant à moi, fort de ma connaissance universelle, déterminer avec assurance, par la proportion que j'ai avec l'univers, où je suis et ce que je suis.<sup>20</sup>

Georges Poulet's reading of the French philosopher focuses on what he defines as the Pascalian "déploiement vertigineux de pensée,"<sup>21</sup> which proceeds excentrically, away from its starting point, the subject, in order to reach out into

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<sup>17</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, ed., Michel le Guern, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 152

<sup>18</sup> Poulet, Georges, *Les métamorphoses du cercle*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1961, p. 51

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52

unknown regions, only to turn back to the starting point again once the circumference of things has been embraced. It is in the dialectical relationship between centre and periphery that the subject's place in the universe is determined. Georges Poulet detects in the Pascalian "déploiement verigineux de pensée" a double movement directed respectively away from the centre toward the periphery in the effort to acquire a "connaissance universelle," and back toward the centre, in order to equate that "connaissance universelle" with a "connaissance de soi":<sup>22</sup>

Deux mouvements opposés s'accomplissent au même moment: l'un, centrifuge, par lequel la périphérie de l'univers s'enfonce de plus en plus loin de l'être qui voit et qui pense, l'autre, centripète, par lequel tout espace circonscrit tend à se rapprocher du spectateur, à s'identifier dans son infinité avec le lieu qu'il occupe, à se réduire avec lui aux dimensions d'un simple point.<sup>23</sup>

Pascal's subject like Keri Hulme's becomes aware of his/her desperate condition as human being once he/she relates him/herself to the infinity of the cosmos, which spreads in all directions, and realizes him/herself to be a simple point within such infinity: "Car enfin qu'est ce qu'un homme dans la nature? Un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout."<sup>24</sup> The emphasis is put on the dialectics of space. Blaise Pascal's pronouncement that nature is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere<sup>25</sup> underlies the sense of spiralling infinity, which informs the representation of nature in *The Bone People*. Starting from a maxim of medieval and Renaissance

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 52-3: "Telle est la signification du déploiement pascalien. Son excentricité, son mouvement expansif n'est plus celui de la science impersonnelle. Il ne s'agit pas de connaître pour connaître, mais de connaître pour se connaître."

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>24</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, p. 155

<sup>25</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, p. 154: "C'est une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part."

thought celebrating God's perfection and fullness (*Deus est spaera cujus centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam*), the French philosopher transforms it into a concept of relativism, characterizing a world devoid of any organizing pattern. Suspended over the infinite vastity of the cosmos the subject finds out the abyss that separates him/her from the universe:

Nous brûlons du désir de trouver une assiette ferme, et une dernière base constante pour y édifier une tour qui s'élève à <l'>infini, mais tout notre fondement craque et la terre s'ouvre jusqu'aux abîmes.<sup>26</sup>

Reminiscent of that great tower, symbol of permanence and daring, Pascal's tower reflects back to Kerewin's tower. In *The Bone People* Kerewin builds a six-floored tower for herself in the strenuous effort to create a refuge against the world capable of protecting her artistic talent and of providing, at the same time, the right environment for its blossoming. Yet the gaping void, which opens up menacingly under her feet, seems to suggest a further ontological meaning to the building of the tower, and to its final collapse, which is reminiscent of Pascal:

It was the hermitage, her glimmering retreat. No people invited, for what could they know of the secrets that crept and chilled and chuckled in the marrow of her bones? No need of people, because she was self-fulfilling, delighted with the pre-eminence of her art, and the future of her knowing hands.

But the pinnacle became an abyss, and the driving joy ended.<sup>27</sup>

The void disclosed by the abyss reveals the complete decentring of the subject, which is replaced by multifarious points of view. In *The Bone People* the

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158

<sup>27</sup> Hume, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 7

decentralization of the subject is exemplified by the anomalous trinity represented by Kerewin, Simon and Joe. Moving toward the centre represents thus an attempt to reconstruct the subject not as a monad, but rather as a “roseau pensant”<sup>28</sup> where the subject’s thoughts expand simultaneously concentrically and excentrically into the unknown, drawing what Donald Kuspit describes as the “Pascalian spiral.”<sup>29</sup> Pascal’s idea of nature as an infinite sphere spreading spiralwise in all directions and based on the infinite permutations of centre and periphery is in many respects similar to Keri Hulme’s. In both Blaise Pascal and Keri Hulme what predominates is the same sense of infinity which informs every single particle of the cosmos. There is a vastness implied in such a perspective that is almost unbearable, and which characterizes the representation of nature in the novel.

Dark and ambiguous, the representation of nature in *The Bone People* is one of the most intriguing features of the novel insofar as it marks a startling complicity with the subject, partly determining the experience of the fall, and the shifting of distances within the narration. Only by falling can the subject aspire to a universal knowledge, embracing the uncanny infinity of the cosmos, which enables the subject to acquire a notion of his/her own identity. If the sketchy prologue of the novel opens up with the Maori/Christian creation myth evoking darkness as the enveloping nothingness out of which the world will emerge, that darkness never dissolves completely, but keeps hovering over the representation of nature in the novel as if to remind the reader not to sever the finite from the infinite nor the natural from the supernatural. The uncanny in such a representation lies in the

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<sup>28</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, p. 161: “L’homme n’est qu’un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c’est un roseau pensant.”

<sup>29</sup> Kuspit, Donald, “The Pascalian Spiral: Robert Smithson’s Drunken Boat”, p. 85

merging of apparently different dimensions that need to cross their paths for their game of presence and absence to become effective, and in so doing efface the boundary that keeps them apart without removing it. By leaving darkness hovering over the narrative space, blurring the boundary between the finite and the infinite, the natural and the supernatural, the writer seems to respond to a mythopoeic desire of hers, aimed at granting a utopian dimension to the novel through the use of myth.

Mark Williams compares the use of myth in Keri Hulme with the use of the fantastic in Robin Hyde as they both betray the same commitment to what he defines, quoting from the introduction to the 1986 New Women's Press edition of Robin Hyde's *Nor The Years Condemn*, as a "Utopian politics."<sup>30</sup> Robin Hyde's "Utopian politics"<sup>31</sup> is palpable in novels like *Nor The Years Condemn* and *Check to Your King* where the author's dream of a resolution of the conflict between Pakeha and Maori within New Zealand society is foregrounded. By portraying the fantastic as real and by writing about things not as they are but as they ought to be,<sup>32</sup> Robin Hyde confers on her writing a utopian quality, and so does Keri Hulme when she revises old myths or when she creates new myths out of old ones in the attempt to bridge the gap between Pakeha and Maori culture. Mark Williams considers Keri Hulme's use of myth in the novel as "a means of erasing the corrupt ways of seeing and responding to the spiritual realities of the past that are inseparable from Pakeha

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, Mark, "Keri Hulme and Negative Capability", *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, p. 104: "Like that of Robin Hyde, whose *Nor The Years Condemn* (1938) has similarly been accused of 'varying unpredictably between the pedestrian and the fantastic', Hulme's realism is harnessed to a 'utopian politics'.

<sup>31</sup> Bunkle, Phillida, Hardy, Linda, Matthews, Jacqueline, "Commentary" in *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 268: "For Robin Hyde, the central problem of colonial society was racial, sexual, and economic conflict in a society whose very foundations were the expropriation and exploitation of land. But although the realist parts of her writing recognise conflict, her work strives to go beyond realism towards a vision of reconciliation, to a statement of what this society might be. This is the location of the utopian politics of *Nor The Years Condemn*, Hyde's aspirations for her society."

<sup>32</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 107

consciousness,” and thus aimed at fostering a national regeneration exclusively “reshaped in Maori terms.”<sup>33</sup> His interpretation of Hulme’s myth-making method proves to be nevertheless rather one-sided, as he does not take into consideration the novel’s cross-cultural interaction, proposed in terms of content by Hulme’s idea of commensalism and achieved in terms of form through the writer’s “creolized”<sup>34</sup> use of myth. The rediscovery of Maori values in the novel is thus interpreted as an attempt to establish a new hegemonic racial order, dominated by the Maori element, and replacing the colonial ideal of a Pakeha England-oriented New Zealand with the postcolonial ideal of a Maori spiritualized Aotearoa:

New Zealand in *The Bone People* signifies an idealised essence by reference to which the actual New Zealand is a continual disappointment. Thus *The Bone People* oddly recaptures the sense we find in colonial writing of ‘home’ as a distant ideal by substituting the buried spiritual presence of Maori New Zealand for the lost Pakeha one of England.<sup>35</sup>

According to Mark Williams’ interpretation Keri Hulme manages, in so doing, to “assert a centre,” consisting of Maori spirituality only, which is set “against the centrifugal tendencies of history.”<sup>36</sup> A closer look at Keri Hulme’s use of myth reveals on the contrary the absence of a single centre as regenerating core of the myth-making process. Instead of asserting a centre the writer systematically removes it in accordance with the spiralling movement informing the structure of the novel. It is on the dialectical relationship between centre and periphery inspired by the

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<sup>33</sup> Williams, Mark, “Keri Hulme and Negative Capability”, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, p. 104

<sup>34</sup> Huggan, Graham, “Opting out of the (Critical) Common Market: Creolization and the Post-Colonial Text”, *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing*, p. 31

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 105

<sup>36</sup> Williams, Mark, “Keri Hulme and Negative Capability”, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, p. 105

spiral that the myth-making process is moulded. By removing the centre as hegemonic point of convergence, the static structure of myth is deconstructed and made susceptible of change. Mark Williams's assumption that Maoriness as "spiritualised," "reformulated," and "purged" essence of a new national identity constitutes the centre on which the narration of the novel is riveted, is denied by the absence in *The Bone People* of a concept of pure Maoriness. As Anna Smith points out such a concept is not present in Keri Hulme's novel:

Undoubtedly a spiritual renaissance inspired by Maori culture is the agent of reconciliation within the narrative; even so, the spiral-shaped marae is more the product of an eclectic catholicism than a call to return to an unspoiled past. Hulme dispenses Maori images and artefacts with the creative eye of an artist. She selects and arranges in order to dramatise the neglected resources of a potentially rich and mysterious culture, but she is equally drawn to the regenerative powers of all mythologies.<sup>37</sup>

Old Maori myths are revised in the novel, creating new myths which result from the eclectic melding of disparate sources, including Maoritanga, Christianity, Sufic mysticism and Japanese aikido. Spirituality in the novel is not exclusively Maori; on the contrary, it is enriched by the introduction of apparently irreconcilable elements until a synthesis is achieved, so that the three central characters who constitute the holy family of Christian tradition with Kerewin as the virgin, Joe or Joseph as the virgin's husband and Simon Peter as Jesus Christ also represent the first Maori family with Simon as Rehua, the son of Rangi and Papa, embodied by Joe and Kerewin respectively.

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, Anna, "Keri Hulme & 'Love's Wounded Beings'", *Opening The Book. Essays on New Zealand Writing*, p. 158

In *The Bone People* Keri Hulme opens that “locked treasure chest”<sup>38</sup> of legends and stories belonging to Polynesian mythology which Robin Hyde feared might get lost together with “Maori’s tremendous mine of cultural and human knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> Robin Hyde’s concern for Maori heritage must not however be confused with an act of mere appropriation. On the contrary it is part of a wider problematic concerning the identity of the New Zealand writer and the colonial tradition within which he/she writes. The writer’s acknowledgement of the richness of Maori culture is aimed at undoing the colonial/imperialist myth that New Zealand history began with the arrival of white settlers bringing culture and civilization to the heathen:

Individuals came ‘to a country’ which while certainly not flowing with milk and honey, was still quick with the sap of Polynesian mythology and poesy, so vitally a part of pre-Europeanized Maori life that it is unjust to dismiss it as a crude primitive culture.<sup>40</sup>

Against the arrogance of a Pakeha society deaf to its Maori counterpart Robin Hyde does not spare the arrows of her poignant irony: “It is important [...] to know that about the time when England was starving John Keats like a dying rat, Maoris were maintaining poets and poetesses (there is a considerable amount of sex equality), as rare tribal possessions[...].”<sup>41</sup> If on the one hand Robin Hyde is aware of the importance and relevance of Maori culture to her as a New Zealander and as a writer, she knows on the other hand that those Maori legends and myths cannot be

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<sup>38</sup> Hyde, Robin, “The Singers of Loneliness”, *T’ien Hsia Monthly*, August, 1938, in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 347

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 348

<sup>40</sup> Hyde, Robin, “The Singers of Loneliness”, *T’ien Hsia Monthly*, August 1938, in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 347

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 349

included in her cultural background by a sheer act of will, but represent rather a future challenge for New Zealand writers:

New Zealand is not a country of flat colours and facts. It is, in everything, subtle and complicated, and the knowing of it a craft as well as an art. It is not easily put on paper. One cannot make a poem or a story 'New Zealand' by sticking a spray of kowhai in the corner like the brand on the side of frozen mutton. But if the revelation is very difficult, it is also certain and individual and by its slowness you may measure its probable depth. There will be books written about this country which the world will turn aside to read. But they won't be flat surface compilations of the cheerful and the commonplace of life. I venture to make this prophecy. The best New Zealand literary work written within the next fifty years, will bear the stamp of oddity.<sup>42</sup>

Janet Frame expresses herself, in *A State of Siege* published in 1966, on the futility of creating a literature or even a national identity out of a "spray of kowhai," and again in her last novel *The Carpathians* which appeared in 1988 Janet Frame is critical of the use made by Pakeha of Maori myths and legends in that she considers it a mere act of appropriation, or worse, a subtle form of neo-colonialism, concealing commercial greed and exploitation:

So one by one the items of national character became the center of the rumor and of the new probe to get at the treasure. Putting kowhai, puarangi, manuka, rata, tarapunga on postage stamps and biscuit tins (the first stage was insertion in poetry), selling Maori carvings, faked or genuine, in Lower Queen Street where the overseas ships berth - all helped, or was thought to help.<sup>43</sup>

Both Robin Hyde's and Janet Frame's attitudes point to the difficulty often encountered by writers of providing a truthful representation of New Zealand

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<sup>42</sup> Hyde, Robin, "New Zealand Writers at Home", in Gloria Rawlison's "Cloud of Witness", *The Wooden Horse*, Vol.1, No. 4, p. 28

<sup>43</sup> Frame, Janet, *A State of Siege*, p. 124

society devoid of the prejudices of the colonial past and of the disillusioned nostalgia of the postcolonial era. From this perspective Keri Hulme's rediscovery of Maori values in *The Bone People* is an act of defiance and rebellion toward the presumed unrepresentability of the conflict, which accounts for the utopian quality characterizing her novel. The utopian dimension Keri Hulme confers on her novel is not directed toward a nostalgic resurrection of Maori values belonging to a long-deceased pre-colonial past but to the regeneration of a national identity based on the interaction between Pakeha and Maori within New Zealand society. The rediscovery of Maori values acquires a utopian dimension as long as these values can be readapted to the present, and reworked into new myths. Keri Hulme's myth-making is radical and innovative as it affects the way imagination shapes reality rather than the way reality is recreated, which explains why the author treats the supernatural as natural and vice versa. By making natural and supernatural interchangeable the writer grants to her imagination the freedom it needs in order to conceive reality as fluidly part of an infinite cosmos.

The perspective suggested by the writer to her reader does not dwell exclusively on one plane of reality but expands *ad infinitum* until it becomes cosmic, embracing both microcosm and macrocosm. What emerges through the representation of the natural and the supernatural, the finite and the infinite as a whole, is the novel's cosmogony, that is, the attempt on behalf of the author to go back to the myth of origins, the creation myth, as myth of myths, to that primeval darkness where ending and beginning, centre and periphery, the prehistoric and the archetypal, coincide and drift apart, engendering a vertiginous movement that sets nature's infinite sphere spinning off spiralwise. In this sense Keri Hulme's use of myth is similar to Janet Frame's. By representing the merging of micro- and

macrocosm in her writing, Keri Hulme re-evokes that primeval darkness of the beginning from which a re-naming word<sup>44</sup> emerges, creating new myths or revising old ones. The myth of origins the writer goes back to foreshadows thus the writing process which constantly aims at recreating the world by rewriting it anew. In the first chapter of the autobiographical *To the Is-Land* Janet Frame significantly writes:

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 its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth.<sup>45</sup>

It is in the writing process that both Janet Frame and Keri Hulme shape the cosmos of their literary creation, going at the same time back toward the past and ahead toward that "Third Place" where the alchemy between reality and imagination gives rise to a utopian narrative space. It is in such a utopian space that the first chords of myth are struck. Keri Hulme's hint at the creation myth in the prologue of the novel is thus suggestive of the author's willingness to portray the process of writing as an ontological device capable of going beyond the essence of things, back to their beginning, to a time beyond time, and ahead toward that place where ending and beginning coincide and drift apart, which is the place of artistic creation, of myth.

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<sup>44</sup> On the importance of unnamings and renamings in *The Bone People* see Christine Hamelin's "'Fitted to his web of music': Art as renaming in *the bone people*", *Australian & New Zealand Studies in Canada*, no.10, 1993, pp. 106-20

<sup>45</sup> Frame, Janet, *To the Is-Land*, London, Paladin, 1987, p. 9

## The broken ring and the spiral

Keri Hulme's perception of the uncanny infinity of the cosmos permeates the creative flux underlying her process of writing as myth-making. What the writer is interested in is not the tale as chain of verisimilar events, but the process that leads to the creation of the fictive form that the writer ultimately confers on the chain of events making up her plot. Her concern with form voices a general concern with the process of writing, and with the writer's ability to give full expression to all the infinite possibilities entailed in such a process. In this sense the attempt to achieve a representation of the uncanny infinity of the cosmos through writing belies another attempt on behalf of the writer, that is, her attempt to come to a saturation of all the contrasting aspects and hidden potentials inherent in writing.

The writer's aim is to render as it is the immensity of the cosmos on the page without having to de-construct it in order to make it fit in with the rules of narrative representation. Keri Hulme is aware that she cannot simply throw her net of words over the cosmos in order to give a truthful representation of it, but must evoke it through a "rite of propitiation." She does that in two different ways, that is, through the use of the supernatural combined with the use of incantatory language and cyclic rhythm. The use of the supernatural is evident - to give an example - in the writer's short story "Planetesimal" where the supernatural is epitomized in the mysterious tattoo of a girl at a party. By underlining that the girl's tattoo is not just a picture drawn on her skin but it is a hole, "the cancellation of her flesh,"<sup>46</sup> which opens up mysteriously into the universe, the writer's intent is to provide a tangible proof of

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<sup>46</sup> Hulme, Keri, *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*, p. 74

the uncanny infinity of the cosmos. The hole in the girl's arm is no symbol. It is merely accidental, and for this reason more uncanny than it would have been, had its nature been exclusively symbolic. The narrative structure of the short story is endowed with cyclic rhythm: the story begins with the meeting of the narrator and the tattooed girl at a party, and it ends with the narrator contemplating his tattoo, contracted as an infectious disease only by having touched the girl's arm. The narrative formula "I once knew a girl who -" placed at the head of each paragraph, and reiterated throughout the short story, confirms furthermore the writer's intent to emphasize the circular progression of the narration.

A similar use of the supernatural and of cyclic narrative rhythm is made by the writer in *The Bone People* where the linear progression of the narration is replaced by circular motion. The supernatural is used in such a way that it is not to be considered symbolic but realistic, accidental. It is a rare event which, like the tattoo on the girl's arm in "Planetesimal," leaves a tangible mark on the fabric of reality once it occurs. Despite the realistic description it is given, the supernatural is surrounded by a halo of mystery which is rendered by the cyclic rhythm of the narration. *The Bone People's* narrative structure is circular insofar as it consists of four sections of three chapters each, which are preceded by a prologue and concluded by an epilogue where the prologue, suggestively entitled "The End At The Beginning," already anticipates the end. By making ending and beginning interchangeable the writer draws a perfect ring which is nevertheless continually broken, until a spiralling movement is engendered insofar as the writing process is perceived as an open structure turned simultaneously back toward the past and

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ahead toward the future. Keri Hulme points that out in an interview where she comments on the circular structure of the novel and on its pervasive circle imagery:

I had this kind of image in mind - everything comes back almost in a full circle except it's gone slightly outside of it. A circle is wholeness but it's sterile wholeness, it's final. You can't do anything with it until you actually break it apart. Which is why I love spirals - they can just keep on going and going forever.<sup>47</sup>

It is thus to the image of the broken ring that Keri Hulme confides the secret of her writing. By disrupting linear time the writer succeeds in creating that suspended narrative space where no boundaries between reality and imagination can possibly exist, so that the narrative space becomes the springboard for all that is hardly possible or believable: the utopian. Such a narrative space, which is considered by Janet Frame as the reservoir of the manifold, becomes the laboratory of the artist as myth-maker where the creative flux is thus moulded so as to attempt innovative artistic combinations. Myth is for Janet Frame and Keri Hulme no archetype in that they do not conceive it as absolute and static. On the contrary they use it as a prototype employed to reimagine reality rather than to recreate it. The writers' use of myth is radical and extensive in that it implies a subversive act of rewriting of tradition. Old myths are revised and reformulated both in *The Bone People* where the writer draws indiscriminately upon various mythologies, and in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* where old myths are reinterpreted with a touch of irony. Allusions to the myths of Ulysses, Sisyphus and Icarus are made in the novel only to emphasize the impossibility of such an analogy. The analogy drawn between

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<sup>47</sup> Smith, Shona, "Constructing the Author. An Interview with Keri Hulme", *Untold 2*, 1984-1986, pp. 32-33

Edward's return home after eleven years of absence and Ulysses' return to Ithaca cannot but be hilarious in that Edward is no hero despite the efforts of his imagination:

I know that after years of wandering and warring and loving, the Greek sailors were recognized by their families immediately they came ashore. For Penelope there was never any swineherd who suddenly cast off a disguise and cried, I am Ulysses; there was only Ulysses; only and always. Ulysses?

Edward traced his hand over his bald head and winced as he touched a raw spot, a tiny pimple. He squeezed it. It spurted niggardly white offering between his thumb and forefinger. He sighed.<sup>48</sup>

Mythic material is also provided to the writer by "the events of living" which are fictionalized through the writing process and thus blended into the flexible structure of myth: "It is the events of living that are not easily recognized as legends and part of myths that are the test of the value of lifelong tenacy in Mirror City; and it is the discovery of the new legends and myths that keeps building, renewing the city."<sup>49</sup> Janet Frame's writing process like Keri Hulme's is circular. Yet the perfect ring drawn by writing at the base of the classic structure of myth as archetype is discarded in favour of that broken ring mentioned by Keri Hulme which confers to their writing its utopic, subversive character. Describing her writing, Janet Frame defines it as a process moving away from its original shape, the circle, which is continually broken apart and reformed, conveying that spiralling movement Keri Hulme refers to when speaking about the process of writing:

The process of the writing may be set down as simply as laying a main trunk railway line from Then to Now, with branch excursions into the

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<sup>48</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, pp. 109-10

<sup>49</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, London, Flamingo, 1993, p. 183

outlying wilderness, but the real shape, the first shape is always a circle formed only to be broken and reformed again and again.<sup>50</sup>

The narrative structure of *Scented Gardens for the Blind* confirms the image of the broken ring in that the narration proceeds cyclically, drawing a perfect ring, which is subsequently broken. The narration unwinds itself in a circle starting from Vera Glace's inner monologue and ending with Vera Glace's silence in the psychiatric asylum. The perfect ring drawn by the writer is nevertheless broken apart in the novel by Vera's first words uttered after thirty years of silence. Hers is the language of the swamp, a pre-historic language with no apparent meaning, but also the language of the future, which represents both man's incapacity to communicate, and man's ultimate promise of regeneration, in that it contains the seeds of a new language devoid of power structure and violence.

Both Janet Frame and Keri Hulme confide thus to the symbolism of the broken ring their idea of writing. It is no wonder then, that it is a ring, a "different kind of a ring," that is given by Janet Frame to her fellow writer, Keri Hulme, as a gift, to celebrate their meeting in Wellington as a rare event of silent complicity:

She gave me the ring, a spontaneous across-the-table gift.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Frame, Janet, *An Angel at My Table*, London, Flamingo, 1993, pp. 143-4

<sup>51</sup> Hulme Keri, "Out of Frame", in *The Inward Sun. Celebrating the Life and Work of Janet Frame*, Elizabeth Alley, ed., Wellington, Daphne Brasell Association Press, 1994, p. 198

## **CHAPTER VI**

**Notes on the creative power of Katherine Mansfield,**

**Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme**

***Scented Gardens for the Blind and The Bone People: a case of anomalous trinity***

It is the image of a hazel tree and its “three tiny hazelnuts” that in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* introduce the notion of an anomalous trinity which is represented by Vera, Erlene and Edward, the three central characters of the novel:

We have only a hazel tree which leans over the creek, having suffered the attacks of people who could not decide whether to leave it growing, since it bore little fruit, or to kill it in revenge for its barrenness. Its limbs are chipped and chopped; one is dead; on one branch there are three tiny hazelnuts snug in their green skin; shake shake hazel tree gold and silver over me.<sup>1</sup>

Far from the overpowering magnificence of Katherine Mansfield’s pear tree, tall and slender and in full blossom, Janet Frame’s hazel tree delivers in its desolation and barrenness a sense of impotence toward a reality which is perceived by the individual as violent and suffocating. Maimed by the “attacks of people” who punished it for its barrenness, the hazel tree hints sideways at the human condition of isolation and estrangement, and in particular at the condition of edged-off women like Vera Glace, an internee of a psychiatric hospital, single and unrelated, who “bore little fruit,” insofar as she refused to fit in, to play the role of mother, daughter and wife that society assigned her. Referred to by Doctor Clapper as “the little old woman,”<sup>2</sup> refusing to speak she is considered as a useless old thing living the life of the dead. Similarly, the hazel tree is described as half dead, yet preserving on one

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<sup>1</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, pp. 12-3

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 250

branch, as a token of life, three hazelnuts “snug in their green skin.” Huddled together on one branch yet separated from each other by their encapsulating green skin, which seems furthermore to insulate them from the surrounding space, an impression strengthened by the use of “snug” as if to emphasize a yearning for isolation and self-sufficiency, they render the idea of separate togetherness and of fragmented wholeness which characterizes the notion of anomalous trinity featuring in Janet Frame’s novel. The three hazelnuts represent, on the other hand, Vera’s imaginative power. It is no coincidence that in Vera’s description of the hazel tree she reverts to the magic language of the fairy-tale (“shake shake hazel tree gold and silver over me”) as the ultimate refuge offered to the protagonist against reality’s destructive power.<sup>3</sup> Vera Glace, who lives in total isolation, unable to communicate as a result of her muteness, is endowed with a vivid imagination, which she uses to create a new identity for herself. She imagines herself as Vera Glace, mother of a mute child, Erlene, and as Edward’s wife. What the unaware reader is tricked into from the very beginning is the imagination of an old woman, living in a psychiatric hospital, as the truth about the illusory nature of the three characters is revealed to the reader only in the last chapter of the novel. Vera, Erlene and Edward are thus represented as definite and distinct characters employed by the author to back up her metafictional trick, and they are at the same time discordant voices within Vera’s self, suggestive of that concept of subjectivity in relationship which is a common feature in the fiction of both Janet Frame and Keri Hulme. Various hints at their ambiguous nature are dropped throughout the novel and passed unheeded. Ambiguity is kept up

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13: “I need a fable to fall like a gentle cloak from the sky, to protect my daughter and myself with the cloth spread over familiar names and situations, however terrible - the cutting out of tongues, metamorphoses, the removal of limbs, of the head turned smiling in the direction of the clock running like bright water.”

by the author in a subtle game of concealments and revelations. A maze of doublings, mirrorings and projections confuses and recomposes the notion of the subject's identity which evolves in multifarious forms, caught up in an endless process of both (de)- and (re)-construction. Vera's friend, Poppy, like Dossy<sup>4</sup> in the homonymous short story by Janet Frame, is one of Vera's numerous wilful projections:

When I was a child, in this very town, I had a little friend on stalks, and she was called Poppy; she was velvet, and we walked together to school every day, and put our hands through the hedges and fences, cadging flowers, a red and pink and yellow stained assortment juicy and warm in our hands. And whenever Poppy and I met, we talked and talked, because we were friends. But if by chance in our walking (we always walked in step), we got out of step or we separated with Poppy going one side of the lamppost and I, Vera, going the other, the curse of silence was put upon us.<sup>5</sup>

Like Poppy and Vera, the three central characters of the novel seem to have got out of step so that "the curse of silence" is thrust upon them. They do not interact with each other nor is there any passage in the novel where they confront themselves either verbally or physically. "Snug in their green skin" they keep themselves apart, unwinding their tale for fifteen chapters in a chain of inner monologues until the sixteenth and last chapter deprives them of their objective existence.

The same triangular structure is at the base of the characterization of Kerewin, Simon and Joe in *The Bone People*. Keri Hulme delivers the notion of the anomalous trinity present in the novel through a game of correspondences and interconnections. In both novels one deals with a woman, a mute child and a man whose features constantly merge and confuse themselves. In Keri Hulme's novel the

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<sup>4</sup> Frame, Janet, "Dossy", *The Lagoon and Other Stories*, p. 49

<sup>5</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 9

three characters apparently maintain their status of verisimilar characters throughout the narration. Unlike the characters in Robin Hyde's *Wednesday's Children* or in Janet Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind* they are not explicitly turned into the figments of the heroine's imagination, yet their complementarity and interdependence are indicative of their fragmented nature, so that to be whole they have to be together. Simon's words in this sense are very suggestive: "But we have to be together. If we are not, we are nothing. We are broken. We are nothing"<sup>6</sup> Fragments yet whole, "they only make sense together,"<sup>7</sup> as the author underlines in the novel's prologue where she emphasizes the importance of their togetherness. Separated, they are overcome by fears of destruction as Joe's attitude to mirrors attests. He is afraid of looking in mirrors because of what he might see in them: "I had this nightmare eh. One day I'd look into a mirror and somebody else would be looking back out of my face."<sup>8</sup> Joe's fear of seeing either otherness or nothingness ("I used to get afraid that I'd look up into the mirror and see nothing there")<sup>9</sup> in the mirror puts the accent on his lack of a definite identity, which marks the common state of isolation the three characters are trapped into at the beginning of the novel, and from which they move away in the course of the narration.

The threesome nature of the characters' subjectivity is perfectly synthesized by the kaumatua in the fourth section of the novel. Before setting out, travelling in search of that person he has been awaiting for years, who will take over his role of guardian of the mauri, the kaumatua already knows that the person in question

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<sup>6</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 395

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 395

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 275

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 275

cannot be taken singularly. He foresees meeting someone who is not conceivable, as weird as it might seem, as one and single, but must be addressed with the plural form. Thus talking to himself he exclaims: ““This person, they may smoke.””<sup>10</sup> It is the narrator, however, that at the conclusion of the novel, makes use of the word “trinity” to define the triple-forged nature of her characters: “And then it was three again, the trinity regained in a microcosmic way.”<sup>11</sup>

The physical characterization of Kerewin, Simon and Joe strengthens further the impression of reciprocity the author has endowed them with. Psychologically speaking the three of them are trapped in a condition of isolation and despair (Kerewin is an artist *manqué*, Joe is a marginalised Maori, Simon is an autistic child), which they strive to overcome by aspiring toward a new definition of their self, inclusive rather than exclusive, and open to the multifarious variations inherent in human nature. Their search for a new self-definition reflects back to their search for a sexual identity going beyond the socially established categories of female/male, homosexual/lesbian. Kerewin, though female, perceives herself as a neuter,<sup>12</sup> and is more inclined to male gender-associated tasks like hunting, building and fighting than Joe. He is bisexual, and is described at times as effeminate. Simon, on the other hand, is often mistaken for a girl.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 338

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 436

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 266: “I spent a considerable amount of time when I was, o, adolescent, wondering why I was different, whether there were other people like me. Why, when everybody was fascinated by their developing sexual nature, I couldn’t give a damn. I’ve never been attracted to men. Or women. Or anything else. It’s difficult to explain, and nobody has ever believed it when I tried to explain, but while I have an apparently normal female body, I don’t have any sexual urge or appetite. I think I am a neuter.”

<sup>13</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 244

The point of cohesion of the anomalous trinity is nevertheless represented both in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* and in *The Bone People* by a woman, single, childless and undesired. Kerewin and Vera share the same destiny of cast-off heroines in search of a new identity, capable of giving full expression to their protean nature regardless of society's preconceptions. It is interesting to note that the only way for Vera and Kerewin to acquire a new self-identity is through Erlene and Simon respectively, as they embody that part of them that refuses to compromise. The children's silence must be interpreted thus as a sign of revolt. Both Simon and Erlene have willed themselves to silence, as they do not deem words to be able to convey any meaning nor to get to the essence of things because, as Simon points out in the novel, "names aren't much. The things are."<sup>14</sup> Failing to convey meaning, words menacingly hint, according to Erlene, at the void and lack of sense of human existence: "She was not going to speak to anyone. She could not speak if she wanted to, because everytime she opened her mouth to say something, her voice, in hiding, reminded her there was nothing to say, and no words to say it."<sup>15</sup> The children's loss of speech is a form of dissent which threatens to break the brittle existence of Vera and Kerewin as, in their refusal to conform, a radical critique of society is implied. It is not a coincidence that Simon and Erlene are perceived by Kerewin and Vera as a threat to their lives. In *Scented Gardens for the Blind* this threat is made explicit from the beginning and is reiterated obsessively throughout the narration. What Vera dreads most of all are the incriminating words that her daughter might utter once she recovers her power of speech: "[...] yet if I knew that her first words were

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126

<sup>15</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 31

to be judgement upon me I would kill her, I would kill her, I would go now to the little room where she sits alone in the dark, and kill her, and she would not be able to cry for help.”<sup>16</sup> What Kerewin dreads most of all is Simon’s intimacy, his body language, which is the direct result of his muteness. A great repulsion overcomes Kerewin everytime the child, in his desperate effort to communicate, spreads his fingers and unexpectedly touches her:

Something touches her thigh.  
She spins round, viciously quick, her palms rigid and ready as knives.  
The urchin has sprouted by her side, asking questions with all its fingers.  
‘Sweet apriocks and vilest excreta...boy, don’t do that again.’  
It was like watching a snail, she thinks coldly. One moment, all its horns are out and it’s positively sailing along its silken slime path, and the next moment...ooops, retreat into the shell.  
The urchin has snatched its hands behind its back and is standing fearful and still.  
‘Ahh hell,’ says Kerewin, her actor’s voice full of friendship, ‘it is just that I get easily surprised by unexpected contacts eh.’<sup>17</sup>

In the attempt to grasp what the child tries to say, Kerewin lends him her voice: “I’m used to talking to myself, but talking for someone else?”<sup>18</sup> She translates his gestures in sentences, interprets them, despairing from time to time of getting to their intended meaning. Simon is filtered throughout the novel by Kerewin’s mind so that a kind of continuous osmosis is established between her thoughts and his.

In relation to Kerewin Simon acts as a mirror.<sup>19</sup> Distance is the key to their relationship. Keri Hulme’s characters like Janet Frame’s must be considered

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<sup>16</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 9

<sup>17</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 27

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Anna, “Keri Hulme & ‘Love’s Wounded Beings’”, *Opening The Book. Essays on New Zealand Writing*, pp. 148-9: “Clearly, the relationship between these two characters is a complicated one. The woman resists the child’s approaches but needs him all the same, because Simon’s maimed life reflects back to Kerewin her lack of wholeness. Through the image of the pierced sandal Hulme

spatially rather than temporally insofar as they are fragments of a whole that need to differentiate themselves through distance in order to exist. The shifting distance between them determines the way the three characters relate to each other. When Kerewin meets Simon for the first time the distance between them is at a maximum. As the absence of minimum distance between them would have made them coincide, the presence of maximum distance suggests all the same a form of coincidence engendered by diversity, which highlights their mutual belonging, their complementarity. By playing with distance Keri Hulme creates Simon as Kerewin's doubling. The moment of Simon's "genesis" is achieved through a dexterous shift of distance from Kerewin's standing point to Simon's. Kerewin is by the window looking out at the sea when she realizes there is something amiss, a "wrongness somewhere." Two elements stand out in this description: the window and the water whirlpool below, the latter exerting an hypnotic influence over the subject. It is from such details that one can infer that Kerewin's moment of suspension has come. Katherine Mansfield describes that moment as the moment when the character is flung out of life and held before the precipice. The vertigo perception is rendered in Hulme's description through the "gathering boil of the surf." It is a brief moment, at the end of which Kerewin becomes aware, like one of Katherine Mansfield's heroines, that something has happened. Something is amiss. Kerewin is uneasy. She stares at her feet to make sure there is nothing wrong with them:

She stands over by the window, hands fistplanted on her hips, and watches the gathering boil of the surf below. She has a curious feeling as she stands

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undoubtedly introduces someone who challenges Kerewin's autonomy, but at the same time she is able to use his deficiencies to talk about herself. It is unlikely that if Simon has been less needy, he would have inspired her to love him. Kerewin needs someone who is broken, malicious, locked into himself and unpredictable, because she too is all of these things."

there, as though something is out of place, a wrongness somewhere, an uneasiness, an overwatching. She stares morosely at her feet (longer second toes still longer, you think they might one day grows less, you bloody werewolf you?) and the joyous relief that the morning's hunting gave, ebbs away.<sup>20</sup>

The "curious feeling" Kerewin has standing by the window slowly gives away to a more sombre sensation, ("the joyful relief that the morning's hunting gave ebbs away") which is about to break through. The ingenious way the writer renders the slow movement that from Kerewin's standing point leads to the child's is indicative of a further intent on behalf of the author. Kerewin's awareness of Simon is at first an inner perception which is only afterwards projected outward. The "curious feeling" experienced at first by Kerewin standing by the window is transformed into a perception directed inwardly by one isolated statement, where the writer specifies that Kerewin's acknowledgement of Simon is not due to a sudden movement of the child ("it wasn't a movement that made her look up"), seemingly implying an awareness on Kerewin's part which springs out of a perception of wholeness. It is as if Simon were not other than Kerewin, but intrinsically part of her:

'Bleak grey mood to match the bleak grey weather', and she hunches over to the nearest bookshelf. 'Stow the book on cooking fish. Gimme something escapist, Narnia or Gormenghast or Middle Earth or,' it wasn't a movement that made her look up.

There is a gap between two tiers of bookshelves. Her chest of pounamu rests inbetween them, and above it, there is a slit window.

In the window, standing stiff and straight like some weird saint in a stained gold window, is a child. A thin shockheaded person in haloed hair, shrouded in the dying sunlight.

The eyes are invisible. It is silent, immobile.

Kerewin stares, shocked and gawping and speechless.

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<sup>20</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 16

was intolerable. She turned over to the wall [...]”<sup>36</sup> Later in the story Linda lies in a rocking-chair whilst Stanley and Beryl play crib near one of the open windows of the drawing room: “‘You don’t want the light - do you, Linda?’ said Beryl. She moved the tall lamp so that she sat under its soft light.”<sup>37</sup> Left in the dark Linda looks at the two playing crib not far from her, and finds them remote. This description with its strong contrast of light and darkness echoes another description which occurred earlier: Linda lies in a cane chair suffering from an intense headache, her feet on a hassock and a plaid over her knees. She is the picture of an invalid. The children are warned by their grandmother to be quiet so as not to disturb their mother, whilst Stanley and Beryl sit at the table in the middle of the room eating a dish of fried chops and drinking tea. The voice of the narrator remarks: “Outside the pool of light and firelight the room stretched dark and bare to the hollow windows.”<sup>38</sup> The adjectives used to characterize the room (“dark,” “bare” and “hollow”) could be easily applied to Linda’s description in contrast with that more sanguine one of Stanley and Beryl, always busy eating and playing crib, enjoying in other words the less sombre pleasures of life, and thus always grouped together, placed apart, though sharing the same room with her. Moreover, she is identified with moths, silence and moonlight. She represents the realm of darkness, the realm of the night: “Two big moths flew in through the window and round and round the circle of lamplight. ‘Fly away before it is too late. Fly out again.’ Round

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of the Strang family, three of each article of furniture including three double beds with three balding men and three pairs of spectacles mirror-like rimless) lying on the table beside the bed?”

<sup>36</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, “Prelude”, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 27

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19

and round they flew; they seemed to bring the silence and the moonlight in with them on their silent wings..."<sup>39</sup>

Even stronger than Linda Burnell's objection to light is Vera Glace's in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*:

I am oppressed by the gloom of light, by the attempt to copy its gloom in neon, sodium, putting a ring round the world in a way which the smudged sputtering thumbprint of candle or kerosene flame could never manage, grasped in the trembling hand of people standing strange in one place, in one house, with the beggars pleading outside and the dogs barking. The world is plunged too suddenly into light. Now no crime escapes detection - see how people's thoughts are deprived of shadow, how the insignificant and remarkable stand in equal brilliance under the sodium light, without the shame of a puny telltale shadow or the triumph of a world-blotting shade which cancels the very shape which it claims to serve, to lay a path for, cool shade beneath immense thought. Shade and silence.<sup>40</sup>

Recurrent in Janet Frame's fiction is the theme of "the gloom of light" which plays a crucial role in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, *A State of Siege* and *The Edge of the Alphabet*, and it is still present in much later fiction. Light clogs the arteries of free, independent thought by depriving it of its own shadow. Light embodies the credo of a society eager to colonize, to subjugate in the name of progress and evolution. Light is synonymous with reason, with the torturing tools of the Inquisition: "The sun is all love and murder, judgment, the perpetual raid of conscience, paratrooping light which opens like a snow blossom in the downward drift of death. Wherever I turn - the golden cymbals of judgment, the summoning of the torturers, the inquisitors of light."<sup>41</sup> Shadow on the other hand is identified with the solace of silence which represents the open field of the mind where the seeds of thought are

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>40</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 48

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25

allowed to ripen. As in Katherine Mansfield's "Prelude" silence is connected with shade and darkness, light on the contrary with the bustle of life. To the gay voices of Stanley and Beryl, Katherine Mansfield opposes Linda's loquacious silence, and her train of thoughts, as Janet Frame in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* opposes to "the tattered bargain-price words, the great red-flagged sale of trivialities"<sup>42</sup> of the world, Erlene's silver silence. Darkness, moonlight, shade and silence also predominate in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* as the titles of some of the chapters of the novel ("Season of the Day Moon," "Leaps in the Dark," "Nightfall," "Moonwater Picking") seem to suggest.

The blinding, suffocating, and dazzling power of light blocking thoughts, striking them dumb, is emphasised by Robin Hyde as is evident in this description of Eliza Hannay's state of mind in *The Godwits Fly*: "She felt as though the sunlight had drugged her beyond answering. It hung in long dazzling ropes, pliant snakes dazzling from the trees, dropping their gold liquid heads into the grass, forking their golden tongues."<sup>43</sup> If light is objected to, so is thought, and the strategies of logos, employed by society to impose its own order. Reason is abjured, and with it that sort of Western thought which coincides with "the proud sense of sight" where to see is synonymous with understanding:

Trees do not merely grow about us, they grow into us and through us, shadowing and scattering with winged seeds the whole land of our consciousness. Roads are not merely set before our eyes, land-roads and sea-roads, but the Romans of Britain, the padding barefoot runners of the New Zealand bush, the coracles and the canoes in turn, made roads with patience over us. And that is why people are wrong when they say that the

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<sup>42</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 12: "But what is the use of speech? On and on, saying nothing, the tattered bargain-price words, the great red-flagged sale of trivialities, the shutdown sellout of the mind?"

<sup>43</sup> Hyde, Robin, *The Godwits Fly*, p. 160

eyes are the windows of a soul. The eyes of a man who has stopped trying to think, just for one moment, are the windows of the world's soul.<sup>44</sup>

To stop trying to think means for Robin Hyde to turn from the dominating sense of sight to other senses whose far-reaching voice is ignored, it is left unheard.

In *Wednesday's Children* Wednesday's child, Attica, closes her eyes and reverts to her other eager senses: "Attica had learned, in her vague way, that we trust one sense far too much, the proud sense of sight, whose explanations are all to reason, where touch, taste and smell often speak in muted voices to deeper faculties."<sup>45</sup> Similarly Vera Glace reflects on the ambiguous nature of sight, and seems to agree with Attica that "we trust the proud sense of sight far too much":

But perhaps I am mistaken, perhaps our sight is not the perfect host, it is merely the owner of the house trying to make the best of entertaining this furious gate-crasher, light, which, denied the shelter and sustenance of being seen, will persist at the doors of other senses, queuing at the house of touch and hearing and smell and the unnamed senses which absorbs the world, as some creatures absorb food, through the skin and through the invisible sponges of the mind which suck in the experience of time and are sought each night by the beachcombing dreams which also pick up the paua shells, the lamp shells, the snail houses.<sup>46</sup>

Vera Glace's choice of depriving herself of the sense of sight is thus an act of protest, a denial of light, of reason, granting her an escape from a dehumanizing society. Madness is reckoned to be the only proof of sanity left to human beings. This partly explains why Vera Glace flees from light, and why light is perceived as a haunting animal furiously trying to get in whatever evades its touch: "Light must get

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<sup>44</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, pp. 65-66

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95

<sup>46</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 16

in, at all costs. Light will commit murder to get in. It is no use boarding up the house with blindness. One can pour darkness over the house until a thick layer sets, impenetrable as death, a concrete refusal, numbness, isolation; yet inside one meets light in every room, sitting by the fire, at home."<sup>47</sup>

In *A State of Siege* light is similarly characterized as a "furious gate-crasher," and the gates it tries desperately to break through, are those of Manfred's "dream-room" placed "two inches behind the eyes" which is the realm of the protagonist's "New View." Manfred, a retired school drawing teacher, goes to live on an island off the North Island of New Zealand, in order to dedicate herself to her painting. Aware of the limits of the old view ruling painting, based on a strict sense of proportion, she searches for "the burning wholeness of shape": "I want only to forget the years of rigid shading, obsessional outlining and representation of objects; I want in this, still my preliminary dream, to explore beyond the object, beyond its shadow, to the ring of fire, the corona at its circumference."<sup>48</sup> The locus of this exploration is the "dream-room two inches behind the eye" where light, harbinger of reason, accomplice of patriarchy, is significantly banned:

I notice that though I can see, as it were out in the world in daylight, the room, in fact, is without light, is sealed from light, and that faint sound I hear as of a moaning wind that rises and dies away and seems to probe with its fingers against the walls and door of the dream-room, is Light, trying to get in. 'Only let me in,' Light is saying. "Let our armies in, that we might each stand guard over our chosen shape; only let me in that I may bring the armies of shadow to guard the shapes of your dreaming."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p 16

<sup>48</sup> Frame, Janet, *A State of Siege*, p. 239

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 183

Manfred's journey of exploration resembles Janet Frame's own journey of exploration in the realm of words. It accounts for the writer's attempt to go "beyond the object" "to the ring of fire" in an effort to reach the object's essence. Manfred's "dream-room" from which light is banned, is the "*camera obscura*" of artistic creation where similarly the light of reason is not let in as artistic creation is not compatible with it nor is it willing to slide under its yoke. Art, the writer seems to say, is intrinsically subversive.

Only in the semi-darkness of Linda Burnell's bedroom can Katherine Mansfield let her character trace a poppy on the wall-paper, and let it burst alive under the amazed eyes of the reader. Only in the semi-darkness of dawn can she evoke the sound of the sea so vividly and the wet breath of the earth awakening. It is at dawn that Keri Hulme ends her novel where ending and beginning coincide and are woven together into a new beginning. As Robin Hyde suggests in *Wednesday's Children* "that is how most of the good books and good poems succeed in getting written": "something flashes, like the light-shutter in your camera, and anyone who happens to be standing by at the moment can see it perfectly clear, without its veils."<sup>50</sup> In the "*camera obscura*" of artistic creation the essence of being comes alive, nourished by darkness and silence, and writing unwinds itself as if incredulous in front of its own magic.

### **Time and the invisible traveller**

"Is There anybody there?" said the Traveller,

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<sup>50</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 107

Knocking on the moonlit door.

Walter De la Mare, "The Listeners"<sup>51</sup>

Under the influence of Walter De la Mare, whose poetry, permeated with silence, darkness and a sense of the supernatural, Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme admired, the writing of those four writers becomes a journey of exploration in "the smallest gap in the simplicity" which occurs when "somewhere, at some time, the domestic, everyday, conventional armor wears thin."<sup>52</sup> Where the armour wears thin, there the invisible traveller comes knocking, and time is disrupted by the occurrence of death, which is perceived as the insurmountable gap in the diachronic order. In *The Edge of the Alphabet* Janet Frame writes about time:

Time is the trick, to cast you in moments of intensity from the conveyer belt to the whirlpool below. You are wet with spray from the discarded moments that nobody desires because they are your own (to each his own time) and you stare up at the people in their little boxes or cradles or coffins jerking rhythmically along clackety-clack, being attended and processed, wrapped and delivered by Time. And priced. The cost is too high. And there are rainbows in the air, where the water falls.<sup>53</sup>

Time as a sequence of diachronically ordered segments with a beginning and an end is the trick played upon human beings, and similarly played by the writer upon his/her fiction in order to incorporate death as metafictional element in his/her writing insofar as the notion of death cannot be separated by the notion of artistic representation. To incorporate death as metafictional element means to make the literary text aware of its own devices (time is one of them), whose use enables the

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<sup>51</sup> De la Mare, Walter, "The Listeners", *The Complete Poems of Walter De La Mare*, London, Faber and Faber, 1969, p. 126

<sup>52</sup> Frame, Janet, *A State of Siege*, p. 243

<sup>53</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, p. 76

illusion of the work of fiction to take place. Time thus becomes the tool in the hands of the writer as it emerges in Janet Frame's overt use of it in her writing:

I was blind. I am blind. A quick pinch of a word and time is adjusted, and we believe its adjustment, thinking, We have put time in its place, its pen, cell, hutch of tense, and all that remains now is to feed it, to fatten it, kill it for the feast.<sup>54</sup>

In Katherine Mansfield's "The Wind Blows" the shift in the temporal sequence, that "quick pinch" given by the writer to adjust time, symbolized by the image of the children gazing at the image of their grown-up selves, introduces the long shadow of death in the form of the wing stretching over the tumbling water where death is the reflection of the text upon itself, upon the fleeting nature of artistic representation which is ultimately the representation of a representation, the replica of a replica, the still life of a still life. Yet what the writer allows him/herself is that backward look, that smile of recognition at the end which often in life deserts people when their moment comes, or in Robin Hyde's words: "Yet I don't know that I can bear it if the dance is done. If there were a smile, a backward look, a last sequin of gold light from the empty ballroom, it would be different."<sup>55</sup> Death as metafictional element is also present in *The Bone People*. It is through the image of Kerewin's "paper soul" thrown into the fire that Keri Hulme gives a metafictional representation of death. Kerewin's diary included in the narration of the novel as an example of fiction within fiction, "a paper replica of what is real," is thrown into the fire, once her journey of initiation has come to an end, to celebrate and exorcize at the same time that Death that she has been able to face successfully:

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<sup>54</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 23

I follow the Chinese: on the funeral pyre of our dead selves, I place a paper replica of what is real. Ghost, follow the other ghosts - haere, haere, haere ki te po! Go easy to the Great Lady of the Night, and if we ever meet in the dimension where dreams are real, I shall embrace you and we shall laugh, at last.<sup>56</sup>

Death, the invisible traveller, is thus present in the writing of Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme in its double nature as metafictional and fictive element as well. In "The Garden Party" as in "The Canary" death appears in the dead body of the carter and that of the dead bird; in *Scented Gardens for the Blind* it appears in the dead body of Vera's grandfather, in Uncle Blackbeetle, in the figures of "the soldiers passing in twos and threes,"<sup>57</sup> in the devastating effects of the atom bomb, in the swooping hawks speckling people's mind with death, as it is present in the words of Wednesday to Mr Bellister in Robin Hyde's *Wednesday's Children*:

Do you know, when sometimes I walk in the crowds, and have watched them to take off their hats as the hearse passes by, I have realised why they respect and fear death so greatly. It's because death is the most contagious plague in the world...and we've all got it, we've all got it, if the body were all. Why, the very acidity with which we quarrel over trifles, the enormous stress we put upon morals and gains and impossible, childish rules of conduct, too ludicrous to look at, are only a sort of red herring drawn hopelessly across the tail of that great mortal enemy that's hunting all us down. People can't live shut in boxes, shut in their limitations, watching in one another's eyes the progress of their ageing and mortality, because they know no escape from fate, and must therefore make petty punishments and rewards exasperating or titillating enough to distract their attention from the final thing.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hyde, Robin, *A Home In This World*, p. 24

<sup>56</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 437

<sup>57</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 83

<sup>58</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 200

Death as a plague sparing no one, dominating the life and choices of the living is equally present in Janet Frame's fiction in the form of an eternal return of the dead: "The dead return, they mingle, their smell is layered over the living and the present. Do people passing in the street recognize the smell that hangs like a cloud like a shroud, or do only the little dogs know it, jerking and running around corners to catch the tantalizing bitch-smell of death that stings them to life, to uncomplicated slot-machine love where the face is faceless."<sup>59</sup> Fiction becomes thus the journey of exploration in the "undiscovered country" "from whose bourn", to say it in Hamlet's words, "No traveller returns."<sup>60</sup> As basis and precondition of human existence it moulds its features upon the features of the living. That something sad in life, that is there "deep down, deep down, part of one, like one's breathing" which the protagonist of Katherine Mansfield's story, "The Canary" perceives behind the little singing of her canary,<sup>61</sup> is unravelled in Janet Frame's *The Edge of the Alphabet*, taking the form of that sense of despair which haunts the living, "captives of the captive dead":<sup>62</sup>

Each night, I say, the dead creep between my sheets. They share my hot-water bottle with its velvet cover, and my handkerchief tucked beneath the pillow; during the night they glance with cunning at my alarm clock on the chair by the bed. What a crude face man has given to Time! What a strained white face of a worried constipated being! And the hook there, see, at the top, for hanging.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, p. 17

<sup>60</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare, Harold Jenkins, ed., London, Methuen, 1982, Act. III, Sc. I, 79-80, p. 279

<sup>61</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, "The Canary", *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 422

<sup>62</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, p. 302

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 302

The overlapping of death into life and life into death as metafictional element, which is used by the four writers, enables them furthermore to create a spiralling movement within the narrative text, where death is the vanishing point, the point of departure and arrival. Time is the hook, the menacing reminder of that end which is, in fiction, continually procrastinated. The hook used for hanging obliquely hints at the notion of the fall. Death is, in the last instance, the vertigo life thrillingly verges towards. The hook as the nail in "The Canary" ("You see that big nail to the right of the front door? I can scarcely look at it now and yet I could not bear to take it out...I sometimes hear the next people saying, 'There must have been a cage hanging from there.'")<sup>64</sup> is for hanging a cage where human beings like "those yellow birds which are kept apart from their kind"<sup>65</sup> live in captivity, crying like Sterne's starling in Robin Hyde's description of the human condition: "I can't get out, I can't get out."<sup>66</sup>

But like the yellow birds have we not our pleasures? We look long in mirrors. We have tiny ladders to climb up and down, little wheels to set our feet and our heart racing nowhere; toys to play with. Should we not be happy?<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, "The Canary", *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 418

<sup>65</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, p. 302

<sup>66</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 199

<sup>67</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Edge of the Alphabet*, p. 303

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **Creating an Is-Land of otherness: four New Zealand writers at work**

## An Is-Land of Their Own: writing as utopia in Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme

That year I discovered the word *Island*, which in spite of all teaching I insisted on calling Is-Land [...] In the end, reluctantly, I had to accept the ruling, although within myself I still thought of it as the Is-Land.

Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land*<sup>1</sup>

I never take anyone to my island. It lies off the map [...] It's sanctuary.

Robin Hyde, *Wednesday's Children*<sup>2</sup>

The island referred to by Janet Frame in *To the Is-Land* and by Robin Hyde in *Wednesday's Children* is both an undeniable geographical reality, a public space, and its very opposite. A-geographical ("It lies off the map") and private ("It's sanctuary") it rises to the ranks of myth in assuming, not just a private meaning, ("within myself I still thought of it as the Is-Land") but a private spelling: the Is-Land is where past and future meet - drawing a perfect ring - and in meeting cease to exist, a noon-ridden place, to put it in Nietzschean terms, where old Cronos is a coin out of currency. And yet this Island/Is-Land anchored at the edge of the imagination, and lapped by the waters of Lethe, is present in the writing of both Janet Frame and Robin Hyde in its physical reality, in the sensuousness of its aquamarine existence, a strip of land between sea and sky, "forever fluid in image,"<sup>3</sup> and thus it is evoked

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<sup>1</sup> Frame, Janet, *To the Is-Land*, p. 41

<sup>2</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 130

<sup>3</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 66

bearing the mark of its physical nature, and hinting, at the same time, at something beyond, something that transcends it altogether. Dyadic, partly mythical, partly real, the Island/Is-Land is a haunting image in what has been defined by Lawrence Jones in *Barbed Wires And Mirrors*<sup>4</sup> as the impressionistic tradition of New Zealand writing to which Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme among others are deemed to belong.

To understand the implications of the image Island/Is-Land we must firstly question such terms as “real” and “mythical” in relation to the writers’ vision and secondly apply them to it anew. In such a process the normally accepted canons of reality and fiction are reformed, producing a kind of writing which, from Katherine Mansfield onwards, has distinguished itself from the writing of the dominant New Zealand realist tradition by what one could define as a sort of utopian quality, the need to thrust writing ahead in a journey of self discovery and initiation capable of questioning the representation of reality and the self, suggesting at the same time, by hints only, the existence of a different, half-hidden path to follow.

I will thus question canonical terms such as “real,” “mythical,” “utopian” in relation to the writing of Robin Hyde and Janet Frame, pointing in this confrontation at Katherine Mansfield as a reference source or Aristotelian middle term, as she acts as a sort of literary humus for her fellow New Zealand writers. An example of it is certainly Keri Hulme’s unawareness of having started one section of *The Bone People* “very early morning” which is the beginning of “At the Bay” by Katherine

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Lawrence, *Barbed Wires And Mirrors*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 1987

Mansfield as Shona Smith remarked to the writer's surprise in an interview with her.<sup>5</sup>

My starting point will be the image of the Island-Is-Land permeating New Zealand fiction, in particular fiction by women writers in opposition to the more recurrent island metaphor of novels like, for instance, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In other words the Island/Is-Land is not a wilfully contrived scenario where the tenets of Western civilization are put on trial. The Island-Is-Land is not an Eden with a heart of darkness, but that place both real and mythical where the process of creative writing is continually cast into shape and let loose in a double movement of emergence and submergence, as if the Island/Is-Land were at the same time written word emerging from the silence of the blank page and island emerging from the sea. In the osmosis between written word and blank page, between land and sea, the borders between reality and imagination are pushed back, leaving to the writer something like an in-between space to inhabit, where writing becomes a way of exploring, of challenging barriers, and in so doing creating new possibilities of thought. This in-between space I have called utopia and I have identified it, because of its subversive quality, with that third term within the dualistic image of the Island/Is-Land which, I think, characterizes the writing of Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme.

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, Shona, "Constructing the Author. An Interview with Keri Hulme", *Untold 2*, 1984-1986, p. 34

## An is-land of their own

In 1917 Katherine Mansfield wrote of “the little island” where she was born: “I always remember feeling that this little island has dipped back into the dark blue sea during the night only to rise again at gleam of day, all hung with bright spangles and glittering drops.”<sup>6</sup> These words echo the beginning of “At the Bay” where the features of land and sea are not distinct, but lie still entangled, as if the island partook of two different worlds: the former overt and the latter submerged. It is the very mixture of these two worlds which hints at another symbiotic and at the same time dyadic relationship, that between reality and imagination, characterizing the process of creative writing. It is here that the written word like the island in Mansfield’s text is engaged in a similar maze of emergencies/submergencies from/in the white space of the blank page. In suggesting such a correspondence Mansfield succeeds in engendering a language which dwells at the border between these two worlds, a language between the sensuous and the metaphysical enabling the writer to breathe life into her writing and stain it with grass:

Ah-Aah! sounded the sleepy sea. And from the bush there came the sound of little streams flowing, quickly, lightly, slipping between the smooth stones, gushing into ferny basins and out again; and there was the splashing of big drops on large leaves, and something else - what was it? - a faint stirring and shaking, the snapping of a twig and then such silence that it seemed someone was listening.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> O’Sullivan, Vincent and Scott, Margaret, eds., *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Volume I, 1903-1917, p. 205

<sup>7</sup> Mansfield, Katherine, “At the Bay”, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 205

Similarly in *A State of Siege* Janet Frame's writing seems to entwine itself with the voice of the Island/Is-Land in its ethereal and yet deeply earthly nature:

Hush-hush-hush, the grass and the wind and the fir and the sea are saying:  
hush-hush the graves of the sailors, of the soldiers home from the war, of  
the baronets, of the little birds, of farmers, of sheep, of shadow: hush-sh-sh,  
the bagpipes on the shore, the ocean's roar...<sup>8</sup>

And further, in *Wednesday's Children* the voice of the sea surrounding Wednesday's island is skilfully conjured up by Robin Hyde as if it were music: "Wednesday dipped her oars into the hidden water, feathered them and heard the drops slide back to the sea in a measured chime, like a simple scale played on a beautiful instrument of music."<sup>9</sup> Likewise in Jane Campion's film *The Piano* the music played by the heroine, Ada McGrath, is one with the foamy waves of the sea and the ferny kauri forests of the inland. Hauntingly the music wells up and gives voice to the inner world of the heroine; hauntingly as if retracing the perfect perimeter of the island, the music comes back to entwine its melody with the features of the island itself in one of the most evocative images of the film when the piano, abandoned on the solitary beach, seems to suggest an uncanny complicity between art, nature and the human desire for self knowledge. Conjured up out of the sea, one with the voice of water, air and earth, the island is the miracle captivating the sailor's ear with its melody as in *The Tempest* which, more than any other play by Shakespeare, abounds with songs, and where music is of great importance.<sup>10</sup> Echoing Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, and in particular Caliban's speech to

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<sup>8</sup> Frame, Janet, *A State of Siege*, p. 228

<sup>9</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 44

<sup>10</sup> Kermode, Frank, ed., "The Music of *The Tempest*", *The Tempest*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Methuen, 1954, p. 156

Stephano, Keri Hulme makes the kaumatua say in *The Bone People*: "All the land is filled with mysteries and this place fairly sings with them."<sup>11</sup>

The choice of these passages has been dictated by the intention to question the representation of reality offered by such descriptions as they are not solely subjective nor they do respond to a purely mimetic approach. The little island Katherine Mansfield wrote about, and it is significant that she called it "a little island," is not New Zealand, although it stands for it; the little island where she was born that dips back into the dark blue sea only to rise again at gleam of day has almost nothing to do with reality, nor does it seem to stand for anything but fiction. What emerges is an internalized image rescued from the depths of silence and given over from the amniotic liquid of language that is silence to the written world. In the metaphor of the emergence and submergence of the island Katherine Mansfield outlines the moment of artistic creation. Beyond the image of Mansfield's little island beckons the very process of writing in which similarly the black sign of the written word emerges from the recondite abodes of silence, where silence is nonetheless not lack of but language itself,<sup>12</sup> (it would be noise otherwise), a language inwardly constructed that will be eventually organized into thought, emotion, image, remembrance. If it is true as Mikhail Bakhtin affirms that the authentic essence of the text takes place on the border between two consciousnesses, two subjects,<sup>13</sup> it cannot be wrong to assume that the artistic text is created by the dialogue between the language of the sayable, the written text, and that of the

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<sup>11</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 368

<sup>12</sup> Sontag, Susan, "The Aesthetics of Silence", *Styles of Radical Will*, New York, Anchor Books, 1991, pp. 3-34

<sup>13</sup> Holquist, Michael, ed., "Discourse in the Novel", *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, pp. 259-422

unsayable, the blank page whose inter-play reveals another text beyond the given one: a text where suppressed thoughts, memories and free associations chisel that hypostatization of the thinking process, that is writing, and shape it into something “rich and strange,” a multi-faceted creation. Such a concealed text enables the inwardly spun voice of the artist, which urges a need to be brought to the surface, to articulate itself. H.(ilda) D. (oolittle) suggests in *Tribute to Freud*<sup>14</sup> that such an urgency can be interpreted either as a desire to emit signs, prophecies or as an extension of the artist’s mind projected from within. Similarly in Frame’s passage and in Robin Hyde’s, what reaches us in their description is a voice, a glittering vision stranded on the blank page like a sea anemone or an octopus. And yet what enables this vision to impose itself is its fully sensuous response to the reader’s ways of perception of the phenomenological world, and its thorough evocative appeal: “the hush-hush of the sea and the fir trees” as well as “the measured chime of the drops,” in Janet Frame and Robin Hyde respectively, are evoked on the page as the synthesis between reality and imagination that bears the very mark of fiction, and tell at the same time the story of their own genesis. They give voice to the writer’s urge to articulate his/her vision into a web of words as if outside writing, in a society that has lost its oral tradition, there was no possibility of existence or survival.

When Katherine Mansfield writes that “reality cannot become the ideal, the dream” and that “art is not an attempt of the artist to reconcile existence with his vision” but “it’s an attempt to create his own world in this world,”<sup>15</sup> she is defining

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<sup>14</sup> D.(oolittle), H.(ilda), *Tribute To Freud*, New York, Pantheon, 1956

<sup>15</sup> Middleton, Murry J., *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 273

reality neither in terms of verisimilitude nor in terms of transcendence but in terms of fiction. Writing construes reality and articulates it, or in other words what gives birth to reality in the first place is the creative process, not the other way round. In the attempt to create his/her own world in this world, the artist neutralizes the binary opposition reality/imagination insofar as there is no reality to be depicted outside his/her creative power. Such an attempt occurs in Janet Frame's writing as she herself relates in the first volume of her autobiography:

I have often wondered in which world I might have lived my "real" life had not the world of literature been given to me [...] It was my insistence on bringing this world home, rather than vanishing within it, that increased my desire to write, for how else could I anchor that world within this everyday world where I hadn't the slightest doubt that it belonged?<sup>16</sup>

Once again it is through writing that the artist manages to find his/her place in the world, not between the mere opposition of that to this world. Robin Hyde was conscious of it when she wrote in *A Home In This World*:

I know now what I am looking for. It is a home in this world. I don't mean four walls and a roof on top [...] I want a sort of natural order and containment, a centre of equipoise, an idea - not a cell into which one can retreat, but a place from which one can advance.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of a *locus*, both physical and metaphysical, embodied in the image Island/Is-Land, is of paramount importance to the writing of these New Zealand writers. It is there that the process of creative writing is eventually sparked off, a place of landing as well as "a place from which one can advance." That same idea of arriving at and moving from is suggested in the title of the first volume of Janet

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<sup>16</sup> Frame, Janet, *To the Is-Land*, p. 148

<sup>17</sup> Hyde, Robin, *A Home In This World*, p. 10

Frame's autobiography, *To the Is-Land*, where moving towards the Is-Land refers to the very process of creative writing as myth-making, and the writer as myth-maker. In such a process reality and imagination draw from each other and reshape themselves *ad infinitum*, creating circles continually broken and reformed. It is interesting to note that even Keri Hulme considers the perfect circle that has to be continually broken and reformed as the evolving image at the base of her writing. In the process of the writing linear time is replaced by cyclic time, an image of the circle that reminds us once again of that image of islands depicted by Janet Frame in *The Envoy from Mirror City*:

Small are islands, a tyranny of completeness,  
a fear of meeting too many selves in mirrors.<sup>18</sup>

By dint of disrupting linear time and informing her writing with cyclic rhythm, Janet Frame creates a suspended narrative space in which no secure boundaries between reality and imagination can be possibly set, and no absolute truth can emerge. In so doing a myriad of truths like an archipelago of small islands swarm in the writer's text, giving birth to a surprisingly abundant number of selves, each embodying a part, a splinter of that same truth. The Island/Is-Land, as the ideal place where the process of writing takes form, can be identified with that very narrative space, the blank page, where the alchemy between reality and imagination occurs, engendering "the real" in the form of a threatening proliferation of selves which is the very product of fiction. Bearing this in mind it will not be difficult to understand why Janet Frame, commenting on her works, has been affirming with

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<sup>18</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 66

tenacious insistence that she has never been writing of “herself” even when writing her autobiography:

My only qualification for continuing this autobiography is that although I have used, invented, mixed, remodelled, changed, added, subtracted from all experiences I have never written directly of my own life and feelings. Undoubtedly I have mixed myself with other characters who themselves are a product of known and unknown, real and imagined; I have created “selves”; but I have never written of “me.”<sup>19</sup>

The term “real” can be therefore defined as a result of the alchemy between reality and imagination, whereas the term “mythical” is to be related to the very process of creative writing which we have described, borrowing from Janet Frame, as moving toward the Is-Land.

In *Wednesday's Children* Robin Hyde makes a similar hybrid usage of such terms. Thus unsurprisingly the novel has been deemed to be characterized by the opposition reality/imagination, an opinion strengthened by Gloria Rawlinson's assumption that such opposition is strongly present throughout Robin Hyde's narrative.<sup>20</sup> According to this interpretation Wednesday and her children represent the world of dream and imagination opposed to the male dominated world of reality represented by Wednesday's straightfaced family, and Mr Bellister (he is an Englishman) invites critics to read the novel as a parody of colonialism. Feminist critics on the other hand are more than happy to recruit Wednesday as the emancipated heroine victimized by a patriarchal society epitomized by Mr Bellister, and add her name in so doing to the long list of heroines in fiction that end up

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<sup>19</sup> Frame, Janet, *The Envoy from Mirror City*, p. 154

<sup>20</sup> Rawlinson, Gloria, “Robin Hyde and *The Godwits Fly*”, *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, pp. 40-59

committing suicide at the conclusion of their novels. Yet all this sounds somewhat unconvincing as it solely relies upon the binary system of oppositions applied indiscriminately by critics as a sort of rhetorical figure.

When one looks closely at the structure of the novel itself new elements come in sight, for instance, each of Wednesday's children is allotted a chapter in which his/her adventures are related, ranging from the fantastic to the picaresque. Their existence in the economy of the text is strictly dependent on that of the central plot. These chapters could be the nucleus of other novels; they could be the sketched beginnings of the process of creative writing itself. This is what Wednesday seems to suggest at the very beginning of the novel when, reflecting upon her children as a writer could reflect upon the products of his/her creativity, she explains: "I'll just have to have another baby, and somehow work it so that he...she...is a compound of perfections, and makes the others look like fools."<sup>21</sup> What is foregrounded here is the process of creative writing itself as leit-motiv of the novel. Reality as such is not discarded in favour of a world of dream as we could be led to believe at first, but in favour of creativity, in favour of myth. The dream breaks up with Wednesday's disappearance only to reveal "the real" in terms of fiction, to disclose the subject of the novel, that is the process of creative writing that has granted us the dream. It is no coincidence that the novel closes on the image of Attica (whose name is very suggestive) seen through Mr Bellister's mind's eye:

Somehow breaking the threnody of the sea-voices, wave and wind, another voice, light and young, fled past him. It was a defiant voice, fleet and nymph-like in its age of gold. With his eyes he saw nothing, but into his mind came the clear picture of a young girl running. She wore nothing, but her bathing-suit, which failed to conceal the sweet curve of her breasts, and

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<sup>21</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 19

the fine down-like golden mail on her long, slender legs and thighs. "Attica," he whispered, "Attica." No footprint set its beautiful shapely seal on the edge where the pale foam was sucked down into the sand. But foam and sand sprayed up together, as though the runner's foot had touched and adored them.<sup>22</sup>

In Attica's characterization as a mythological goddess we are reminded of the process of writing as mythmaking where reality is the everlasting illusion created by fiction, and the blank space is where writing experiences, in a fit of joyful dizziness, utter freedom. The utter freedom enjoyed by *Wednesday's Children* and its author has been often misinterpreted and mistaken for a lack of ballast, a flaw in Robin Hyde's ability as a writer; her characters deemed to be unlikely have been doomed to literary oblivion. Joan Stevens describes in *The New Zealand Novel*<sup>23</sup> the writer's position as "always in peril on the border between reality and fantasy," although in reading Robin Hyde's novels one discovers an experienced, though undoubtedly reckless, tightrope-walker rather than a clumsy, untalented one. That utter freedom which in Katherine Mansfield's words makes the writer "single out," "bring into light" and "put up higher," regardless of the unlikeness of the subject to what is generally accepted as reality, constitutes that utopian quality which characterizes Robin Hyde's writing. Wednesday's experience as an independent, self-possessed woman might not be likely but ought to be likely, ought to be real, as we are reminded by Wednesday herself in the novel:

And the things that are not right only exist for a moment, but the things that could be right exist for eternity. And if a thing exists in eternity, but has not yet quite got down to existing here, every now and again, something flashes, like the light-shutter in your camera, and anyone who happens to

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 207

<sup>23</sup> Stevens, Joan, *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965*, Wellington, A.H. & A. W. Reed, 1966, pp. 52-60

be standing by at the moment can see it perfectly clear, without its veils. That's how most of the good books and good poems succeed in getting written.<sup>24</sup>

The dichotomy between reality and imagination is similarly present in *The Bone People* where it is represented through the opposition of the natural and the supernatural whose boundary, according to Mark Williams, has not been duly delineated by the writer.<sup>25</sup> By depicting the supernatural realistically, thus treating it as natural, the writer is deemed to compromise the stylistic unity of the novel and is furthermore accused of lacking balance, as Robin Hyde was accused of “varying unpredictably between the pedestrian and the fantastic”<sup>26</sup> for not keeping reality and imagination separate and distinct in her novels. By effacing the boundary between reality and imagination, the natural and the supernatural, both writers reveal their concern for a “Utopian politics”<sup>27</sup> in that they subvert through their use of fantasy the canons of reality.

Writing is thrust ahead in creating new worlds, anticipating, emitting prophecies, projecting the writer's vision into the timeless space of the blank page in a double movement of arriving at and moving from the Is-Land. Writing becomes a way of exploring, of challenging barriers, of experiencing the “other,” be it an unconventional character like Wednesday in *Wednesday's Children* or an historical character, equally unconventional, like the Baron de Thierry in *Check to Your King* or Douglas Stark in *Passport To Hell* and *Nor The Years Condemn*.

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<sup>24</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Wednesday's Children*, p. 107

<sup>25</sup> Williams, Mark, “Keri Hulme and Negative Capability”, *Leaving the Highway. Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, p. 87

<sup>26</sup> Stevens, Joan, *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965*, p. 56

<sup>27</sup> Letter to J.H. Schroder, 2 September, 1937, cited in *Disputed Ground. Robin Hyde, Journalist*, p. 62

In the biographical novel *Check to Your King* Robin Hyde recounts the saga of one of New Zealand's most romantic colonisers, self-styled King of Nukahiva, Sovereign Chief of New Zealand, whose dream was to create a kingdom where the Pakeha and the Maori could live together in peace as equals. The same amount of fact and imagination is used in *Passport To Hell* and *Nor The Years Condemn* to tell the story of Douglas Stark, Bomber in the Fifth Regiment of New Zealand Expeditionary Forces and at the same time the story of New Zealand caught between the two wars. Douglas Stark, half Red Indian half Spanish, is a born soldier of rare courage but out of the battlefield he is an outsider. Like Janet Frame, Robin Hyde is mainly interested in characters pushed to the very "edge of the alphabet," in the deprived and the derelicts. The other experienced in their writing is both the unfitting element subverting the hierarchy of Western society and, in terms of writing, the white space of the blank page continually reshaped by the black sign of the written word in a process of mutual influence.

In Janet Frame as in Robin Hyde and Keri Hulme, it is not the choice of the subject of her fiction, mainly dealing with outsiders locked up in mental hospitals, to give her writing that particular utopian quality, but the quasi exoteric attentiveness paid to the alchemical making of the writing process. In the case of these writers it is up to their writing, as a form of subversive action capable of creating new myths, to direct the choice of their subject in the first place. What interests them is not the structure of myth based on the archetype but the process through which form is being achieved.<sup>28</sup> Unlike modernists who use myth as a

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<sup>28</sup> Ostriker, Alicia, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" in *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on women, literature and theory*, Elaine Showalter, ed., London, Virago Press, 1986, pp. 314-338. See also Paola Zaccaria, *A Lettere Scarlatte: Poesia come Stregoneria*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1995, p. 220

structure to sustain fragments of modern life, their usage of myth is postmodern in the sense that acting as a prototype, it affects the way imagination shapes reality rather than the way reality is recreated, succeeding in so doing in inhabiting the present rather than the past. In the journey of exploration the writers make, they enjoy utter freedom insofar as they inhabit the space of their writing. It is interesting to note that Janet Frame, Robin Hyde and Keri Hulme often play with the reader's expectations in a constant game of concealments and revelations that confirms once again their wittingly conceived role of mythmakers. In *Wednesday's Children* as well as in *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, for example, the identity of the heroine is revealed only at the very end. Keri Hulme, on the other hand, diverts the attention of the reader in *The Bone People* with the aid of extravagant fictive stratagems. A long digression concerning Simon's Irish origins, which leads nowhere, is unmasked as a trick played by the author to the reader's omniscient desires: "Don't let's digress any more, g. reader [...] Anyway back to the reason I dragged you out of the cobweb pile, self-odyssey."<sup>29</sup>

The island described by both writers as a place of confinement for the marginalized becomes the very place to arrive at and to move from; a place, the Island, where their vision can emerge from the creative abodes of silence and speak in a language both ancient and unknown, which marks at the same time an ending and a new beginning for the mythmaking writer and her utopic world. As Janet Frame told me when I visited her in New Zealand "the Book" is the one with white pages, or in the illuminating words of Walter Benjamin: "To read what has never

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<sup>29</sup> Hulme, Keri, *The Bone People*, p. 98

been written.' Such reading is the most ancient: reading before all the languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances."<sup>30</sup>

### **"Speak Silence": The languages of the unsayable**

I am not a person to say the words out loud  
I think them strongly, or let them hunger from the page:  
know it from there, from my silence, from somewhere other  
than my tongue

the quiet love  
the silent rage.<sup>31</sup>

As Jeanne Kammer suggests in her essay "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry", the use of silence for women poets and writers, unlike that of men, is a journey in the realm of darkness in search of the first root of language: "The use of silence in male artists is often characterized as an acknowledgment of the void, a falling-back in the face of chaos, nothingness; for women, there appears more often a determination to enter that darkness, to use it, to illuminate it with the individual human presence."<sup>32</sup> In *Scented Gardens for the Blind* Janet Frame significantly describes that darkness not as "a withdrawal of light," but as "primary darkness, the first layer, the first condition of light, its foundation; it is a darkness which gives birth to a light that does not suffer the stain of human vision; a pure light resting, like a bandage, close to the deepest wound of the dark."<sup>33</sup> As darkness

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<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "On the Mimetic Faculty", *One-Way Street*, London, NLB, 1979, pp. 160-163

<sup>31</sup> Hulme, Keri, *Strands*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1992, p. 32

<sup>32</sup> Kammer, Jeanne, "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry", *Shakespeare Sisters. Feminists Essays on Women Poets*, Sandra M. Silbert and Susan Gubar, eds., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 158

<sup>33</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens For The Blind*, p. 25

is not a denial of light so silence is not a denial of language, but its reservoir, its amniotic liquid where the multifarious and the manifold, which mark the essence of language, rest. The concept of silence as the very condition for the utterance to be acted out is emphasised by Pierre Macherey who recognizes the embeddedness of language in silence: "it is this silence which tells us - not just anything, since it exists to say nothing - which informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance, and thus its limits, giving its real significance, without for all that, speaking in its place."<sup>34</sup> In "The Aesthetics of Silence" Susan Sontag highlights further the impossibility of a conception of silence as absence or void:

A genuine emptiness, a pure silence is not feasible - either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.<sup>35</sup>

Starting from the assumption that silence is not absence of language, Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme let it unravel in the white space between words. Their writing evokes silence as the shadow of language and is evoked by it in a game of projections where the written hints at the unwritten and vice versa, so that to investigate the unspoken inevitably leads to a better comprehension of the spoken, or in Pierre Macherey's persuasive words: "what the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence."<sup>36</sup> In *Living in the Maniototo* Janet Frame

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<sup>34</sup> Macherey, Pierre, "The Spoken and the Unspoken", *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. from the French by Geoffrey Wall, London, Routledge, 1978, p. 86

<sup>35</sup> Sontag, Susan, "The Aesthetics of Silence", *Styles of Radical Will*, p. 11

<sup>36</sup> Macherey, Pierre, "The Spoke and the Unspoken", *A Theory of Literary Production*, p. 87

describes language as an hawk suspended over eternity which manages to reveal “by a wing movement” what lies beyond the “untouched, undescribed almost unknown plain,” which symbolizes the world of the manifold, of the imagination, giving a glimpse of that true essence concealed behind the surface of things:

I feel that language in its widest sense is the hawk suspended over eternity, feeding from it but not of its substance, and not necessary 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.<sup>37</sup>

In so doing language becomes a form of initiation, hinting at those secrets that surround human existence. As a form of initiation it implies an interior journey leading the traveller back to the origins, to “the untouched, undescribed almost unknown plain,” toward the acquisition of a new language born out of the experience of the silent journey. That is the journey the writer initiates the reader into, accompanying him hand in hand through a spiralling process of identification and self-effacement as far as the very border of the conceivable where language is not a means, but a self-sustaining reality where writing can only suggest, hint and thrust forward. It is as if Janet Frame, believing in the transcendence of language into silence, also believed in a transcendence of silence into something beyond it which produces a new sort of language capable of creating new and unknown possibilities of thought.<sup>38</sup>

It is to her writing that Janet Frame trusts her hidden message, letting the white space between the words speak on their behalf. Likewise, it is in the white

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<sup>37</sup> Frame, Janet, *Living in Maniototo*, London, The Women’s Press, 1981, p. 43

<sup>38</sup> Sontag, Susan, “The Aesthetics of Silence”, *Styles of Radical Will*, p. 18

space between words that, according to Keri Hulme, the magic of language is preserved, as her “theory of words as a net” suggests:

You can use words that convey a sense by leaving out what you want to say - that is Hulme’s theory of words as a net. You’ve certainly got all the words there but sometimes it’s the spaces between that are conveying the full impact of emotions.<sup>39</sup>

In that white space it is as if another text, tied with an invisible thread to the written one, came to the surface bringing to light all those possibilities, a potential reverberating in the primaevael flux of things where words take their definite shape, and eventually undergo the fate of hypostatization. Exempt from such a fate is the white space between words where that other voice of silence speaks of a world devoid of the barriers and bars of otherness, where truth is not frozen as the name of Vera Glace suggests, but finally melts, flowing out of ancient rock and ice. In the ontological white space of the writing paper Janet Frame inscribes the first chords of her new language which sounds both as a cry of revolt, and as an act of liberation from the chains of a language of censorship and mutilation. Vera Glace speaking after thirty years of silence utters the first sounds of this new language: “Ug-g-Ug. Ohhh Ohh g. Ugg.” Out of ancient rock and marshland; out of ice and stone.”<sup>40</sup> The new language lies on the page under the puzzled eyes of the reader tempting him/her to a fatal translation which will only prove the insufficiency of his rational means of comprehending a far too complex reality, revealing to him/her the oceanic measure of his loss. In Robin Hyde’s work one encounters the same striving for the reconstruction of a language adequate to the human’s desire for communication, to

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<sup>39</sup> Smith, Shona, “Constructing the Author. An Interview with Keri Hulme”, *Untold 2*, 1984-86, p. 28

<sup>40</sup> Frame, Janet, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, p. 252

the freedom of the human spirit. The “dialect laid over speech” which Sister Collins tries to decipher in *Nor The Years Condemn* resembles “the adapted Maori melody,” as they both conceal that first root of language firmly planted in the multifarious space of silence. The music of the little bone flutes of which the adapted Maori melody is a distant relative speak a language both ancient and forgotten:

The Maoris played guitars and American ukes up and down the river, and sang what they were told was adapted Maori melody. The tourists liked it...But if you ever wandered into a museum, and stared at the cases, you could pick out little bone flutes. The notice said they were made from the thigh-bone of captives who had first been eaten. One wondered what their music had been. Nobody had ever heard it, it was locked away in the museums, and probably even the oldest of the Maoris had gone deaf, dumb and blind to it.<sup>41</sup>

The quest for that first primeval root of language which is the language of creation sparks off Robin Hyde’s journey in the realm of darkness to the “undiscovered land” where she, as Katherine Mansfield before her, reckoned new possibilities of thought lay in abeyance. Her quest for a new language, even when frustrated, reverberates throughout her work, and in particular in one of her last poems written in London before her death:

There is no more to say; for I have done  
With words, their crimson and their gold, that lie  
Meaningless on the canvas of our dreams  
We are come to Babel Tower, you and I,  
From whence our speech flows on in separate streams.  
I give you silence, clearly as the sun  
That pale and gold brims out in this empty sky.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hyde, Robin, *Nor The Years Condemn*, p. 102

<sup>42</sup> Hyde, Robin, “Babel Tower”, *The Conqueror and Other Poems*, London, Macmillan, 1935, p. 43

Similarly it is in language that Janet Frame's journey of exploration ends and starts anew:

Language, at least, may give up the secrets of life and death, leading us through the maze to the original Word as monster or angel, to the mournful place where we may meet Job and hear his cry:  
*How long will you vex my soul*  
*And break me in pieces with words?*<sup>43</sup>

Keri Hulme refers to the same journey of exploration undertaken by language back and ahead toward "the original Word" naming when she writes:

[...]and from ancient halls mounds vestibules  
 spinning out of the golden past  
 sometimes, the resonance of Words  
 naming.<sup>44</sup>

"The original Word" Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme lead us to through the maze of those fictive selves whose masquerade characterizes their fiction is a word of silence. Like the footsteps of the working man that Eliza Hannay in *The Godwits Fly* hears long after he is gone, ("They would go on for ever, and she stand on the pavement, smiling and listening"<sup>45</sup>) the words of these writers return to our mind long after we cease to read them, even when we cannot recollect a single plot of their stories and novels. In the perfect circle drawn by silence we recognize their voices, the trace left behind by their striving for a language free from its own limits, soaring up above boundaries to speak a word of wholeness capable of revealing the Island/Is-Land of their artistic creation.

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<sup>43</sup> Frame, Janet, *Daughter Buffalo*, p. 29

<sup>44</sup> Hulme, Keri, "Tara Diptych", *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*, p. 15

<sup>45</sup> Hyde, Robin, *The Godwits Fly*, p. 236

## Conclusion

The decision to focus, in this study, on the notion of the fall and the perception of the vertigo was prompted by the detection, on my part, of a spiralling movement within the narrative structure of the four writers' texts. It started as an intuition which demanded to be developed further, until it could claim an autonomy of its own. Yet the way in which this should happen, bore the clear mark of oddity.

In tune with the movement of the spiral, which is based on the loss of any sense of direction, I proceeded to the analysis of the texts, trying to find my way to them by losing it. Like the flâneur who maps the city that he/she wanders through with no apparent aim, only paying heed to his/her train of thoughts, I wilfully lost my sense of direction to find my way to the text. I mapped the apparently aimless meandering which I undertook in my study by succumbing to its spiralling fascination, as the flâneur is swallowed both by the streets of the city and his train of thoughts. My intention was to mould my study on the shape of the spiral which is open, and keeps going on forever, in the effort to escape from the sterile wholeness of the circle which has an end and a beginning, and it is final.

The texts were thus to be considered in their spatial dimension, in their capacity for dealing with distances and heights, and the various effects, like the vertigo effect, which they engender. Katherine Mansfield's short stories provided an excellent starting point as they seemed to respond perfectly to the notion of cyclic rhythm and shifting distances which characterize the notion of the fall and the

perception of the vertigo entailed in it. Similarly the movement of the spiral, seen as a deviation from the norm, was investigated in the texts of Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme. The texts were approached from different perspectives, so as to be as inclusive as possible and as rich, yet the vantage point of the notion of the fall was kept constantly in focus. The main difficulty of such an achievement was represented by the simultaneous task, imposed by the influence of the spiral on my work, to keep the notion of the fall constantly in focus while at the same time wandering off from it.

In choosing to concentrate on the notion of the fall as vantage point of my study my attempt was to provide a very specific reading of these most diverse New Zealand writers without nonetheless pinning them down to my argument and point of view, but preserving that freedom their writing has won to itself. As my last chapter demonstrates, the critical discourse on their writing cannot be exhausted, nor does this study attempt to exhaust it. By evading a concluding chapter my intention has been to let my discourse open, to let it go back to the beginning where my tentative steps started moving toward the spiralling conclusion.

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